

The Civility of *Emma*¹

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The medieval concept of manners, called “courtesy” because it was practised by noblemen at court, begins to be called “civility,” a term for a wholly new system of bodily propriety, which is henceforth applicable to all citizens, not merely the elite.—MARGARET VISSER²

“Civility” evolved from “courtesy” as a code of manners for citizens, not courtiers. When courts gave way to cities and when commercial and industrial power became more compelling than feudal interests, civility inevitably superseded courtesy as “behaviour befitting a citizen” (*OED* 7). The task of civility was to create a code of conduct for civilization, which implied the harmonizing of peoples from all walks of life. The code of civility, therefore, had to address both sameness and difference in human nature. Sameness inheres in our instinctual life; difference in our birth, class, rank, and wealth as well as in those individual oddities that we used to call humors. Elegance is the refinement of civility in our appearance, thinking, feeling, and acting. Amiability is our civility acting on a sensitivity to the needs of others that are no less exigent than our own. Intelligence and knowledge promote elegance and amiability because stupidity and ignorance hinder the discrimination of sameness and difference, whose confusion causes shame and mortification. Jane Austen’s rendering of civility involves the interconnection of all these elements of life. Thus, as they grapple with a variety of problems, we see her characters trying to solve puzzles and argue cases. These demand a precise mind and a good judgment, respectively. Civility, therefore, is constantly probed in *Emma*. It is a noteworthy goal that is sometimes achieved. This in a nutshell is the argument of this paper. The meat within the nutshell will take a bit more chewing.

The problems of civility in *Emma* begin with the variety of characters and their problems. John Knightley from London, for instance, finds it difficult to accommodate himself to Donwell parish, even though it’s his birthplace. And Highbury must learn to accommodate Miss Hawkins of Bristol once she becomes Mrs. Elton. And even though her family’s fortune was made commercially in a city that was prominent in the slave trade, Augusta Elton finds it impossible to put up with the Tupmans of West Hill, whose Birmingham origins make them “upstarts” to her in-laws, the Sucklings of Maple Grove. The queenly Mrs. Churchill, “barely the daughter of a gentleman” with “no fair pretense of family or blood” (II.xviii.310),³ cannot bear her brother-in-law, Mr. Weston, who is “rising into gentility” (I.ii.15); she even pries his son away from him. Will the

Coles be impertinent enough to invite Miss Woodhouse to their dinner party or inconsiderate enough not to invite her? A nice question at a time when money is challenging blood for social position. And so on and so forth. The social panorama of *Emma* is there for all to see in a state of "Heraclitean . . . flux."⁴ There are its landowners, lawyers, and clergymen; its apothecaries, school mistresses, and ostlers; its Searles, Jameses, and Williams; its orphans, bastards, and bitches; its sick, healthy, and hypochondriacal; its towns, cities, and seashores.⁵ The novel thrives on dinners, dances, and teas; on puzzles, riddles, and charades; on cases, courtships, and consciences—to say nothing of ignorance, like that of Mrs. Elton, who sees "Poor Knightley" as an "eccentric" (III.xvii.469).

We know from this outburst, brought about by the news of the Knightley-Woodhouse engagement, that Mrs. Elton's mind, fixed as it is on "finery and parade," has costly limitations (III.xix.484). Her ignorance necessarily limits her civility. For if civility doesn't require people to like each other, it does require them to do each other justice.⁶ But ignorance, like Augusta Elton's, and stupidity, like Harriet Smith's, severely tax civility in Highbury. Never having experienced either a woman as elegant as Jane Fairfax or a man as amiable as Mr. Knightley, for instance, Mrs. Elton doesn't know how to treat real ladies and gentlemen. She insists on getting a job for the one and sending invitations for the other. Both have to rebuff her, civilly, to do justice to themselves.

Miss Bates, however, is very sensitive to civility, as she shows when Mr. Knightley sends her his last bushel of apples. "We really are so shocked!" she says to Mr. Knightley. "Mrs. Hodges may well be angry. William Larkins mentioned it here. You should not have done it, indeed you should not." It seems to Miss Bates that Mr. Knightley has sent apples of discord rolling among them. She does not want to be on the outs with Mr. Knightley's steward and his housekeeper, and she does not want him having trouble with his own servants. She is worried that his kindness to her mother, her niece, and herself may be an act of incivility. Mr. Knightley is not: "Ah! he is off," Miss Bates announces to the diverse lot of people in her house examining Jane Fairfax's new pianoforté. "He never can bear to be thanked" (II.x.245).

Those listening to Miss Bates talking out the window to Mr. Knightley on horseback are, in order of social importance, Emma, Frank Churchill, Mrs. Weston, old Mrs. Bates, who probably hears nothing, Miss Bates, Jane Fairfax, and Harriet Smith. Those mentioned in the conversation in the order of rank are Mrs. Cole, whose dinner party all attended the night before; William Larkins, Mr. Knightley's steward; Mrs. Hodges, his housekeeper, and, by implication, Patty, Miss Bates's servant, who told her that William Larkins

said that theirs was the last bushel of apples at Donwell. There has to be a way for all these people from high to low to get along with each other; therefore, civility is striven for as a necessity. Clearly it is not for Mr. Larkins or Mrs. Hodges to tell Mr. Knightley what to do with his apples. And they don't. William tells Patty who tells Miss Bates. But that's all right too: "William Larkins is such an old acquaintance! I am always glad to see him" (II.ix.239). Miss Bates thus finally quiets her conscience and sees no harm done. Neither does Mr. Knightley. He rides away. Civility has been preserved. And Miss Bates, who is always so "obliged," obliges him by not discussing the great question that she has, quite properly, already discussed with Mr. Woodhouse: whether the apples should be baked two or three times (II.ix.238).

Mr. Knightley sent the apples for Jane Fairfax because he knows that an apple a day keeps Mr. Perry away. But Emma is mentioned as eating an apple—"the best baked apple for her" (II.x.240)—not Jane. If only Frank Churchill had taken a bite of that apple before Emma ate it all! That would be Adam and Eve in Regency dress and account for many other things in the chapter. Things like shame, which becomes even more prominent later in the novel. Immediately, however, Emma is sure that she can account for Jane Fairfax's shame. Mr. Dixon sent the mysterious pianoforté to Jane; he's a married man who loves his wife's friend more than his wife and sends her expensive presents. Emma has told Frank her conjectures. And Frank leans upon the word enough to make Jane smile at the innuendo of her sexual recklessness. So Emma concludes that her conjectures are correct but nonetheless tries to quiet Frank down:

"You speak too plain. She must understand you."

"I hope she does. I would have her understand me. I am not in the least ashamed of my meaning."

"But really, I am half ashamed, and wish I had never taken up the idea."

"I am very glad you did, and that you communicated it to me. I have now a key to all her odd looks and ways. Leave shame to her. If she does wrong, she ought to feel it." (II.x.243)

This is Frank Churchill at his worst. "It was his object to blind all about him" (III.xvii.427). And he has already started with Mrs. Bates, as we shall see presently. But everything that he says now he says at Emma's expense. Emma and Frank Churchill are not laughing at Jane Fairfax. Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill are laughing at Emma. Ambiguity governs a situation that Emma thinks is crystal clear. Frank Churchill has deliberately led Emma into shaming herself in public. But she doesn't know that—yet. Later, when she does, she will call his action "treachery" (III.x.399). And Mr. Knightley will dismiss Churchill as "a disgrace to the name of man"

(III.xiii.426).⁷ Frank's is a piece of incivility of the worst kind because it shows "no English delicacy towards the feelings of other people" (I.xviii.149). And this remains true to the end of the novel where Jane Fairfax, who tries to be "deaf" to Frank's reminding Emma of their "blunders," says that he shamelessly "*courts*" shame (III.xviii.480). Jane Austen here drives the last nail into the coffin of COURTSHIP that haunts this novel as a revenant charade. For Frank fakes a courtship of Emma at the Bateses' while he savages her with a smile, making Jane his unwilling accomplice. Yet this scene begins seemingly in the most civilized way.

It begins with Churchill restoring a rivet to Mrs. Bates's broken spectacles. Here is what Emma, Harriet, and Mrs. Weston see as they precede Miss Bates into her sitting room:

The appearance of the little sitting-room as they entered was tranquillity itself; Mrs. Bates, deprived of her usual employment, slumbering on one side of the fire, Frank Churchill, at a table near her, most deedily occupied about her spectacles, and Jane Fairfax, standing with her back to them, intent on her pianoforté. (II.x.240)

Mrs. Bates cannot knit without spectacles. She cannot hear well either (II.i.158). When the party of women arrives, Mrs. Weston is surprised to see Frank still on the job: "'What! . . . have not you finished it yet?'" Of course he hasn't; he has hardly begun. Since Mrs. Bates can't see, hear, or work, she falls asleep. Frank has effectually been alone with Jane. He is not wasting time with spectacles; he is making time with Jane! By taking away Mrs. Bates's spectacles, he has created an occasion for his convenience. Frank, in these circumstances, can safely tell Jane about Emma's shameful conjectures about the pianoforté, which Jane stares at as Emma enters the room.

Emma is ashamed of herself because she told Frank Churchill her conjectures about Jane's carrying on with the husband of a woman who has been sister to her. Emma is not ashamed of what she thinks, only of saying what she thinks. Because Jane's accomplishments require Emma to think well of her, Emma needs to lower her estimate of Jane. When she sees Jane's sexuality run amok, Emma succeeds. Since she herself is not even tempted to marry, she is sure she's got her sexuality under control. If Emma cannot play piano as well as Jane, then Jane cannot play at love as well as Emma. Harriet Smith may be downright stupid, but at least she is not immoral. And if Jane is immoral, Mr. Knightley will not interest himself in her, as Mrs. Weston thinks he is doing. That pianoforté tells Emma everything she needs to know. Jane's moral music is all discords. Emma need apologize to no one for what she thinks. If only she could keep her big mouth shut!⁸

But Emma can't be quiet because as much as she thinks she has her sexuality under control, the whole novel reveals that the opposite is true.⁹ It begins with her claiming that she has made Miss Taylor into Mrs. Weston. She proceeds to try to make Miss Smith into Mrs. Elton. Then into Mrs. Churchill. But certainly not into Mrs. Knightley. If Jane Fairfax can't be Mrs. Knightley, then Harriet Smith cannot be either. It's when she wakes up to her own need to marry that Emma wakes up to her own sexuality. Eros releases his arrow,¹⁰ and Sleeping Beauty awakens to remember that Mr. Knightley, brother of the father of five, has penetration too.¹¹ Having got her jollies vicariously and made a mess of everything, Emma takes responsibility for her own sexuality to become Mrs. Knightley herself. In doing so, she shakes off the image of Mrs. Bates, blind and deaf and asleep while the world of love circulates around her. For as much as Mrs. Bates is always herself, she is also an image of Emma, whose comatose sexuality allows her to see and hear nothing accurately. It is no accident that the chapter that literally gives us Mrs. Bates asleep, figuratively gives us, sexually and morally, Emma snoring. Emma needs to note her sameness with more than one woman before she attains to civility.

Although difference is everywhere evident in society,¹² as the scene at the Bateses' shows, the sameness of human nature must not be forgot. People as different as Emma and Jane Fairfax are the same as others in basic ways. Starting with baked apples. Everyone has to eat to live, whether it be thin gruel for Mr. Woodhouse or roast loin of pork, which Mr. Woodhouse meant to be boiled, for the Bateses; or that fricassee of sweetbreads with asparagus that Mrs. Bates longs to eat and Mr. Woodhouse takes away from her; or the slice of cold meat and glass of Madeira that keep Frank Churchill from leaving immediately for "Switzerland"; or that river of tea and spruce beer that flows through Highbury down past the Donwell strawberries, in three varieties, which Mrs. Elton gathers in "her apparatus of happiness" (III.vi.358). There is dinner at Randalls; there is dinner at the Coles; there is dinner at Hartfield; and there is dinner at the Crown Inn, where the idea of serving only sandwiches is mocked as "an infamous fraud upon the rights of men and women" (II.xi.254). And let us not forget the cold lamb at the Box Hill "pic-nic," where Emma gets a taste of humble pie too.

"Sexuality, like all the other natural human functions, is a phenomenon known to everyone and a part of each human life."¹³ "All men are equal," says a French courtesan, "once you get them in bed"—allowing, naturally, for temperamental and anatomical differences. The basic similarity of sexual desire, however, is a way that "sex helped readers to think about equality in a deeply inegalitarian society."¹⁴ Sexuality helps to level differences. So we see in *Emma*

that if food gives pleasure, so too does sex. Ideally, the sexual drive perpetuates families and society. But it has other inducements as well. Harriet Smith is the natural daughter of somebody—that somebody a tradesman whose passion got the better of his reason. Mr. Dixon marries Miss Campbell but is supposed to love Miss Fairfax more than his wife. Frank's passion for Jane Fairfax turns her into an "angel," but the angel drives Churchill "mad," "insane" (III.xiv.439). The machinations of her loudly professed celibacy make Emma's mind "disgusting" (III.xi.412), and Mr. Knightley's love for Emma turns into "jealousy" of Frank Churchill (III.xiii.432). Emma makes allowances for the "ignorance and . . . temptations" of the poor (I.x.86). But her sister Isabella, if less ignorant is not less tempted. She already has five children. Mrs. Weston marries in October and has a baby in July, nine months later. She conceives at the beginning of the novel and her daughter Anna is born three chapters from its end (III.xvii.461). Mrs. Weston is presented as a model of healthy, mature sexuality.¹⁵ Others are more deviant. Emma tries hard to make Harriet Mr. Elton's wife, but he makes violent love to Emma. Mrs. Weston tries to make Emma Frank's wife, but he makes secret love to Jane, whom Mrs. Weston is trying to match with Mr. Knightley. The novel begins with one wedding, has another at its middle, and three at its end.¹⁶ There's as much attention to dancing as there is to eating in *Emma* because, as we know from *Pride and Prejudice*, "to be fond of dancing" is a "certain step towards falling in love."¹⁷ And if you dine at the Coles, you can dance as well; and if you dance at the Crown Inn, you can dine there too.

Eating and sexuality are what men and women, regardless of birth, class, rank, and wealth, have in common.¹⁸ It is the way that men and women go about satisfying their desires for food and sex that brings about distinct codes of manners. As far back as Genesis, God distinguishes humankind from brute beasts and tells Adam and Eve what they are to eat. "The Bible seems to agree with Aristotle that the *first* reason for dietary laws is the need to restrain, moderate, and define the naturally unrestrained, immoderate, and boundless appetites of human beings—appetites that are by no means restricted to the desire for food but for which the problem of eating is somehow emblematic."¹⁹ Mr. Woodhouse may take such restraint to comic proportions, but he is an exemplary reminder of the evolution of a code of manners dealing with eating that is everywhere evident in *Emma*.²⁰ And we have the very opposite of Mr. Woodhouse in Frank Churchill, whose sexually induced madness and insanity for Jane Fairfax constantly leads him into schemes that allow them to be together. The subtly private one of blinding the deaf Mrs. Bates eventually gives way to the extravagantly public one of the Crown Inn ball.

The rules that govern conduct in dancing are meant as society's way of introducing civility into sexual expression.²¹ The Eltons ignore such decorum in exhibiting their sexual rancor for Harriet Smith. Their violation of civility is an "unpardonable rudeness" that makes Mr. Elton look "very foolish." It puts Mr. Knightley to dancing with Harriet and thereby continues Emma's sharpening sexual perception of his person and manners, which begin upon his entering the room: "not one among the whole row of young men . . . could be compared with him": "how gentlemanlike a manner" and "what natural grace." "Her eyes invited him irresistibly to come to her," and they danced. And not, of course, as "brother and sister! no, indeed" (III.ii.326-31).

Jane Austen tells us through her dramatization of desire that civility must recognize food and sex as basic human needs to formulate the manners of society successfully. At the same time she shows us that birth, class, rank, and money, along with individual peculiarities of personality, are basic social facts too. To ignore their existence also undermines civility. People *are* different. Distinctions require recognition. They need to be dealt with civilly. Problems created by sameness and difference in civility, Jane Austen suggests, can be negotiated by elegance and amiability. These are highlighted in *Emma* by the association of the one with Jane Fairfax and the other with Mr. Knightley.²²

Jane Fairfax is so "remarkably elegant" (II.ii.167) that Mrs. Elton, as Mr. Knightley says, doesn't know what to make of her: "Such a woman as Jane Fairfax probably never fell in Mrs. Elton's way before—and no degree of vanity can prevent her acknowledging her own comparative littleness." She "awes Mrs. Elton by her superiority both of mind and manner" (II.xv.286-87). Thus Jane Fairfax is invariably polite but firm. She knows everyone expects her to become a governess at the same time that she herself expects to become Mrs. Frank Churchill. Thus she doesn't want Mrs. Elton playing "Lady Patroness" and interfering with her future.

Mrs. Elton's vision of everything is skewed by her sense of the importance given her by Maple Grove. She feeds everything into the endless Sucklings-of-Maple-Grove rodomontade, which alone gives her any sense of herself. That is why she tries to measure everything by it. Hartfield, she tells Emma, is "so like" Maple Grove. She has no eye for difference except for what is below her. Her first meeting with Emma has her using the pronoun "*We*," as if a Hawkins were the same as a Woodhouse because her sister is a Suckling. To make Maple Grove like Hartfield makes Augusta Hawkins like Emma Woodhouse. But the equation is a howler. Without elegance of mind, Mrs. Elton doesn't do social calculus well. Because she buys a husband for what everyone agrees is £10,000, she thinks she is ready

for higher math. But even her basic geometry is bad: she sees lines intersect that are absolutely parallel. Because her perception is inaccurate and her mind limited, her manners lack civility.

The same can be said of Emma when she insists on sameness when difference is evident. The whole enterprise of Emma's taking Harriet's likeness shows this. Quite unconsciously, Emma has selected Harriet to lead her sexual life for her, she herself being committed to celibacy. No husband-hunting and no marrying for her. Yet Emma constantly manifests a drive toward sexual union. She is forever making matches: silly matches (Harriet with Mr. Elton), illicit matches (Jane Fairfax with Mr. Dixon), and flattering matches (Frank Churchill with herself). But Emma misses the sexual games being played between Churchill and Jane Fairfax, Mr. Elton and Harriet, and even between Mr. Knightley and herself. Emotionally with Emma it is *Tel père, tel fille!* Marriage grievously breaks up the family. Emma is reluctant to be anyone but Miss Woodhouse of Hartfield. Needing an emotional outlet, Emma finds one in Harriet Smith. She gets Harriet to play the love scenes for her. When, for instance, Frank Churchill, who is exasperated with Jane Fairfax at Box Hill, asks Emma to "find somebody for me. I am in no hurry. Adopt her, educate her," Emma asks:

"And make her like myself."

"By all means, if you can."

"Very well. I undertake the commission. You shall have a charming wife." (III.vii.373)

And Emma asks herself, "Would not Harriet be the very creature described?" Of course, because Emma has already made Harriet like herself in rendering her likeness as an elegant woman. The rhetorical question simply confirms Emma's belief in her double and in Harriet's usefulness in short-circuiting sexual desire.

For Harriet to be her surrogate Emma must make her an elegant woman. She therefore turns Harriet into a version of Jane Fairfax. When Emma draws Harriet's likeness, she gives her Jane's height and figure as well as Jane's eyebrows and eyelashes. Each of these features is mentioned in introducing Jane Fairfax as an elegant woman (II.ii.167-68), and each is contested by someone looking at the picture Emma draws (I.vi.46-49). Emma rejects every criticism. She insists that Harriet is what she makes her: an elegant woman. So once the likeness—which isn't a likeness—has been taken, Harriet Smith can act for Emma Woodhouse.

Harriet's two problems, however, are that she isn't smart and she isn't legitimate. To be blunt, though pictured as an elegant woman, Harriet Smith is really a stupid bastard.²³ Refusing to see her glaring difference from other women, Emma designs a picture-perfect

Harriet for Frank Churchill. But believing in her own picture, Harriet has designs on Mr. Knightley. Emma then quickly learns the importance of difference. Ignoring it, she has risked her own future and injured civility severely. Robert Martin is insulted and his family degraded. Mr. Elton is outraged, runs off, and marries a woman who will be troublesome in Highbury long after the happy day that "N. takes M. for better, for worse," and thereby "throw[s] cold water on every thing" (III.xvii.469). Harriet is constantly disappointed, and Emma is constantly mortified.

One of the disastrous consequences of her failure to recognize her own sexuality, then, is Emma's making Harriet Smith play a role to which she is totally unsuited. Emma's failure to recognize her own sexual sameness with women like Isabel Knightley and Anne Weston, who have been closest to her, leads her to ignore differences of an important social kind. Not until she admits her love for George Knightley and longs for his love does Emma's mind become elegant again. Then she can make the distinctions that need to be made, giving "clearness of head" equal importance with "tenderness of heart" (II.xiii.269). Then she sees that she herself is most like Jane Fairfax. When they confess their mistakes, admit their shame, and welcome their impending weddings, Emma's likeness to Jane becomes palpable (III.xvi.459-60). Jane Austen emphasizes the point ironically when she equates both with "perfection": Emma through Mr. Weston's conundrum (M+A=Perfection [III.vii.371]) and Jane through Mrs. Elton's attribution of "perfection" to her (III.xvi.457). If neither actually achieves perfection, each nonetheless realizes their sameness while affirming their difference with the difference in the physical beauty standing as a happy expression of a union of mind and manner with tenderness of heart.²⁴

Mr. Knightley, with his remarkable "clearness of head," recognized this likeness and urged Emma to embrace it (II.ii.166). He became the first critic of her embracing Harriet instead of Jane. He is never "gallant" with Emma—never "pays court," never is "a ladies' man" (*OED* "gallant" B3)—the way that Mr. Elton and Frank Churchill are. They demonstrate gallantry in their courtship of Emma. And COURTSHIP vexes this novel not only as a charade but as a riddle too. "Who is courting whom?" is the question never asked (everyone thinks she knows) and the question that always needs an answer.

"Courtship," like its cognate "courtesy," evokes an older social order than the one that prevails in Highbury. It referred originally to seeking favor at court through an elaborate set of manners that even in their updated form are altogether repugnant to Mr. Knightley because of the "Mystery" and "Finesse" involved (III.xv.446). When Emma becomes both open-eyed and open-hearted, she exclaims to

Jane Fairfax, "Oh! if you knew how much I love everything that is decided and open!" (III.xvi.460). This is another way of her saying, "Oh! if you knew how much I love Mr. Knightley!" For in a novel larded with riddles, GEORGE KNIGHTLEY alone fits Emma's description of what she loves. He is everything that is decided and open. But Mr. Elton and Frank Churchill are not. They play the courtship game as gallants at the expense of Harriet, Jane, and Emma. Neither shows that true English delicacy for the feelings of others implied in amiability, which characterizes Mr. Knightley alone: from sending apples and carriages to those who can afford neither to testing the snow for Mr. Woodhouse and dancing with Harriet Smith. George Knightley helps feed society as a farmer and helps it function as a magistrate. He recognizes in the land he inherits and the office it confers as well as in his precise mind and affectionate heart how he is at once the same as and different from his fellow citizens in Highbury. Just as nobody is beyond the scope of Miss Bates's conversation, nobody is beyond the scope of Mr. Knightley's action. The difference between them is that he can make distinctions and she cannot. Mr. Knightley is thus Highbury's best hope for enduring civility in all its doings.

Jane Austen does not present him as a humor character at all, even when he appears as a scold after Emma induces Harriet to refuse Martin and after Emma insults Miss Bates at Box Hill. He scolds Emma only when he sees her abusing her intelligence and failing to do justice to others. But his brother John, the lawyer, and his neighbor, Mr. Weston, are drawn as sophisticated versions of humor characters. John Knightley appears in the guise of the domestic man, and Mr. Weston in that of the sociable man. What they do is governed by these traits. And often enough they clash. Most notably when John Knightley finds himself at Randalls for the Westons' Christmas Eve dinner. There he frightens Mr. Woodhouse by dwelling on the falling snow in order to get back to Hartfield, his home away from home, as soon as possible. His next visit to Highbury finds him, unwillingly, at the Hartfield dinner for Augusta Elton, a dinner that Mr. Weston cannot attend because of business in London. But he astonishes John by showing up after dinner and leaving him in "mute astonishment":

That a man who might have spent his evening quietly at home after a day of business in London, should set off again, and walk half-a-mile to another man's house, for the sake of being in mixed company till bedtime, of finishing his day in the efforts of civility and the noise of numbers, was a circumstance to strike him deeply. (II.xvii.302-03)

Mr. Weston is introduced into the novel as "indisposed for any of the more homely pursuits in which his brothers were engaged"; therefore, he "had satisfied an active cheerful mind and social tem-

per by entering into the militia of his county” and became “a general favourite” (I.ii.15). He so loves company that he invites his son Frank to Mr. Knightley’s strawberry party and invites the Eltons to what Emma thought was her Box Hill party. This leads Emma to comment on “the unmanageable good-will of Mr. Weston’s temper” (III.vi.353), which causes problems. The Box Hill party proves to be Mr. Weston’s biggest mistake. One might well say with John Knightley, “I could not have believed it even of *him*” (II.xvii.303). The domestic John Knightley and the sociable Mr. Weston both fail in amiability as the feelings of others fall victim to their humors.

Mr. Knightley partakes of the good qualities of both these men. He is both gregarious and a homebody. At Donwell Abbey he asserts his rights by denying Mrs. Elton the role of “Lady Patroness” (II.vi.354); he talks with Harriet to take the temper of her feelings in the vicinity of Abbey Mill Farm. He even manages to get Mr. Woodhouse to Donwell and make him comfortable there. At the novel’s end he domesticates himself at Hartfield, following more thoughtfully in his brother’s footsteps. And before that we see him checking the snow, talking with Miss Bates, and dancing with Harriet. All of his actions show a just sense of himself, his home, and his relatives and friends. That is, he does justice to himself as well as to others. At home and away from home, George Knightley is a gentleman who displays “English delicacy towards the feelings of other people”; he is an amiable man—“habitually characterized by that friendliness which awakens friendliness in return” (*OED* “amiable” 3).

And yet he has his faults. His sameness with others shows in his sexual desire. He is jealous of Frank Churchill and finds it necessary to apologize to Emma for lecturing her so much. And Jane Austen laughs at him too. After Emma reflects on his amiability—“never deserv[ing] to be less worshipped than now” (III.xv.450)—Jane Austen shows him a besotted lover, making a *reductio ad absurdum* of his feelings as he reflects on Frank Churchill’s depredations:

He had found [Emma] agitated and low.—Frank Churchill was a villain.—He heard her declare that she never loved him. Frank Churchill’s character was not desperate.—She was his own Emma, by hand and word, when they returned into the house; and if he could have thought of Frank Churchill then, he might have deemed him a very good sort of fellow. (III.xiii.433)

Austen’s ridicule gives George Knightley a dimension that makes him like the rest of us. But Jane Austen makes sure that we take a proper estimate of his difference from us and from the characters in the novel too. If he is a truly warm-hearted domesticated man as we see in his love for Emma, in his solicitude for Mr. Woodhouse, the Bateses, and Harriet, and in his just appreciation of Jane Fairfax, he

is also an incisively intelligent man too, as one so much on the go needs to be.

Emma presents readers who are not “dull elves”²⁵—readers who have Mr. Knightley’s kind of mind—riddles to solve and cases to consider.²⁶ Riddles are most evident in Mr. Elton’s COURTSHIP charade and in Garrick’s CHIMNEY-SWEEPER verses. And, as I pointed out before, when Emma talks about loving what is open and direct, MR. KNIGHTLEY alone answers to her words. And MR. KNIGHTLEY is also *the* answer to Harriet’s riddle about the “service” done her that’s brought her from “perfect misery to perfect happiness” (III.iv.342). For that service is his dancing with her, not Churchill’s rescuing her from the gipsies. Riddles are puzzles with one right answer only. And one of the oldest riddles, that of the Sphinx in Sophocles *Oedipus the King*, shows us that if you don’t answer correctly you die. That is one reason why Emma is so frequently “mortified”—a word often used in the novel—at her mistaken guesses at COURTSHIP charades enacted before her. She guesses HARRIET as the object of Mr. Elton’s gallantry; the answer is EMMA. She guesses EMMA as the object of Frank Churchill’s gallantry; the answer is JANE FAIRFAX. She guesses DIXON for the pianoforté puzzle; the answer is CHURCHILL. She guesses CHURCHILL for Harriet’s service riddle; the answer is KNIGHTLEY. All these mistakes make Emma “wretched” and she dies to herself, as the word *mortification* implies: “she had been imposed on by others in a most mortifying degree; . . . she had been imposing on herself in a degree yet more mortifying” (III.xi.412). Mr. Knightley, for the most part, doesn’t get involved in riddles and puzzles, save to recognize their existence around him when he sees Frank Churchill passing the words DIXON and BLUNDER to Jane Fairfax. These simply become evidence as he considers cases.

Cases differ from riddles in that they can be argued from more than one point of view; and cases look toward life, not death. Does the cask of vintage wine taste, as one expert says, of a soupçon of iron? Or does it taste, as another expert says, of a hint of leather? The little iron key on a leather loop found at the bottom of the emptied cask shows that the wine tastes of both.²⁷

Cases, then, admit of more than one point of view. A magistrate like Mr. Knightley is well placed to know that. Did Emma make the Weston marriage, or did they manage it without her? He is willing to argue that case with her. Is the intimacy of Emma with Harriet a good thing or bad? He is willing to argue that case with Mrs. Weston. Is Robert Martin suited to be Harriet Smith’s husband? That is another case he argues with Emma. Can Frank Churchill visit the Westons when he chooses or not? Emma argues that case with Mrs. Weston and then with Mr. Knightley—perversely, using Mrs. Weston’s

arguments against him. Should Jane Fairfax accept Mrs. Elton's attentions? Emma thinks it unsafe; Mr. Knightley safe. Should Mr. Knightley's interest in Jane Fairfax be interpreted as love? Mrs. Weston thinks so; Emma doesn't. The novel is built up of riddles that contribute to cases that, taken together, form one all-encompassing case. "Depend on it," Mr. Knightley says to Emma at the end of chapter one; "a man of six or seven-and-twenty can take care of himself" in selecting a woman to marry (I.i.14). If you interfere in such matters, he warns her, "you are more likely to . . . harm . . . yourself, than [do] good to them, by interference" (I.ii.13). Emma thinks he's wrong. The novel works out this case to Emma's mortification and then to her blessing. She gets the answers to the riddles wrong; she doesn't argue her side of cases very well. Yet when it comes to N. taking M. for better or worse, she gets the answer correctly. The working out of the overriding case of whether and to what degree one should or should not interfere with a man's choice in marriage—be he six or seven-and-twenty or seven or eight-and-thirty—shows the mettle of mind and emotion of those who argue and act on their different positions. And since sexual desire is the heart of the matter, Jane Austen asks us to ask ourselves how the sameness of human nature or the difference and deference of couples must inform civility in deciding this case.

Emma is a novel marked by sexual fertility and the promise of more. And the novel shows, in instances of shame and mortification, how dangerous it is to toy with desire, even in its early stages. In Jane Austen's world people no longer threw bones on or over the table, no longer burped and farted at meals, no longer picked their teeth with knives or blew their noses in tablecloths.²⁸ Common bodily functions were no excuse for incivility. Good citizens had learned from Erasmus's time forward—he wrote the first great book on manners in 1530²⁹—to refrain from offensive conduct while eating. And their sexual conduct had become at least as refined as the ritual of dining itself,³⁰ as rules for the intermingling of the sexes in the ballroom illustrate.

In a society evolving into greater civility as it became gradually more mixed and adjusted to leveling forces, the best way to conduct affairs of the heart was to act for yourself not for others. Sameness demanded difference. You were to eat from your own plate, so to speak, not from another's. When Emma and Mr. Knightley satisfy their hunger for each other with a ceremony with "very little white satin, and very few lace veils," they needn't notice that Mrs. Elton thinks it "a most pitiful business!" The amiability of their conduct is more civil than "finery or parade." Nor need they care that "Selina would stare when she heard of it" (III.xix.484) because elegance would be a greater riddle to her than courtship was to Harriet.

N. and M. knew that if society were to get on, the Knightleys and the Eltons and the Sucklings of the world had to learn how to live even with differences that amount to dislike. Thus we recognize their wisdom in knowing that “A mind lively and at ease can do with seeing nothing, and can see nothing that does not answer.” In that way, at least, one need never stare! Emma and Mr. Knightley do embody such a wisdom as an instance of civility. When Mr. Weston invites Frank to Donwell Abbey against its owner’s wishes, Mr. Knightley “was then obliged to say that he should be glad to see him” (III.vi.357). And when Mr. Weston invites Mrs. Elton to Box Hill, Emma’s “every feeling was offended” but she nonetheless showed “a forbearance of . . . outward submission” (III.vi.353). Like it or not, the civility of the novel demands no less of its hero and heroine. And like it or not, the civility of *Emma* demands no less of its readers in Jane Austen’s day and our own.

NOTES

- ¹ This essay was presented to the Jane Austen Society of Australia on 6 May 1996 at The Library of New South Wales in Sydney. It was subsequently published in JASA’s journal *Sensibilities* 11 (December 1995): 38-54. The present version is substantively the same except for factual corrections and changes in style and notation. I want to thank Nora Walker and her colleagues for the invitation that made this paper possible.
- ² *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991): 58. Visser here summarizes one principal theme in an important recent book on civility by Norbert Elias, *The History of Manners*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, *The Civilizing Process: Volume I* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
- ³ Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1933). All quotations are from this edition.
- ⁴ Oliver MacDonagh, *Jane Austen: Real and Imagined Worlds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991): 135.
- ⁵ MacDonagh has written on the “Social Traffic” of *Emma* with discrimination, adding greater detail than I present here and suggesting, brilliantly, I think, that “without much stretching, Highbury may be classified as a species of extended household, and its upper classes—at any rate, the prescribed ‘three or four families’ and their associates—as just such a quasi-familial group” (136). Such a characterization makes even more imperative the need for a code of civility to govern the interaction of many people.
- ⁶ Plato stipulated in both *The Republic* and *The Laws* that justice was the founding virtue of civilization.
- ⁷ Joseph A. Kestner treats the subject of Frank’s masculinity, as contrasted to Mr. Knightley’s, in “Jane Austen: Revolutionizing Masculinities,” *Persuasions* 16 (1994): 147-60. Kestner convincingly relates the construction of English manhood in Knightley to the models of St. George, Admiral Horatio Nelson, and Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, and the lack of manhood in Frank Churchill to the despised enemy during the Napoleonic Wars, the Frenchman. On the construction of masculinity generally in nineteenth-century England, see Kestner’s *Masculinities in Victorian Painting* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1995).

Penny Gay also takes up the subject of English and French paradigms for manhood in *Jane Austen's Emma*, Horizon Studies in Literature (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1995): 25-36.

- ⁸ If only she could keep her mouth shut about "abominable suspicions . . . so unpardonably imparted," which is the way Emma later stigmatizes her suspicions and her conduct (III.xii.421).
- ⁹ Penny Gay gives a detailed exposition of the process of love emerging into consciousness as it is worked out in Emma's thoughts, feelings, and actions in *Jane Austen's Emma*: 37-47.
- ¹⁰ "It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!" (III.xi.408).
- ¹¹ "There was no denying that those brothers had penetration," Emma admits to herself in another context (I.xvi.135). For an elucidation of the sexual subtext of *Emma*, see Nicholas E. Preus, "Sexuality in *Emma*: A Case History," *Studies in the Novel*, 23 (1991): 196-216.
- ¹² Biblical commentary on the first chapter of Genesis shows that God creates by separating one thing from another and then man from the brute beasts. So that while an animal, man is different from the other animals as the earth is different from the ocean and the sky. Unless things differed one from the other, there would be nothing at all. Everything is different from nothing, with which God began. See Leonard R. Kass, *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of our Nature* (New York: The Free Press, 1994): 199-207.
- ¹³ Elias: 190.
- ¹⁴ Robert Darnton, "Sex for Thought," *The New York Review of Books*, XLI: 21 (22 December 1994). Darnton is here discussing Margot, the heroine of a French pornographic novel, *Vénus en rut*, and the way she "exposes the artificiality of social distinctions by sleeping her way from the bottom of society to the top" (68).
- ¹⁵ Preus calls the Westons' the "paradigmatic sexual relationship" in *Emma* (209).
- ¹⁶ In "Emma: point counter point," *Emma: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. John Halperin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975): 207-20, I discussed the fugal form of the novel as it constantly develops in terms of these themes of matchmaking.
- ¹⁷ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1932): I.iii.9.
- ¹⁸ We are reminded of these and other bodily functions in detail by John Wiltshire, *Jane Austen and the Body: 'The picture of health'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 110-54.
- ¹⁹ Kass: 208.
- ²⁰ The classic study of table manners is Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*; see note 1 above.
- ²¹ Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, "'Entering the World' of Regency Society: The Ballroom Scenes in *Northanger Abbey*, 'The Watsons,' and *Mansfield Park*," *Persuasions* 16 (1994): 115-24, is a thorough introduction to this subject, drawing on conduct books for dancing in Jane Austen's time.
- ²² Stuart Tave, *Some Words of Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973) presents extended definitions of "elegance" and "amiability" in writing about *Pride and Prejudice* (116-31). My interests differ from his, but my discussion is indebted to him.
- ²³ I do not mean "stupid bastard" as an epithet of reproach to Harriet: she is responsible neither for her birth nor for her limited intelligence. But I do mean "stupid bastard" as a *mot juste*—as a precise phrase to describe Harriet in an accurate, if startling, way that shows glaring personal (stupidity) and social

(bastardy) traits that Emma insists on ignoring and that Mr. Knightley insists are too obvious for anyone, especially Emma, to ignore.

- ²⁴ See Tave: "In the truly elegant woman the physical appearance, the manner and the mind all unite, and the delicate skin becomes in a happily Platonic way, the visible light of the beauty within" (226-27).
- ²⁵ "I do not write for such dull elves / As have not a great deal of ingenuity themselves." *Jane Austen's Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1952): 298.
- ²⁶ André Jolles, *Einfache Formen*, trans. as *Formes simples* by André Marie Buguet (Paris: Seuil, 1972): 137-58, presents the standard distinctions between cases and riddles; I present a summary discussion of them in *Gothic Manners and the Classic English Novel* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988): 12-13, and treat *Pride and Prejudice* as a case on pp. 25-40.
- ²⁷ See Jolles: 152-53.
- ²⁸ Prohibitions against these and other such popular practices are scattered throughout Elias's book. They are by no means my crude attempt at humor or even my attempt at crude humor!
- ²⁹ *De civilitate morum puerilium* [On the Civility of Boys' Behavior]. Visser remarks that Erasmus's book is comprehensive in its prescriptions: "'Civility' governs far more behaviour than table manners. The seven chapters of Erasmus's treatise concern body posture and facial expression, dress, behaviour in church, table manners, conversation, and comportment at play and in the bedroom" (58).
- ³⁰ See Elias: 169-90; see also Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), Vol. I, who treats sexuality as a discourse of power, distinguishing the "two great procedures for producing the truth of sex": the Eastern preference for *ars erotica* as distinct from the Western preference for it as *scientia sexualis* (57). The former is a matter of initiation into legitimate pleasure; the latter is a matter of controlling pleasure, which, depending on circumstances, may or may not be legitimate. Just how much can be said minutely about sexual pleasure is suggested by the Sacrament of Penance in Roman Catholicism. Priests were trained to ask such pointedly specific questions about sex acts that Confession began to become an erotic discourse and the Church had to back priests off too invasive and minute a mode of inquiry. Nonetheless, Foucault concludes that the whole procedure helped make "Western man . . . become a confessing animal" (59); that is, it helped produce that massive body of literature that we think of as confessional in which people tell all about their sexual lives just because they want to.