



“There is a great deal in Novelty”: The Pleasures of *The Watsons*

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THIS ESSAY HAS GROWN out of a long and energetic email exchange between the authors, undertaken because we both love Jane Austen’s fragment *The Watsons* but have not read a great deal about it recently that has helped us to appreciate it more. Ever since the publication of the eighth volume of *Persuasions* in 1986, containing several essays on this fragment of a novel, it has received relatively little attention as literature. An important exception is Juliet McMaster’s splendid 1994 essay, “Emma Watson: Jane Austen’s Uncompleted Heroine.” McMaster focuses on the literary qualities of the fragment and, on that basis, considers how Austen would have developed it; she also extends a reading of the fragment set forth in her 1986 *Persuasions* essay, which sees Emma’s excessive refinement as a major theme. Our conclusions differ in part because McMaster’s focus lies in filling in the blanks to point toward completion; we wish to concentrate on enjoying the subtleties of what is already there.

The question that discussion of *The Watsons* usually raises is, why did Austen never finish it?¹ This query has received many responses, and although we will consider some of them later, we want to begin by approaching this work differently—not as a biographical puzzle but as if it comprised the first forty pages of a completed Austen novel. If it were *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, we would have eight short chapters to read, and the last would take us to the witty and complex exchange at Netherfield between Elizabeth,

Darcy, and Caroline Bingley on accomplished women. If it were *Persuasion*, we would, in five chapters, have witnessed the exile of Sir Walter and Elizabeth to Bath and Anne Elliot's arrival at Uppercross in order to minister to her sister's whines. *The Watsons'* forty pages fall somewhere between those two novels' openings in offering energy and depth and complexity of exposition. If Austen had finished the novel, we believe, it would have almost as many admirers as they. Obviously, that belief cannot be substantiated, but what we hope to show is that close attention to these forty pages as literature reveals comedy and subtleties of character and theme that make this fragment as challenging and pleasurable to read and think about as the openings of Austen's other works.

As is usual in these openings, the first sentence of *The Watsons* announces important themes and points us toward sources of comedy:

The first winter assembly in the Town of D. in Surry was to be held on Tuesday Oct^r ye 13th, & it was generally expected to be a very good one; a long list of Country Families was confidently run over as sure of attending, & sanguine hopes were entertained that the Osbornes themselves would be there. (314)²

Right away, this sentence announces the rigid social stratification and snobbery that infuses the tale and establishes a superficial equation in this world between goodness and social rank. A "good" ball is one in which the local gentry are prominent—many "Country Families" attend—and which attracts the Osbornes, who, we soon learn, are the local aristocrats. The narrator's use of the passive voice underscores the prevalence of this shallow equation but keeps it from attaching to individual snobs. We must wait to encounter the many varieties of comic snobbery and rudeness practiced by Lord Osborne, Tom Musgrave, others at the ball, Mr. and Mrs. Edwards, and Robert and Jane Watson.

At the start, then, not individuals but the social world itself—everyone and no one—is indicted. That world alone seems to offer the ball that "was to be held" and seems to focus its attention on attendance, which "was generally expected" and "was confidently run over," so that "hopes were entertained." Social snobbery is thus proclaimed but disavowed in this grammatical formulation—just as the opening of *Pride and Prejudice* proclaims but uses the passive voice to disavow the "truth universally acknowledged" about the need of young women without fortunes for husbands who have them. Social distinctions, along with the pretense that one is above them, are similarly proclaimed and disavowed by Mrs. Edwards's later reformulation of the first sentence,

in response to her husband's gossip that the Osbornes will be at the ball: "I am glad of it . . . because their coming gives a credit to our Assemblies. The Osbornes being known to have been at the first Ball, will dispose a great many people to attend the second.—It is more than they deserve, for in fact they add nothing to the pleasure of the Evening, they come so late, & go so early;—but Great People have always their charm." (323)

In thus personalizing the opening sentence with a specific critique of the manners of the aristocrats, and of those who will be mindlessly influenced by their attendance to come to other balls ("Great People have always their charm"), Mrs. Edwards creates her own social distinctions in which she locates herself securely above the follies of both groups. In the manner of Austen's highest comedy, she ultimately criticizes herself in the process of disclaiming the snobbery that she simultaneously proclaims in her complacently possessive "our Assemblies"; she expresses the snobbery, that is, of those who pretend not to have any.

What immediately follows the first sentence in *The Watsons* further elaborates snobbery and the fine social distinctions that it requires. Money provides the primary distinction, as we would expect, though, as Austen readers know, even the time of eating dinner can announce status (the Watsons serve dinner unfashionably early). The Edwardses are "people of fortune" who "kept their coach"; the Watsons are "poor & had no close carriage" (314–15). Except when Fanny Price visits Portsmouth, Austen has nowhere else drawn her heroine within so poor a family. She also doesn't ordinarily make aristocrats central characters—in other novels they intervene from a distance, like Lady Catherine de Bourgh. *The Watsons* therefore places readers within a world of much wider and deeper social stratification than usual, and the conversation between Elizabeth and Emma Watson, as they drive to D. so that Emma can attend the ball, brilliantly sketches out some of these strata. Emma is more "refined" than Elizabeth because she was brought up by her richer aunt and uncle, whose money she would have inherited if her aunt had not married again. Now merely the daughter of a poor clergyman, Emma perhaps must learn to be less refined in order to survive—she must marry or teach. One of her brothers is an attorney, whose wife's fortune of £6000 helps to make him rich. Another is apprenticed to a surgeon and therefore not likely to obtain Miss Edwards with a fortune of £10,000. Finally, Emma should beware of Tom Musgrave, "an universal favourite" with a "very good fortune" (315). The focus on fortune is insistent: we later learn more precisely that Tom has

“8 or 900£ a year” (328); that Emma’s lost fortune would have been eight or nine thousand pounds (352); and that Jane Watson believes that if Emma likes Stanton, her father’s home, she could never have been in line to inherit as much as Jane’s own £6000 (350).

The comedy here is especially sharp: all these financial details come not from an omniscient narrator but from the gossip of other characters—Elizabeth Watson, Mary Edwards, and Robert Watson—making this social world seem more claustrophobically mercenary than usual in an Austen novel. Even Emma Watson, who is unwilling to marry for money (“to pursue a Man merely for the sake of situation” [318]), who seems unimpressed by Lord Osborne’s status and his admiration, and who judges him and Tom Musgrave by their manners, not their money, causes us to know Tom’s income. Although Elizabeth has already mentioned that Tom has a good fortune, Emma asks Mary, “He is rich, is not he?” (328), a question no other Austen heroine asks about an eligible young man. That is, even Emma, newly disinherited, is implicated in this world’s obsession with money—although needless to say her head is not really turned by Lord Osborne’s expressed interest. As the narrator tells us, his “notice . . . might please her vanity, but did not suit her pride” (347).

Other comedy is no less piercing but more obviously funny. Our title, besides announcing what we trust will be a novel view of *The Watsons*, comes from Elizabeth Watson’s delightfully frank comment to Emma, hoping that she will be in “good looks” at the ball: “I should not be surprised if you were to be thought one of the prettiest girls in the room, there is a great deal in Novelty” (315). Her dialogue is full of such revealing and amusing moments—“I should not like marrying a disagreeable Man any more than yourself,—but I do not think there *are* many very disagreeable Men” (318). Touches like these are everywhere in the dialogue of the comic characters, who include not just Elizabeth, the most complicated among them, but the Edwardses, all the other Watsons except Emma, and, of course, Tom Musgrave and the Osbornes. Mr. and Mrs. Edwards refuse to acknowledge any likeness between Sam and Emma; both reiterate that Emma cannot look like her brother—because both dislike the possibility that Sam has captured their daughter’s interest. Jane Watson’s words are always wonderfully contradicted by her actions: she protests that she and her husband “never eat suppers” but then apparently sits down to the one that Tom Musgrave escapes after the card game at Stanton (351, 359). Jane asserts that “I am no card player” and then, in a few sentences, “I can play anything” (354). Robert Watson refuses to powder his

hair for his relatives but then apologizes to Tom Musgrave for his “dishabille. . . . I had not time even to put a little fresh powder into my hair” (357). To powder or not to powder—Robert’s argument on this subject with Jane forms part of the fragment’s intense concern with status, and thus with fashion as a superficial indicator of status. Even Lord Osborne recommends fashionable half-boots to Emma (345), Tom Musgrave is determined that his next meal should be a very fashionably late dinner (359), and Jane Watson abandons her recommended game of Speculation for Vingt-un once Tom Musgrave extols its popularity at Osborne Castle: “She was quite vanquished, & the fashions of Osborne-Castle carried it over the fashions of Croydon” (358).

As we see in this last line, the narrator of *The Watsons* produces the wide range of comedy that we expect in Austen’s novels. We are told, for instance, that Elizabeth’s “delight in a Ball was not lessened by a ten years Enjoyment” (315)—perhaps an in-joke for Cassandra. When the Osbornes finally arrive, “the important Party” is preceded by the “attentive Master of the Inn to open a door which was never shut” (329). The rush to defer could not be more simply and cleanly speared. The narrator has particular fun with male gossip, first pointing out that Mr. Edwards fills his idle days with it: having noted that the Osbornes will appear at the Assembly, “Mr Edwards proceeded to relate every other little article of news which his morning’s lounge had supplied him with” (323). Later, we hear that upon Tom Musgrave’s appearance at Stanton after a day in London, Robert Watson monopolizes him: “the last current report as to public news, & the general opinion of the day must be understood, before Robert could let [Tom’s] attention be yeilded to the less national, & important demands of the Women” (356). The narrator appears to enshrine male gossip as what is “national, & important” and (in the passive voice—always a spur to skepticism) as what “must be understood,” and thus seems to denigrate female concerns, but since the reports turn on “the general opinion of the day,” they don’t really differ much from what Mr. Edwards collects in his “daily lounge.” That is, male and female talk is equally idle.

The narrator takes special pleasure, however, in skewering Tom Musgrave. His deference to the Osbornes extends not just to willingness to come as close as this world allows to being Lord Osborne’s pimp (he asks Emma to dance so that Lord Osborne can easily stare at her), but to self-sacrifice: he will not be seen in the ballrooms without them, so he pretends that he is glad to leave when they do. The narrator makes his folly very clear: “As Tom Musgrave was seen no more, we may suppose his plan to have succeeded, & imagine him mortifying with his Barrel of Oysters, in dreary solitude—or gladly

assisting the Landlady in her Bar to make fresh Negus for the happy Dancers above" (336). Either he punishes himself with "dreary solitude" or seeks out the landlady to patronize (he needs an audience)—the narrator is supremely indifferent to which of these foolish positions Tom arrives at instead of letting himself be a happy dancer. Later the omniscient narrator actually enters Tom's empty head for us, after Elizabeth has announced that "you know what early hours we keep": "Tom had nothing to say for himself, he knew it very well, & such honest simplicity, such shameless Truth rather bewildered him" (346-47).

This narrator is somewhat less prominent than in other Austen novels, for much of *The Watsons* is dialogue. The novel presents its plot and characters dramatically, from Elizabeth's opening near-monologue onward. Narration from characters' points of view, when it does appear, tends to be more experimental than it is in *Pride and Prejudice* or *Sense and Sensibility*. It more frequently, for example, casts direct speech into the third person yet puts quotation marks around it. As one instance of many, Tom's words in response to Emma's unwillingness to give him the trouble of driving her home are thus represented: "The Trouble was of course, Honour, Pleasure, Delight. What had he or his horses to do?" (339). These are not Tom's words, despite the quotation marks. He would have said something like, "It is no trouble, but an honor, a pleasure, a delight. What else do I or my horses have to do?" Notice how much Tom's actual speech is condensed into what is reported. This technique for blurring the distinction between narration and reported speech, between narrator and character, appears throughout the later novels though seldom in the earlier ones (Fergus 97-98). Later we have an example in which speech is reported in the third person, but even more condensed and without any indication of who says it. When the Watsons hear a carriage arriving at night, their response appears thus:

"Who could it be?—it was certainly a postchaise.—Penelope was the only creature to be thought of. She might perhaps have met with some unexpected opportunity of returning." (355)

This condensed speech probably conflates the speculations and murmurs of several Watsons, so that someone can be supposed to have said, "It can only be Penelope," certainly not, "Penelope is the only creature to be thought of," a phrase that makes no sense in this context. Again, Austen seems to take opportunities to play with narrative in this primarily dramatic fragment.

The pleasures of *The Watsons* are not just local as in these examples, however, but global—in the creation of characters whom Austen's comedy

sometimes allows us to see through, knowing them by their words better than they do themselves. Elizabeth Watson offers the most outstanding example of such a character. Many readers have been struck by the way her speeches announce openness, humility, and simplicity, along with affection for and consideration to Emma—not to mention cheerful sociability and comfortable absorption in domestic detail (from “our great wash” [321] to her unashamed announcement of their early dinners to Lord Osborne and Tom Musgrave [346]). Her language is less elevated than that of most admirable Austen characters, a class distinction: she uses homely phrases like “For the life of me Emma” and “frightened out of my wits” (342) and homely words like “your Brag” and “snappish” (343).

But Elizabeth Watson’s openness also reveals a complicated history with Tom Musgrave that contradicts her own initial account. In her view, she was six years ago “very much attached” to Purvis, and “Every body thought it would have been a Match,” but her sister Penelope destroyed her happiness:

“I trusted her, she set him against me, with a view of gaining him herself, & it ended in his discontinuing his visits & soon after marrying somebody else.—Penelope makes light of her conduct, but *I* think such Treachery very bad. It has been the ruin of my happiness. I shall never love any Man as I loved Purvis.” (316)

Elizabeth has also told us, however, that her love for Purvis coincided with the arrival of Tom Musgrave, who “came into this Country, six years ago; and very great attention indeed did he pay me. Some people say that he has never seemed to like any girl so well since” (316). When Emma asks why Elizabeth’s heart was the only one cold to Tom, Elizabeth replies, “There was a reason for that—[] . . . changing colour” (316), the reason being her love for Purvis, but her blush suggests something more complex. She goes on to say more about Tom (“When first we knew Tom Musgrave . . .” [316]), ignoring Emma’s apology for having given her pain, “without seeming to hear” Emma (316). Purvis, she says, is the one that got away, but we can infer that it is really Tom. What is so comical is how often Elizabeth mentions Tom Musgrave when she talks about Purvis. Even though she says, “I do not think Tom Musgrave should be named with him in the same day” (316), in fact she names Tom again and again, not just in this opening speech to Emma, but subsequently.

Thus, although Elizabeth continually warns Emma against Tom Musgrave, describing his flirtations with herself, then Penelope, then Margaret (317), and insisting that “He will never marry unless he can marry somebody

very great” (319), she always insists equally firmly on his attractive powers. He is ““remarkably agreeable, an universal favourite wherever he goes”” (315). “I defy you not to be delighted with him if he takes notice of you” (319). Almost her final words to Emma before leaving her at the Edwardses’ home are “I shall long to know what you think of Tom Musgrave” (321), and she greets Emma on her return home with amazement that she refused a carriage ride with Tom: “I wonder at your forbearance, & I do not think I could have done it myself” (341). Later, “so, you really did not dance with Tom M. at all?—But you must have liked him, you must have been struck with him altogether. . . . you must think him agreeable” (342). At Emma’s denials, Elizabeth concludes, very tellingly, “I only hope it will last;—& that he will not come on to pay you much attention; it is a hard thing for a woman to stand against the flattering ways of a Man, when he is bent on pleasing her” (343).

In other words, we can infer that Elizabeth was flattered by Tom’s attention and still thinks him irresistible, and it is likely that her own flattered and favorable response six years before alienated Purvis, though Penelope could certainly have assisted by increasing Purvis’s jealousy or disgust. That is, Elizabeth blames Penelope, not her own vanity or fickleness, for the loss of Purvis. In fact, we increasingly recognize that Elizabeth still likes Tom. Perhaps the best evidence of Tom’s continued influence occurs after Lord Osborne’s visit, during which Lord Osborne sits with Emma and Tom is apart with Elizabeth. Elizabeth tells Emma afterward, “Who would have thought of L^d Osborne’s coming to Stanton.—He is very handsome—but Tom Musgrave looks all to nothing, the smartest & most fashionable Man of the two” (347).

Reading between the lines to discover Elizabeth Watson’s self-delusion is what all Austen’s completed novels encourage us to do but what critics have seldom practiced with regard to *The Watsons*. In Elizabeth’s case, it is perhaps too easy to accept her at her own valuation. The “shameless Truth” (347) that disconcerts Tom deflects our suspicion, and indeed so much of what she tells us about the Edwardses and Tom Musgrave and Margaret Watson in her wonderful long opening exposition proves so true that we tend to trust her: Mr. Edwards does indeed stay long at the ball when his cards are good as she predicts, Mrs. Edwards goes early to “get a good place by the fire” (319), Tom does “wait in the Passage and come in with” the Osbornes (319), and Margaret is indeed “all gentleness & mildness when anybody is by.—But she is a little fretful & perverse among ourselves” (319). Elizabeth is very likable, and, certainly, in no other novel does Austen allow a likeable character to be so

long deluded in estimating her response to a man. For about six months at most, rather than six years, do Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse remain deluded by what they think they feel about Wickham and Frank Churchill. And of course, as readers we are never deluded by Tom as most of us are at first by Wickham and Frank: the narrator allows us to see right through Tom Musgrave's vanity and slavish snobbery and to find him as charmless and unattractive as does Emma Watson. He is a comic character from the start, very like Mr. Collins in pretentious self-importance—but at least able to enliven a card game like Henry Crawford. So there are reasons why Elizabeth's history with Tom has not been obvious to readers, but in Austen's best comic mode, once a reader takes notice, the evidence is obvious.

Elizabeth is not the heroine, however; Emma is, and unlike Elizabeth she has received more careful examination from critics. She is seen as even too perfect, incapable of development (Southam 68). Juliet McMaster has analyzed what she considers Emma's flaw, her excessive refinement; for McMaster, that will be the fault that she will have to correct over the course of the novel.³ But in fact, we see her differently. She is not at all too refined in the pages we have of her; she is, in fact, impulsive, so much so that she is capable of what in Austen's world is very unrefined conduct, even visceral responses. Emma blurts out truths about her aunt that include criticism of her—and we know that in *Mansfield Park* Mary Crawford is criticized by Edmund and Fanny for speaking disrespectfully of an uncle who brought her up.

Emma is outspoken not just with her brother Robert, who at least counts as family—she is so with Mr. Edwards, a virtual stranger to her, who knew her aunt slightly when they were young. Notice Emma's outburst after Mr. Edwards supposes that it must be a great deprivation to Emma's aunt not to have her company now, "After bringing you up like a Child of her own.'—'I was not so ungrateful Sir, said Emma warmly, as to wish to be any where but with her. — It did not suit them, it did not suit Capt. O'brien that I sh^d be of the party'" (326). Her revelation that her aunt's second husband, Captain O'brien, essentially evicted her is almost explosively frank, and it allows Mr. Edwards later to engage in equally painful frankness: "When an old Lady plays the fool, it is not in the course of nature that she should suffer from it many years'" (326). His words make Emma cry (she "drew her hand across her eyes"), and Mr. Edwards "changed the subject to one of less anxiety to all" (326). Similarly, when Robert Watson crassly complains that Emma's uncle left all his money to his widow, none to Emma, she again retorts "warmly," asserting her aunt's error: "My Aunt may have erred—she *has* erred—but my Uncle's

conduct was faultless. I was her own Neice, & he left to herself the power & the pleasure of providing for me” (352). Criticizing her aunt this openly to Robert, the last person she would wish to confide in, shows how off-balance and hurt she is. Robert’s reply is even stronger, for he avers that Emma’s absence with her aunt for fourteen years “must do away all natural affection among us” now that she is “returned . . . without a sixpence.” He leaves Emma “struggling with her tears,” so much so that Robert, “rather softened,” replies that “I do not mean to make you cry” (352), and she is left “equally irritated & greived” (353).

These painful exchanges show that Emma has an irritability and impulsiveness that, despite her comparative maturity, rival Marianne Dashwood’s. We know of course that Emma is impulsive, thanks to the well-known scene in which she offers herself as a dancing partner to ten-year-old Charles Blake, who is bitterly disappointed at having been stood up by his promised partner, Miss Osborne: “Emma did not think, or reflect;—she felt & acted—. ‘I shall be very happy to dance with you Sir, if you like it.’ said she, holding out her hand with the most unaffected good humour” (330–31). In presenting herself without an introduction as a partner, and to a child, Emma has felt and acted unconventionally—and her unconventional action helps to move the plot. It brings her to the notice of the Osborne Castle set, from Lord Osborne and Tom Musgrave and even the ladies, to Mr. Howard and Mrs. Blake. As a result, it also sets up the ill-mannered call at Stanton by Lord Osborne and his henchman and permits Emma to become attracted to Mr. Howard. Her impulsive unconventionality, therefore, works in her favor here, but less so when she is “warmly” refuting Mr. Edwards’s apparent accusation that she deserted her aunt or when she is equally “warmly” defending her uncle. We see a strong impulse to defend herself even in her first talk with Elizabeth, after Elizabeth is surprised that Emma doesn’t know that her brother Sam is attached to Miss Edwards: instead of saying, simply, “No, I didn’t know that,” Emma bursts out, “How should I know it? How should I know in Shropshire, what is passing of that nature in Surry?” (320–21). It’s the strength of her feelings that makes her “dread” Margaret’s return with Robert and Jane, and rather exaggeratedly suppose “the day which brought the party to Stanton seemed to her the probable conclusion of almost all that had been comfortable in the house” (348). We can presume that, if the novel had been completed, Emma would have felt strongly and acted impulsively in ways to move the plot, as in the case of her offer to Charles Blake. But she would probably also have learned in the course of the novel to keep her own counsel better.

Emma exaggerates her discomfort at Stanton, for after all she does find a refuge there with her father, away from the irritating members of her family. But that refuge allows her to sum up her grievous position in this way:

From being the first object of Hope & Solitude of an Uncle who had formed her mind with the care of a Parent, & of Tenderness to an Aunt whose amiable temper had delighted to give her every indulgence, from being the Life & Spirit of a House, where all had been comfort & Elegance, & the expected Heiress of an easy Independence, she was become of importance to no one, a burden on those, whose affection she c^d not expect, an addition in an House, already overstocked, surrounded by inferior minds with little chance of domestic comfort, & as little hope of future support.—It was well for her that she was naturally chearful;—for the Change had been such as might have plunged weak spirits in Despondence.
(361-62)

These lines almost close the fragment—so bleakly that despite Emma’s “natural” cheerfulness, we cannot be surprised that comedy in *The Watsons* is sometimes overlooked. After all, Emma begins to cry twice in the first forty pages, and for good reason. No other Austen heroine but Jane Fairfax (not quite a heroine) is in so vulnerable a position, and according to Cassandra, that position was to get worse: “Mr. Watson was soon to die; and Emma to become dependent for a home on her narrow-minded sister-in-law and brother” (363). Even an unmarried Anne Elliot “might always command a home with Lady Russell” (146) and an unmarried Fanny Price with Lady Bertram, but no such possibility exists for Emma, who “was to decline an offer of marriage from Lord Osborne, and much of the interest of the tale was to arise from Lady Osborne’s love for Mr. Howard, and his counter affection for Emma, whom he was finally to marry” (363).

R. W. Chapman footnotes this statement on page 363, alleging that Lady Osborne is “Doubtless a slip for *Miss Osborne*. Lady O. was ‘nearly fifty’ (p. 329).” Like other modern readers, we disagree. We find a few indications in the novel so far that Lady Osborne is interested in Mr. Howard, who, we are told, is “a little more than Thirty” (330). Lady Osborne herself is “very handsome” and has “much the finest person” of all the Osborne females (329), that is, more so than her daughter and her daughter’s friend. Her courtship of Mr. Howard is subtly indicated; the hints are really there for a second reading, we think, and cluster round card games, as if the pursuit were conducted primarily at the card table. After his entrance with the Osbornes, for instance, we first see the

clergyman Mr. Howard at “Lady Osborne’s Cassino Table; Mr Howard . . . belonged to it” (332). He must have gone straight there: Mr. Howard, like Mr. Edwards, apparently spends his time at a ball in the card room, not on the dance floor. After all, when Emma tells Elizabeth that she thinks Mr. Howard agreeable, Elizabeth responds, “Howard! Dear me. I cannot think of *him*, but as playing cards with L[ad]y Osborne, & looking proud” (343). It would be at the assemblies that Elizabeth would see him thus with Lady Osborne.

But the two play elsewhere, too. When Emma asks Tom Musgrave if he sees “much of the Parsonage family at the Castle,” of course trying to obtain information about Mr. Howard, he replies, “they are almost always there,” having just described the noisiness of a game of Vingt-un as played by Lady Osborne and her son and presumably others (358). Admittedly, Lady Osborne on leaving the ball gives Emma “a look of complacency” (336) despite Mr. Howard’s defection from the card table to dance with her. But when the Osbornes arrive, Emma overhears “L[ad]y. Osborne observe that they had made a point of coming early for the gratification of M^{rs} Blake’s little boy, who was uncommonly fond of dancing” (329). In trumpeting her generosity to Mr. Howard’s nephew, Lady Osborne may be in part recommending herself to him. We imagine her courtship as conducted in the grand manner, rather as Lady Catherine de Bourgh might—taking for granted the other’s interest and believing all the cards to be in her condescending hand. She can thus afford to be complacent to a young woman who has been kind to Mr. Howard’s nephew. If we are right, then this pursuit would underline an interesting motif in the novel—another widow making a foolish second choice, as Emma’s aunt did. That is, though Lady Osborne would be a comic character, the treatment of her courtship would not be entirely comic—like so much in this fragment.

Of course, it is not a novel, but a fragment; unlike Kathleen James-Cavan, we do not view *The Watsons* as having achieved closure. Instead, we are imagining re-reading these forty pages for their complex comedy as if they formed part of a completed Austen novel. The usual reason given for why *The Watsons* was left incomplete is biographical. If she was writing it in 1804, as most now believe, then at the end of 1804 she lost her friend Mrs. Lefroy suddenly in a carriage accident, and then at the start of 1805 her father died suddenly, leaving herself, her mother, and Cassandra essentially in the position of the Watson women after Mr. Watson’s death—which was “soon” to happen in the novel. The homelessness of Emma Watson afterward would parallel the wandering existence of the Austen ladies for some time after Mr. Austen’s death, though, in fact, Austen felt wrenched from home even earlier, when she had to

leave Hampshire for Bath. When her wandering ended, in Hampshire at Chawton Cottage in 1809, Austen was still an unpublished novelist. She evidently preferred to revise a completed novel for publication (*Sense and Sensibility*) than to finish *The Watsons*, which is likely to have retained painful associations (Drabble 16). Some critics think that instead of finishing it at this point, she incorporated various elements of it into the three later novels that she conceived and wrote at Chawton: each one has been spoken of as rewriting *The Watsons*, and Margaret Drabble sees it as repeating *Pride and Prejudice* (19). But in fact, all the novels have family resemblances to each other; it's easy to find such parallels. We are certainly overjoyed to have the six novels, but among the many others we wish she had lived to write, a completed *The Watsons* (under whatever name she would have given it) would have been superb, as we hope to have persuasively demonstrated.

NOTES

1. See Pickrel 448 and, for a review of criticism, Hourigan.
2. Although we have quoted from Chapman's edition of *The Watsons* as printed in his *Minor Works*, we have checked the quotations against the printed facsimile of the fragment in the *Later Manuscripts*, edited by Todd and Bree, to determine whether any of Austen's original intentions as indicated there affect our arguments. In general, they support our contentions. Originally, for instance, Mrs. Edwards's sentence refers to "the Ball," not complacently to "our Assemblies," and the other changes also underline her self-satisfaction (279; f.9r). Later, we note that Elizabeth Watson, in her first account in the manuscript of her love for Purvis, says to Emma that "Perhaps you may see him tonight. His name is Purvis & he has the Living of Alford about 14 miles off" (262; f.2r). We would argue that Austen's almost immediate choice to omit these lines, and thus to omit any possibility that Emma will see Purvis, serves to highlight Elizabeth's real interest in Tom Musgrave in that speech; Purvis is out of focus.
3. See McMaster's essay on the Watson family (70) and "Emma Watson" (218-20).

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