

Male Whiners in Austen's Novels

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At Lake Louise three years ago, I focused on female whining in Jane Austen's novels. This paper grew out of the discussion that followed that paper; points were brought up in the discussion afterwards (and after I delivered an earlier version of this talk in New York) that I wanted to explore further, and perhaps the same will happen again today (a warning?). In this talk, I will focus on male whining. But for those of you who weren't at Lake Louise, or who were and (like me) have memories that aren't as serviceable as they once were, let me briefly recapitulate what I tried to say there about Mary Musgrove and Jane Austen's Art of Whining as shown in *Persuasion*. I had two main points to make. First, I wanted to define whining and show how Mary Musgrove exemplified it. Second, I argued that Jane Austen created Mary as part of an attempt to investigate the way her culture treats the expression of suffering as admirable or legitimate in men, excessive or comical or otherwise illegitimate in women.

To summarize the first point: I considered that while a complaint is something that we utter quite directly when we expect to get recognition of or even a solution to an actual problem, a whine is less direct, more emotional, and more manipulative: we whine in order to vent our displeasure or misery and also to manipulate others—particularly by blaming them for our unhappiness. Because it serves to vent and to blame, a whine is repeated again and again; in fact, I consider repetition one of the main criteria for a whine. In real life, a whine is also distinguished by a moaning tone of voice—though dictionaries don't agree on whether that tone is pitched high or low. Since all we can pay attention to in a novel are words, not sounds, I measured Mary Musgrove's whines by looking at the way her words repeatedly announce misery, infuse blame, and refuse comfort with wonderful efficiency. My favorite example of Mary's ability to lament and accuse at once occurs in the postscript of her letter to Anne:

I am sorry to say that I am very far from well; and Jemima has just told me that the butcher says there is a bad sore-throat very much about. I dare say I shall catch it; and my sore-throats, you know, are always worse than anybody's. (164)

Here she is Job, uniquely cursed with the worst sore throats in the universe, and in one sentence she manages not only to remind us of all her past sore throats and to announce her present illness but to whine in the future tense also—about a sore throat she hasn't yet got. What is striking about Mary as a whiner is that she has so complete a sense of both deprivation and entitlement: she feels entitled to the

best of everything and at the same time is sure she's being robbed of it. When she writes this letter to Anne, she feels ill-used because Anne is at Bath and she isn't; lamenting, blaming, and thinking herself ill are for Mary the natural consequences. In short, I concluded that there was no one in all Austen's works to touch Mary as an accomplished whiner.

To the second point: Mary Musgrove's character was created for *Persuasion*, I argued, because the novel is to some extent about ways that people cope with the sense of ill-usage as well as with loss and grief. As readers, we are unlikely to find ourselves sympathizing with Mary's whines—and no one in the novel does either. But why not? Isn't there any legitimacy in Mary's whines? In her frustrated sense that she never gets enough? Isn't she partly right, after all? People do avoid her when they can. Of course, it's largely her fault that they do—but why does she act so as to provoke avoidance? The novel gives us enough information that we can consider these questions. One possible answer is that Mary was evidently a neglected child, only eight or nine when her mother died; Anne was about thirteen and Elizabeth about fifteen. Mary is less attractive than either of her sisters, and less secure. She feels competitive with her sisters—witness her fear that Captain Wentworth might be made a baronet at the end. Even in her marriage she was a second choice, and perhaps knows it, as certainly the Musgroves do. Her self-aggrandizing attempts to precede her mother-in-law Mrs. Musgrove into local dining rooms reflect her anxiety and insecurity, just as her whines do. So why are we so unsympathetic to her? Is it just because whining itself is so repellent?

That's part of the answer, but I think more is involved. Claudia L. Johnson's recent book on Mary Wollstonecraft, Ann Radcliffe, Frances Burney, and Jane Austen, *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s, Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, and Austen* (Chicago, 1995), points out that the legitimacy of suffering is a gendered issue in the 1790s. The gendering of suffering, the question of who suffers longer over loss, men or women, is certainly at issue in *Persuasion* in the famous conversation between Anne and Captain Harville. Johnson's compelling analyses of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *Camilla* argue that only men in those novels seem to have the right to suffer and lament; women are constantly enjoined and exhorted to repress and deny their suffering. We see this everywhere in *Persuasion*, not just in Anne's repression of her suffering over losing Wentworth and then over watching him flirting with other women, but in Mrs. Smith's stoical response to the loss of her husband, her health, and her money. By contrast, male suffering receives social concern, even approval. Perhaps the best examples occur in the trip to Lyme. There Captain

Benwick's mourning of Fanny Harville is the first unhappiness that people treat at all sympathetically in the novel, for Mrs. Musgrove's mourning of Richard is indulged, not sympathized with. The introduction of Benwick's unhappiness is followed by Louisa's accident, when male emotional responses are treated far more tenderly and sympathetically than female ones within the social world that the novel describes. Anne remains in control of herself, Henrietta faints, Mary screams and becomes hysterical; Henrietta and Mary are tacitly criticized for their behavior. Conversely, we are told that Wentworth suffers at first in an "agony of silence," then asks for help "in a tone of despair" (109, 110); his need to lean on Anne for help is not criticized the way Mary's need for Charles to support her is. Similarly, Charles Musgrove's feelings are approved; we are told that he, "really a very affectionate brother, hung over Louisa with sobs of grief" (110). By contrast, the victim Louisa is implicitly blamed in Anne's thoughts for the "very resolute character" that contributed to the accident (116). The expression of male suffering seems to be legitimate; female suffering apparently less so.

I concluded my second point by arguing that Mary's whines remain richly comical, despite what I see as Austen's critique of the way the expression of unhappiness is so gendered by her culture that we prefer to laugh at Mary, not sympathize. But both the discussion that followed and subsequent thought and conversation with friends have prompted me to alter these conclusions somewhat. First, many people at Lake Louise rightly noted that other whiners (besides Mrs. Bennet, whose claims I'd acknowledged) existed in the novels—particularly Mrs. Price in *Mansfield Park*. Second, in the discussion we all tended to agree that whiners in Austen and in real life feel powerless to get what they want by direct means; hence, they whine. It's not surprising, then, that whining is so associated with women and children, traditionally more powerless in Austen's world and in our own. But this equation was challenged by one speaker, who felt that powerful men in the novels could whine too; as he put it, people with power always want more. He cited Sir Walter Elliot as an example of a powerful whiner, and I now agree with him. I will begin with Sir Walter as a whiner and will then move on to a more interesting and perhaps even more powerful one, John Knightley in *Emma*, and his foil as whiner, Mr. Woodhouse.

Sir Walter's whines are not like those of any other character, male or female, in the novels. What he suffers over is not lack of attention, like Mary, or the entail at Longbourne, like Mrs. Bennet. His suffering is much purer: for Sir Walter, the world simply doesn't come up to his own splendid standard. He is himself properly beautiful and justly elevated in rank, but he looks around him and finds nothing but evil: "Anne haggard, Mary coarse, every face in the neighbourhood

worthing; and the rapid increase of the crow's foot about Lady Russell's temples had long been a distress to him" (6). To exacerbate such evils, some very unworthy, unbeautiful men are actually raised in rank above Sir Walter: "Lord St. Ives, whose father we all know to have been a country curate, without bread to eat; I was to give place to Lord St. Ives, and a certain Admiral Baldwin, the most deplorable looking personage you can imagine, his face the colour of mahogany, rough and rugged to the last degree, all lines and wrinkles, nine grey hairs of a side, and nothing but a dab of powder at top" (19-20). His most wonderful whine notes the grim conditions at Bath:

The worst of Bath was, the number of its plain women. He did not mean to say that there were no pretty women, but the number of the plain was out of all proportion. He had frequently observed, as he walked, that one handsome face would be followed by thirty, or five and thirty frights; and once, as he had stood in a shop in Bond-street, he had counted eighty-seven women go by, one after another, without there being a tolerable face among them. It had been a frosty morning, to be sure, a sharp frost, which hardly one woman in a thousand could stand the test of. But still, there certainly were a dreadful multitude of ugly women in Bath; and as for the men! they were infinitely worse. (141-42)

I contend that these utterances are whines, by my definition; Sir Walter repeats them, and they serve to vent his discontent. But they differ from other characters' whines in their failure to blame others—for good reason. Sir Walter finds the world unworthy of his supreme self. Accordingly, his whines cannot be directed at anyone—except perhaps God, the creator of this deplorable universe. Not even his debt, his being forced to retrench, dislodges his sense of supremacy: "It had not been possible for him to spend less; he had done nothing but what Sir Walter Elliot was imperiously called on to do; but blameless as he was, he was not only growing dreadfully in debt, but was hearing of it so often, that it became vain to attempt concealing it longer . . ." (9). Sir Walter is blameless; the world is to blame. He whines from almost a godlike stance—empowered in that sense, but powerless to effect the changes he would prefer. He sees himself as so much above the fray that he doesn't even deign to blame the government for elevating unworthy men to high rank. He is not a "rounded" character; he is a caricature, almost farcical in his comic monstrosity. He is never humiliated, as Austen's other characters often are; even when he ought to be humbled, by having to leave Kellynch and rent it out, he remains superior, turning the lease into a favor that he does Admiral Croft. He would be utterly despicable if he weren't so funny. His whines, in short, express his character, not his situation. Although his suffering over a world unworthy of him is ridiculous and not at all in the same category as Benwick's truncated mourning for Fanny Harville, still he and his whines meet with

indulgence and flattery from everyone around him—as his daughter Mary’s do not.

Although *Persuasion* is the Austen novel that most insistently treats whining, *Emma* too spends a surprising amount of time on the subject, specifically male whining. If what I have argued about *Persuasion* is correct, that is, if Austen is engaged in a cultural critique of the way male and female unhappiness is treated, then we should expect that in other novels male whining, where it exists, will be treated within that novel’s social world somewhat more tenderly than female whining—and I hope to persuade you that that’s the case in *Emma*.

The most obvious male whiner in *Emma* is not, of course, John Knightley but Henry Woodhouse. The very first chapter establishes and illustrates that his whines proceed from his “habits of gentle selfishness and of being never able to suppose that other people could feel differently from himself” (8). Mr. Woodhouse’s enormous narcissism means that he can whine not only for himself but for others. He barely distinguishes between his own feelings and theirs in any case, and we see in almost every sentence that he first utters in Chapter One how he can indulge in vicarious whines, that is, projecting his own fears and anxieties onto everyone else. His first words emerge when at tea, where we are told that

it was impossible for him not to say exactly as he had at dinner,
“Poor Miss Taylor!—I wish she were here again. What a pity it is that Mr. Weston ever thought of her!” (8)

Here we have the basic elements of the whine: unhappiness (I wish she were here again), blame (of Mr. Weston for taking her away), and repetition (Mr. Woodhouse said the same thing earlier and will certainly say it again). But we also have the projected whine, in Mr. Woodhouse’s sorrowful “Poor Miss Taylor!” When Emma tries to point out that Mrs. Weston will be better in a house of her own, where she won’t have to bear with Emma’s “odd humours,” he replies, “but where is the advantage of a house of her own? This is three times as large.—And you have never any odd humours, my dear” (8). The whine vicarious is in wonderful form here—over Poor Miss Taylor’s having to live in a smaller house and over the thought of Emma’s having any faults at all; Emma herself is clearly to blame for having suggested such a thing.

Emma’s next attempt to deflect her father’s whines by suggesting that they will be always meeting Mrs. Weston at Randalls is no more successful: he replies, “My dear, how am I to get so far? Randalls is such a distance. I could not walk half so far” (8). Here the whine vicarious gives way to the whine direct, but of a particular kind. This is the “take care of me” whine, demanding comfort and advice, partly

of course for the pleasure of rejecting both, as Mr. Woodhouse does when Emma reminds him that they will take the carriage to Randalls:

But James will not like to put the horses to for such a little way;—and where are the poor horses to be while we are paying our visit?" (8)

In order to refuse comfort, Mr. Woodhouse resorts again to the projected whine: James will be put out and the horses will be inconvenienced by the trip, or in other words, Mr. Woodhouse will be put out and inconvenienced by any excursion. That he has made this objection before, probably often, is clear when Emma replies that the horses will be put into Mr. Weston's stable and that "You know we have settled all that already. We talked it all over with Mr. Weston last night" (8). Emma succeeds in diverting her father from his projected whines only when she reminds him that he got James's daughter Hannah a good job at Randalls, so James will want to go there. But as soon as Mr. Knightley arrives, the whines resume—first projected onto Mr. Knightley, whose "shocking walk" is first lamented, then the likely consequences ("But you must have found it very damp and dirty. I wish you may not catch cold" [10]). After a short whine at the weather ("we have had a vast deal of rain here. It rained dreadfully hard for half an hour, while we were at breakfast"), he reverts to his major whine: "I wanted them to put off the wedding" (10).

Mr. Woodhouse's whines are distinguished from Mary Musgrove's first by his gentleness and second by his eagerness to project them onto others. Mary, of course, would never do that—her sore-throats are worse than any body's, and so are her whines: more unrelenting, more demanding. But a word should be added here about Mr. Woodhouse's gentle selfishness and gentle whines. Again, he is a dependent whiner, whose whines announce helplessness and ask for reassurance and caretaking. But they are also confident whines; Mr. Woodhouse is sure as Mary never is that reassurance and care will be forthcoming whenever he makes his vulnerability clear. He is catered to, not only by Emma and Mrs. Weston and Mr. Knightley but by all of Highbury. It is in this sense that he is powerful, controlling others—in little things, like denying Mrs. Bates her favorite sweetbread and asparagus fricassee (329), or in big ones, like deferring Emma's marriage. In fact, it is hard to see how he differs as a whiner from the novel's villain, Mrs. Churchill, whose ill-health too becomes a weapon used to control those around her, particularly Frank Churchill. She too whines vicariously—but in the more usual meaning of that word, i.e., she gets others to do her whining. Her husband writes to Frank in the letter that recalls him before the ball at the Crown can take place:

she had been in a very suffering state (so said her husband) when writing to her nephew two days before, though from her usual unwillingness to

give pain, and constant habit of never thinking of herself, she had not mentioned it. . . . (258)

We can almost hear Mrs. Churchill's own whining voice in the assertion that she never thinks of herself. Naturally no one believes her whines, vicarious or not; Frank's response is that "He knew her illnesses; they never occurred but for her own convenience" (258). Only in retrospect is her ill-health credited, when she dies. The implicit parallel that Austen sets up between Mr. Woodhouse and Mrs. Churchill works, I believe, to suggest as in *Persuasion* that in the social world she describes, female complaints or whines will be resented and discredited whether or not they succeed in controlling others, male ones indulged.

But perhaps Mr. Woodhouse is not a fair example. Although he is a rich man, as Mrs. Churchill is a rich woman, he is so benevolent that everyone loves him despite his gentle selfishness; no one seems to love her except perhaps her husband. Mr. Woodhouse, too, does not make a display of his power as Mrs. Churchill certainly does. So let us turn to a more obviously empowered and less benevolent male whiner, Mr. John Knightley. At first, we would be unlikely to see any connection between them. But of course, there is one—Isabella, ideal wife and daughter for these men. Mr. Woodhouse is completely habit-bound, as is his son-in-law John Knightley; for both, change is a threat that produces whines, particularly domestic change. A friend has suggested that in fact Isabella has married her father; living with either, Isabella falls into what my friend Ruth Portner calls, perfectly I think, a "domestic swoon."

This parallel between the two men is initially disguised, for in their first scene together they seem opposites. We hear from the narrator that John Knightley's "temper was not his great perfection" (92) and then that "he had all the clearness and quickness of mind which [Isabella] wanted, and he could sometimes act an ungracious, or say a severe thing" (93). From Emma's perspective we learn of:

the want of respectful forbearance towards her father. There he had not always the patience that could be wished. Mr. Woodhouse's peculiarities and fidgettiness were sometimes provoking him to a rational remonstrance or sharp retort equally ill bestowed. It did not often happen; for Mr. John Knightley had really a great regard for his father-in-law, and generally a strong sense of what was due to him; but it was too often for Emma's charity, especially as there was all the pain of apprehension frequently to be endured, though the offence came not. (93)

A sense that John Knightley is explosive in an unpredictable way is registered here, and it is this unpredictable explosiveness that can make his anger so unpleasant. But he is also very predictable in his response to any offense against his domestic habits, and these responses rise to whines, I would argue, when he has to spend

Christmas Eve at Randalls in bad weather. When he and Emma are on their way to Randalls in the carriage, we learn that

The preparing and the going abroad in such weather, with the sacrifice of his children after dinner, were evils, were disagreeables at least, which Mr. John Knightley did not by any means like; he anticipated nothing in the visit that could be at all worth the purchase; and the whole of their drive to the Vicarage was spent by him in expressing his discontent. (113)

This introduction is followed by a half-page of venting, classifiable as whining by content: his words are full of blame and repetition. But these whines assert power in a manner distinct from the whines of Mary Musgrove, for instance. They begin by elevating themselves to a generalization:

"A man," said he, "must have a very good opinion of himself when he asks people to leave their own fireside, and encounter such a day as this, for the sake of coming to see him. He must think himself a most agreeable fellow; I could not do such a thing."

John Knightley does not lower himself to whine directly about Mr. Weston's sociability; instead, like Samuel Johnson or any other eighteenth-century moralist, he generalizes about men who think themselves agreeable. That is, this empowered man seeks an even stronger position from whence to vent his discontent, to whine. Those in power want more power, as that male member of the Lake Louise audience reminded us. John Knightley is more right than he knows, of course, to dissociate himself from men who think themselves agreeable by saying he is not like them: he can be rather disagreeable and tells us he dines with no one in London (116).

John Knightley then shifts his whine into higher gear by focusing on the weather, perhaps in most cultures the purest and best subject for whining but particularly so in England:

"It is the greatest absurdity—Actually snowing at this moment!—The folly of not allowing people to be comfortable at home—and the folly of people's not staying comfortably at home when they can! If we were obliged to go out such [*sic*] an evening as this, by any call of duty or business, what a hardship we should deem it;—and here are we, probably with rather thinner clothing than usual, setting forward voluntarily, without excuse, in defiance of the voice of nature, which tells man, in every thing given to his view or his feelings, to stay at home himself, and keep all under shelter that he can; . . ."

Again, the whine is generalized and moralized, first into a critique of "folly." It reaches a crescendo of pseudo-objectivity and impersonality when John Knightley imagines the "voice of nature" telling "man"—not himself—to stay at home. He then returns to the main grievance—sociability run mad:

“... here are we setting forward to spend five dull hours in another man’s house, with nothing to say or to hear that was not said and heard yesterday, and may not be said and heard again to-morrow. Going in dismal weather [back to that complaint!], to return probably in worse;—four horses and four servants taken out for nothing but to convey five idle, shivering creatures into colder rooms and worse company than they might have had at home.”

Emma did not find herself equal to give the pleased assent, which no doubt he was in the habit of receiving, to emulate the “Very true, my love,” which must have been usually administered by his travelling companion. . . . (113)

By the end of his speech, John Knightley’s generalized whines have given way to a more familiar kind; mention of the servants and the horses is, of course, suggestive of Mr. Woodhouse. Later, at Randalls, John Knightley sounds even more like Mr. Woodhouse after an interlude in which he first triumphantly announces that snow has fallen and then sarcastically comments on the dangers of getting home: “we are two carriages; if *one* is blown over in the bleak part of the common field there will be the other at hand. I dare say we shall be all safe at Hartfield before midnight” (126). This ability to imagine a carriage disaster links him to Mr. Woodhouse, whose fears of the turn into Vicarage-lane are so lively. But he reminds us of Mr. Woodhouse even more startlingly in his response to Isabella’s announcement that she will walk home half the way if necessary, declaring that “it is not the sort of thing that gives me cold” (127):

“Indeed!” replied he. “Then, my dear Isabella, it is the most extraordinary sort of thing in the world, for in general every thing does give you cold. Walk home!—you are prettily shod for walking home, I dare say. It will be bad enough for the horses.” (127)

With this reference to the horses’ sufferings, not his own, John Knightley achieves precisely the vicarious whine that characterizes Mr. Woodhouse. Both men, of course, take advantage of the fact that concern for one’s livestock, particularly one’s horses, is appropriate to rich men; carriage-horses denote status in Austen’s world as expensive cars do in ours. Though John Knightley probably utters his whines about the weather and visiting and the horses in a tone that would sound to us more like anger than whining, I submit that in form and in content he is as much a whiner as Mr. Woodhouse, though with at least one significant difference: he can be conscious of his bad behavior and embarrassed by it. When Emma returns to Hartfield after her horrible drive with Mr. Elton, she finds that “Mr. John Knightley, ashamed of his ill-humour, was now all kindness and attention; and so particularly solicitous for the comfort of her father, as to seem—if not quite ready to join him in a basin of gruel—perfectly sensible of its being exceedingly wholesome” (133).

This consciousness and shame on John Knightley's part distinguishes him not merely from Mr. Woodhouse as a whiner but also from Mary Musgrove. He is less likely as a result to elicit the same negative response that Mary does. Furthermore, John Knightley's bad temper is initially placed in a context that makes us more likely to tolerate it. When we first meet him, Emma is provoked by John Knightley's comments about Mr. Weston's having given up Frank Churchill for adoption. He says that:

"Mr. Weston is rather an easy, cheerful tempered man, than a man of strong feelings . . . depending, I suspect, much more upon what is called *society* for his comforts, that is, upon the power of eating and drinking, and playing whist with his neighbours five times a-week, than upon family affection, or any thing that home affords." (96)

In response,

Emma could not like what bordered on a reflection on Mr. Weston, and had half a mind to take it up; but she struggled, and let it pass. She would keep the peace if possible; and there was something honourable and valuable in the strong domestic habits, the all-sufficiency of home to himself, whence resulted her brother's disposition to look down on the common rate of social intercourse, and those to whom it was important. —It had a high claim to forbearance. (96-97)

Emma's forbearance here places John Knightley's tendency to ill-temper—his lack of forbearance—in the context of his domesticity. He is domestic man as his wife is domestic woman; Jane Austen has thus set him up to be tolerated well before we see his worst burst of whines and temper on the visit to Randalls.

John Knightley, then, is not an inveterate or an unashamed whiner as is Mary Musgrove or Mrs. Price or Mr. Woodhouse, and for that reason you might feel that his whining *deserves* to be more tenderly and understandingly treated than theirs is—though you may not feel equal (any more than Emma) to applying Isabella's degree of indulgence, her "Very true, my love." That is, both John Knightley and Mr. Woodhouse are affectionate fathers, which seems to qualify their whines, whereas Mary Musgrove and Mrs. Price appear to be unaffectionate, ineffective mothers—and nothing redeems their whining. Let me remind you of how Mrs. Price whines in *Mansfield Park*: her favorite lament is that "every thing comes upon [her] at once" (378), that she can't possibly manage, primarily because her servant Rebecca is so impossible. She vents her discontent by blaming Rebecca for everything. She is as capable as Mr. Woodhouse or John Knightley of the vicarious whine also: in the argument over the silver knife that Betsey takes from Susan, she whines about Susan and finally comforts Betsey with words that project her own dissatisfaction with what her family has done for her: the knife, she says,

“was the gift of [Mary’s] good godmother, old Mrs. Admiral Maxwell, only six weeks before she was taken for death. Poor little sweet creature! [To Betsey—but to herself too, I’d say.] Well, she was taken away from evil to come. My own Betsey, (fondling her), *you* have not the luck of such a good godmother. Aunt Norris lives too far off, to think of such little people as you. (387)

Mrs. Price is affectionate to Betsey as a projection of herself and her own needs—much the way Lady Bertram is to her pug. Mrs. Price is also affectionate to her sons; but we are likely to see her as Fanny and others do, as a feckless whiner and a poor mother. Similarly, Anne Elliot and others see her sister Mary Musgrove as a whining mother who does not manage her children properly. Neither gets sympathy inside or outside the text. We might be reminded here of a modern parallel: the way in which judges in custody battles are now sometimes favoring fathers’ claims over mothers’. Katha Pollitt, in an editorial in *The Nation*, reviewed the case of Sharon Prost, a

lawyer on Orrin Hatch’s staff who lost custody of her two sons to the father, whose job was supposedly more relaxed. But if you look at the court papers, it seems evident that Judge Harriett Taylor—yes, a woman—applied, perhaps unconsciously, a double standard. She gave the father extra credit for every minute he spent with the kids, and docked the mother for every minute she spent away from them. He was in charge of the kids in the evening—*bravo!* She gets up at dawn to be with them before work—*so?* Prost and her husband weren’t judged against each other (actually, they invested about the same amount of energy in parenting); rather, each was judged against the old gender stereotypes of the distant-breadwinner father and the stay-at-home mother. When that’s the standard, modern women are set up to lose. (March 27, 1995)

The modern gendering of parenting roles may seem a far cry from the gendering of suffering and thus of whining, but I think in *Emma* we see Austen’s sharp awareness that when men appropriate women’s domestic space—as Mr. Woodhouse and John Knightley do—they get special cultural credit that women like Isabella Knightley and Mary Musgrove and Mrs. Price don’t receive for merely occupying that space. I believe that Jane Austen noticed and was amused by precisely this discrepancy. I consider that, in depicting two male domestic whiners in *Emma*, she is engaged in a cultural critique of differences between the way even the unhappiness, discontent, and anxiety—expressed in whining—of empowered men and disempowered women are viewed and operate within her culture—and, it turns out, in ours too. But whether you agree with me here or not, I hope you will agree that, by looking at whiners in the novels, we discover once again their fullness and complexity. Any thread, even one that may seem as flimsy as this, when traced through the texts illuminates their richness.