

Another Source for Jane Austen's "Caro Sposo"

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In some "Notes on Jane Austen" first published in *Notes and Queries* in January, 1951, E. E. Duncan-Jones glancingly observed that the phrase *caro sposo*, the affected vulgarism used by the recently married Mrs. Elton to refer to her own "dear husband" in Austen's novel *Emma*, may owe its frequent presence in that character's vocabulary to the influence of Frances Burney's immensely popular *Cecilia* (15). Observing that several other strands of Burney's 1782 novel appear to have been on Austen's mind while she was working on *Emma* throughout 1814 and early 1815, Duncan-Jones was the first to suggest that Mrs. Elton's own character was to some degree informed by that of *Cecilia*'s "rattling" and uncultivated Lady Honoria Pemberton. "If Jane Austen's use of the term has a literary source," Duncan-Jones reiterated in 1995, "it is to be found in *Cecilia*" (380). Even more recently, however, Pat Rogers has traced the "particular history behind the phrase" in Austen's novel, connecting it even more specifically to "an entire family idiom of jokey miniaturization" originating in and among the members and friends of the Burney family. "The currency of the expression in England," Rogers notes, "went back to more than a generation; and the main coiners were Fanny Burney, her father Charles and Hester Thrale" (14). Rogers further speculates that Austen's family connection to the Burneys through her mother's first cousin, Cassandra Leigh (a neighbor and friend of the novelist Frances), provided a connection and possible "conduit" for precisely such otherwise idiosyncratic family gossip and language.

While not discounting the undeniable influence of Burney's novel and vocabulary on Austen's work, we need however at least to acknowledge another possible and more immediate *literary* source for the appearance of the phrase *caro sposo* in *Emma* as well—a source which was quite literally much closer to home. Beginning in January 1789, Austen's elder brother James (then a Fellow of St. John's College, Oxford) began publishing the literary periodical which he had called, in emulation of earlier publications such as Addison's *Spectator*, Mackenzie's *Lounger*, and Johnson's *Rambler*, *The Loiterer*. The work was to run for sixty issues, completing its publishing history in March 1790. We know that the young Jane Austen (she was thirteen years old when the first number appeared) read *The Loiterer*, and we know that she was to return to several of its stories and concerns later in her own, mature fiction. We have every

reason to assume too that she took a close personal interest in its composition and reception; we even have reason to believe that she may have made some contributions to *The Loiterer* herself. Recent critics of Austen's work have increasingly turned to *The Loiterer* as one of the most obvious sources of evidence not only for our knowledge of what the young Austen read (later, acknowledged influences such as Johnson and Richardson are very much present here), but also for an understanding of how conversant she may have been with topics of contemporary literary and even political debate. Several numbers of *The Loiterer* were doubtlessly written over James's long vacations away from university, and it is tempting to picture Jane and her sister Cassandra listening to them being read aloud, or even taking an active part in their composition, in the rectory at Steventon. Although neglected by all but a few of Austen's earliest critics, one of the novelist's most recent biographers, Park Honan, devotes an entire chapter to the periodical, concluding that for a young woman of her promising abilities, *The Loiterer* was nothing less than "a lively, absorbing school" from which she could learn much that would eventually find its way into her own work (60). "Jane Austen climbed aboard *The Loiterer*," Honan writes, "and for sixty weeks followed its experiments straight in the direction of her developing talents, her passionate concerns and her future novels" (63).

The phrase *cara sposa*, which is of course the feminine form of *caro sposo*, is used twice in the Austens' periodical. *The Loiterer* No. 40 (31 October 1789), written by James Austen himself, relates the history of a correspondent who is introduced to readers only by the initials "C. M." "C. M." claims to have written to *The Loiterer* in the hopes that his own history, the misfortunes of which are "rather the effect of Folly, than Vice," might serve as a warning to others. Having passed up the chance of marrying his true love when still a young man, the correspondent claims subsequently to have been drawn into a marriage which had little to recommend it. A poorly paid curate in a small and out-of-the-way rural community, "C. M." writes:

I . . . submitted to my fate, and united myself forever to a woman, whom I could neither admire, esteem, or like without even the violence of passion or the ardor of youth to plead in my excuse. In this society, and with no other income than from what arises from a Couple of Curacies and the produce of a small Farm, which the few hundred pounds which I received with my *Cara Sposa* helped me to stock, I have now passed ten years; how they have passed, you may guess when I inform you, that my Wife is both vulgar and vain, extravagant and selfish, a manager and a slut, and that she has made me the happy father of six awkward and ordinary children, who bid fair to inherit her good qualities. (10-11)

Less than four weeks later, in *The Loiterer* No. 44 (28 November 1789), James again uses the phrase when describing the domestic

partnership of another ill-matched couple. Pretending to relate the personal history of a fellow Oxford-trained clergyman named Charles Sedley, James writes:

Of all the men I ever knew, Charles Sedley was the most cautious in the grand affair of choosing a Wife; and after mature deliberation, discovered that fashionable women are vain, and accomplished women affected. He therefore married the Daughter of one of his Tenants, with no charm excepting a little health and freshness, and no acquirements beyond those of a country boarding school; being persuaded that because she was ignorant, she must be humble, and because low born, unexpensive. But of both these inferences he lived to experience the falsity; for his *Cara Sposa* soon became intoxicated by the possession of pleasures of which she had till then entertained no idea, entered with eagerness into every species of fashionable dissipation, and paid small regard to a Husband, for whom she felt little gratitude and less affection. (5-6)

Jane Austen's decision to characterize *Emma*'s Mrs. Elton as a vulgar woman who routinely uses affected and insipid phrases in her conversation surely owes something to her brother James's clear tendency ironically to refer in his own writing to the partner of anyone who has "united themselves to vulgarity and meanness, rather than bear the tedium of their own Society" as their *cara sposa*.

One additional, small indication that the novelist may on some level specifically have been recalling her brother's sarcastic use of the Italian endearment in *The Loiterer* is the fact that, although she carefully corrected the proofs of *Emma* sent to her by the publisher John Murray in the late autumn and early winter of 1815, Austen neglected in the first edition of 1816 uniformly to employ the (correct) masculine form *caro sposo*, but casually allowed Mrs. Elton to refer to her husband also as her *cara sposa*, and even her *cara sposo*. Such errors, corrected in only later editions, may well be in keeping with the scattered, "rattling," and impertinent nature of Mrs. Elton's character ("it would be in keeping," Pat Rogers observes, "for the imperfectly educated Mrs. Elton to use an ungrammatical form"), but more than likely owe their presence in the earliest edition of the novel to the combination of Austen's own admittedly slight knowledge of Italian, and to her fond recollection of her brother's use of the phrase *caro sposo* in his own early satiric fictions.

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