



Owning Her  
Work: Austen,  
the Artist, and  
the Audience  
in *Emma*

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JANE AUSTEN'S READERS HAVE ALWAYS PRODUCED what she might have called "imaginist" commentary on her works. But ever-expanding outlets for expressing and sharing their views have allowed *readers* to become increasingly prolific *creators* within the Austen universe. Electronic discussion lists have joined the more traditional meetings and journals in giving voice to new interpretations of Austen. Unprecedented numbers of films and television series present her texts in adaptations that expand on those texts in inventive ways. The mass market in publishing—both in print and via the World Wide Web—supports continuations of Austen's works that devise new lives for her characters and even cast Austen herself in a starring role. This popular response to Austen reflects our passion for her original texts. But it also reflects our tendency, as members of a passionate audience, to fill in the blanks when we encounter them, to imagine and construct versions of the story that can stray far from what the author may have ever imagined herself.

Throughout the century, critics have examined the phenomenon of "reader response" and the potential mismatch between the author's and the audience's viewpoints in a variety of ways. Some

have argued that the author's intentions being either irrelevant or unknowable, the text is what the reader makes of it. Others have argued for the author's point of view in its historical context, some for the text alone. But however one defines it, the dynamic exchange between the author creating a work and the audience receiving and re-creating it clearly affects our understanding of the story and raises interesting questions about who really "owns" a story or can say with authority what it is about.

In the portrait painting scene in *Emma*, as well as in a variety of circumstances surrounding the novel's publication, Austen dramatizes the relationship between artist and audience in ways that articulate her own view of these matters. Austen's interpretation of this relationship is particularly worth examining because, as a woman of her age, she has sometimes been portrayed as being deeply inhibited by an "ambivalence about her imaginative powers" (Gilbert and Gubar 155). Austen does suggest that the demands of the audience present a serious challenge to an artist's ability to create work of her own. On the other hand, she also seems to have been neither inhibited nor ambivalent about dealing with those demands herself, using them instead as a means of asserting her authorial power.

Emma undertakes the creation of Harriet's "likeness" with ownership in mind, discovering "a sudden wish . . . to have Harriet's picture. . . . 'What an exquisite possession a good picture of her would be! I would give any money for it,'" she declares (43). Emma's language of possession and purchase when speaking of Harriet, which Susan Korba notes is "more appropriate to a successful young man deciding the time is right to acquire a wife" (149), is clearly problematic and involves Emma in patriarchal habits that already spell trouble ahead. But possessiveness is not the only problem Emma brings to her work. Her avowed task is to paint a "likeness" of Harriet, but "she meant to throw in a little improvement to the figure, to give a little more height, and considerably more elegance." The subject of this "pretty drawing" (47), in other words, is not really Harriet but "society's image of what a lady suited to be a gentleman's wife should be" (Wiesenfarth 212).

Emma's ultimate goal is for Mr. Elton, assumed to be in love

with this image already, to marry Harriet as a result of her artistic efforts. Derived from the romantic novels as well as general social expectations for women at the end of the eighteenth century (Moler 155 ff.), this marriage plot presents Emma with yet another problem. Critics such as Gilbert and Gubar, who describe other instances of Emma's entrapment in "someone else's fiction" (159), might well claim that the ultimate problem for Emma-as-artist is that she doesn't own the text of the work she thus sets out to create. Using the portrait to promote a socially prescribed marriage plot that she adopts for Harriet (although she rejects it for herself) and prevented by her inherited notions of what a woman should be from trusting and valuing the evidence of her own eyes, Emma inevitably produces dishonest, self-deluding and self-defeating work. This situation is particularly poignant when one considers Emma's simple enjoyment and absorption in *making* the portrait, an enjoyment that actually interrupts the marriage plot Emma thinks she is fostering: "But as she wanted to be drawing, the declaration must wait a little longer" (46). Emma's impatience can be seen as yet another example of her selfishness, but it also comes on a surge of genuine artistic energy and suggests the keen pleasure she finds in reopening her portfolio and taking out her paints. Ultimately, however, Emma is undertaking work that cannot be her "own" because it simply reproduces shapes that society has already drawn for her.

The problems of ownership that arise upon the portrait's creation only get worse when Emma's portrait of Harriet is finished and shared with a wider audience. We are told that "everybody who saw it was pleased" (47), but just a few moments later Mr. Knightley tempers this response with his typically uncompromising review. "'You have made her too tall,'" he says. "Emma knew that she had," replies the narrator, "but would not own it" (48). Here the ownership problem is expressed in yet another sense, that of Emma's unwillingness to admit the accuracy of Mr. Knightley's corrective vision. In Austen's day, the sense of "admitting the truth" associated with the concept of "owning" something could easily slide into a sense of confessing and submitting to a higher authority (*OED*, "own (v.);" 5a, 5b, 6c). This is a kind of ownership that Emma rejects, however, and she rejects

it repeatedly throughout the novel. It is significant that even though a pattern of admitting her mistakes to Mr. Knightley is key to the development of their relationship, Emma still fails to confess all even after they become engaged. The narrator even fills the space between proposal and acceptance with a lengthy meditation on this fact, remarking that “seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure” (431).

Mrs. Weston, Mr. Elton and Mr. Woodhouse also comment upon the portrait in problematic ways. At first Mrs. Weston appears to respond to it much as Emma might wish. Although she recognizes that Emma has been exercising artistic license, she blames not the artist but her subject: it is Harriet’s “‘fault” that her eyes are not as fine as Emma has painted them (47). Now this gives a very pleasant kind of credit to the artist, the kind that Emma rarely cares to question. However, keeping in mind Emma’s desire to cast Harriet in the best light possible, it has to be deflating that one of Emma’s staunchest supporters looks at the portrait only to find previously unperceived defects in its original.

The responses of other supporters of Emma’s work are similarly disconcerting. Mr. Elton is “in continual raptures, and defended it through every criticism” (47). We are told that Emma is “not . . . sorry to know her reputation for accomplishment often higher than it deserved” (44), but she recognizes that Mr. Elton’s effusions are uninformed and excessive and thus worthless and even distasteful. “You know nothing of drawing,” Emma says in an internal monologue earlier in the chapter. “Don’t pretend to be in raptures about mine. Keep your raptures for Harriet’s face” (43). This is precisely what Mr. Elton fails to do, however, defending Emma’s work not by reference to its subject but to artistic terms whose meanings clearly escape him. When Mr. Elton mounts his desperate defense of Emma’s work, he lapses into a style that echoes that of the ever appreciative but indiscriminating Miss Bates: “Consider, [Harriet] is sitting down—which naturally presents a different—which in short gives exactly the idea—and the proportions must be preserved, you know. Proportions, fore-shortening” (48). In his study of Austen’s narrative technique, Lloyd Brown points out that many characters slip into this mode of discourse at critical moments and suggests

that Miss Bates's style thus becomes a "central point of reference" in the novel (132). Here it links Mr. Elton's commentary on Emma's work with the theme of unperceptive judgments that characters make throughout the novel, sometimes with the best intentions, sometimes with the worst. For an artist with any serious intentions, this is a subversive audience indeed.

But Mr. Woodhouse surely represents the most subversive audience member of all. His concern that the outdoor scene "makes one think [Harriet] must catch cold" is a delicious moment (48), but attempts to make sense of his remarks defeat all of Emma's defenders and close the scene in which the portrait is unveiled. As doting as he is, Mr. Woodhouse's preoccupations can allow his daughter's work no meaning of its own. Because he sees no difference between life and art (Tsomondo 70), he cannot really see the art at all. In a typical moment of paternal control, Mr. Woodhouse takes over Emma's portrait entirely, turning it into the creation of his own hypochondriac's imagination.

One of the most difficult things about dealing with this audience is that Emma has no more chance of escaping it than she has of painting a true "likeness" of Harriet in the first place. All of the womanly arts in *Emma*—indeed, in almost all of Jane Austen's works—are valued by the community less as a vehicle of self-expression than as a means of serving the communal eye, ear, and interest in preserving its own institutions. Emma's sketches are given their greatest value when they are finished and hung on the drawing room walls at Hartfield and Randalls, despite the fact that the narrator suggests it is the "least finished" of the drawings in Emma's portfolio that have the most artistic merit (44). Although we can assume that Emma is "not sorry" that her drawings are so highly regarded, this public adoption of her work exposes it to the gaze of the very audience that is so adept at misreading her artistic intentions.

The vulnerability of Emma's art to the response of her immediate audience demonstrates that whatever problems she may have with owning the production of her work, her biggest problem as an artist is that she cannot own the final product of her labors after all. Hung above the mantle in her father's house, Emma's portrait of Harriet becomes a piece of public property,

open to misinterpretation and all too likely to be used for private purposes by critics and flatterers alike. It is this appropriation of her work that seems to frustrate Emma the most. In a revealing commentary on her previous attempts at portrait painting, she describes having foresworn “‘ever drawing anybody again’” because it was “‘more than I could bear’” to have a portrait of John Knightley (a work she considers successful if somewhat too flattering) carried off to London by her sister Isabella to be displayed to visitors and “‘apologized over’” as not being flattering enough (46). Isabella, ever her father’s daughter, sees this portrait only in relation to her own preoccupations—in this case, her exaggerated views of her husband’s virtues. She is thus unable to see Emma’s work for what it is. Emma’s frustration at this situation drives the portrait painter in her to despair. For a while, at least, she gives up drawing “‘in disgust’” (43). From her point of view it must seem that no matter what she attempts, no matter what kind of accommodation she tries to make to her audience, that audience eventually takes over her work for purposes of its own.

Altogether, it is easy to see why interpretations of the artists in Austen and particularly of Emma as “an avatar of Austen the artist” (Gilbert and Gubar 158) raise such doubts that a female artist in Austen’s day could claim anything for her own. As Austen dramatizes this situation, the audience imposes itself upon every aspect of her creative work, and this imposition threatens her ability to create anything at all.<sup>1</sup> If we shift our focus from Emma to Austen, however, it is clear that while Emma helps Austen to dramatize this problem, she is hardly an incarnation of Austen herself, who exercises her powers over the audience with considerably more skill and authority.

It must first be said that it would be absurd to claim that audiences respond to works by women any more possessively or eccentrically than they frequently do to works by men. To dispose of that theory, one need only ask a Baker Street Irregular for the latest adventures of Sherlock Holmes. But the narrowness of Jane Austen’s domestic circle does seem to have made her feel the pressure of her audience more acutely than her male contemporaries might have done. As evidence, we have two remarkable texts pro-

duced by Austen between 1814 and early 1817, her “Opinions of *Mansfield Park*” and “Opinions of *Emma*,” collections of neighborhood commentary on the last two novels she saw in print. Instead of ignoring the sometimes pestering voices of her amateur critics as an artist of more independent means or connections might have done, Austen actually amplified the opinions of the Mr. Knightleys, Mrs. Westons, Mr. Eltons and Mr. Woodhouses of her family and neighborhood by recording them for us in texts of her own.

Laura Brodie, in her analysis of the type of readership represented by the “Opinions,” argues that this compilation proves that Austen highly valued her personal “literary community” (59). But it must be noted that there are alarming similarities between this community and the one at Highbury. Certainly its members put their own preoccupations first. Echoing the debate about the “likeness” of Harriet’s portrait, one group of opinions concerns the “naturalness” of Austen’s portrait of Emma. Some of Austen’s neighbors think the novel “too natural to be interesting” (*OE* 437) while others think its “peculiar air of Nature” make it preferable to any of Austen’s other works (436). Several of Austen’s critics, like Emma’s, have alternate texts of their own in mind. Miss Isabella Herries, for example, “objected to my exposing the sex in the character of the Heroine” (438), and both Mrs. Wroughton and Mr. Sherer, vicar of Austen’s brother’s parish at Godmersham, were “displeased with my pictures of Clergymen” (439; 437). One also wonders whether there is a private if poignant text behind the opinion of Miss [Anne] Sharp, a former governess and one of Austen’s closest friends, who remarked that she was “dissatisfied with Jane Fairfax” (436). Here too are the querulous strains of a Mr. Woodhouse, incapable of making distinctions between life and art. Mrs. Dickson, for example, “did not much like [Emma]”. She “liked it the less, from there being a Mr. & Mrs. Dixon in it” (438).

Austen’s unblinking view of this audience provides one kind of evidence that she was not intimidated by it. But the style of the “Opinions” also abounds in the ironic forms of expression and occasional narrative disclaimer that distinguish all of Austen’s novels and that repeatedly assert her authorial voice. Indeed, R. W.

Chapman included the “Opinions” in his edition of *The Works of Jane Austen* because he thought “the phrasing of some of them, though not their substance” were likely to have been Austen’s own (vi). Laura Brodie similarly suggests that Austen’s punctuation of the “Opinions” offers “ironic commentary” throughout (58). Austen does correct some of the opinions as she records them. The same Miss Herries who thought Austen had unfairly exposed womankind in her portrait of Emma was also “convinced that I had meant Mrs. & Miss Bates for some acquaintance of theirs— People whom I never heard of before.” More typically, however, Austen summarizes and juxtaposes her reader’s comments in brief phrases that comically rebound upon their sources. There is a Mr. Cockerelle, who “liked [*Emma*] so little, that Fanny [Knight, Austen’s niece] wd not send me his opinion” (438). Austen feels no need to belabor the point that Fanny conveys Mr. Cockerelle’s views quite adequately by so faithfully explaining why she won’t. Then there is the hapless Mrs. Bramstone, who “preferred [*Mansfield Park*] to either of the others—but imagined *that* might be her want of Taste—as she does not understand Wit” (*OMP* 433). Austen is so far from being entrapped by this audience that she is able to translate her amused understanding of it into the stuff of art itself, into texts that are often as funny and complex as many a more finished literary work.

Austen’s encounter with the Prince Regent’s delectable dunce of a librarian, the Reverend James Stanier Clarke, produced additional texts that illustrate how Austen handled the demands of her audience. In one way at least, Clarke was spectacularly successful at getting what he wanted: he managed to leave his hand on Austen’s work for all time when he arranged for her to dedicate *Emma* to the Prince. There can be no doubt that Austen found this arrangement an appalling imposition on her work. Apart from her dislike of the Prince, she did not wish to alter even so slight a part of her work for anyone, and reminded her sister Cassandra of “my first resolution of letting nobody know that I might dedicate &c—for fear of being obliged to do it” (26 November 1815). After attempting to wriggle out of the obligation in an adroitly worded letter to Clarke (“I intreat you to have the goodness to inform me . . . whether it is incumbent upon me



to shew my sense of the Honour" [15 November 1815]), Austen finally saw no alternative but to give in. She may have taken a small measure of comfort in the fact that she flubbed the dedication after all. Correcting the unsigned statement of fact ("Dedicated by Permission to H.R.H.") that she proposed for the title page (11 December 1815), Austen's publisher John Murray seems to have established the dedication's final wording and location. Murray may be considered suspect here, being yet another patriarchal figure putting words into the mouth of what the dedication to *Emma* calls a "Dutiful and Obedient, Humble Servant, the Author." In reality, however, Austen seems to have preferred the emptiness of Murray's form to any forced effort of her own. In her return letter of thanks she seems relieved to *disown* any personal involvement in the dedication: "Any deviation from what is usually done in such cases is the last thing I should wish for" (11 December 1815). Austen's sense of humor surfaced quickly, and in the end she turned this episode to her own advantage as an author. She joked about her "mercenary motives" (26 November 1815) and, in a spirited move reestablishing her controlling interest in the novel, used the prospect of the dedication to spur her publisher to speedier production (23 November 1815; 11 December 1815).

But an obligation to the monarch is one thing; an obligation to his librarian is another. In her further correspondence with Clarke, Austen shows how deep and effective her resistance could be to any other attempts to impose on her work. The Reverend Clarke, of course, also had a little text of his own to promote, the tale of a certain well-connected clergyman that grew in pathos and absurdity with every letter he wrote. In each of her responses to Clarke, Austen employs a strategy of ownership in relation to her readers that we can see being used in her other works as well. In rejecting his first proposal, for example, she claims that she has not had the classical education it would take to provide a "likeness" of the clergyman's conversation. "I think I may boast myself to be, with all possible Vanity," she emphasizes, "the most unlearned & uninformed Female who ever dared to be an Authoress" (11 December 1815). This "boasting" of the "vanity" of her claim to humility is a typically ironic configuration for Austen.

It has that suspect air of confession (she “owns up” to the traditionally female sin of vanity), and what she ultimately seems to be confessing to is yet another female weakness (the inherent limitations of her powers), yet she frames the whole within a proud statement that she *is* “an Authoress” in spite of all. Clarke may not have been able to see through this, but we surely can: Austen asserts her right to her work first by giving her audience a line it likes to hear and then by undercutting that line with ironic language that points to a different text of her own. But one cannot humor the Reverend Clarkes of this world forever. It is hard to imagine a more unequivocal claim to ownership of her work than the one Austen makes in her final letter to him. “No,” she says to his latest proposal, “I must keep to my own style & go on in my own Way” (1 April 1816). The vigorous clarity of this statement echoes the first person narrative voice that unexpectedly leaps out from time to time in Austen’s novels, interjecting itself into the story with a directness that makes the presence of the author—whatever one makes of her words—impossible to ignore.

Austen’s last word on Clarke, however, comes in yet another form, the burlesque *Plan of a Novel*. In this late work she took the most ludicrous of her readers’ suggestions and worked them into a comic anti-story that embodies a clear message about reader demands. B. C. Southam believes that Austen actually may have solicited some of these suggestions in the same spirit of family fun that produced her earliest burlesques, but he admits that Austen was also obviously “getting her own back” at Clarke and at others whose comments she had recorded in the “Opinions” (82). Clarke’s clergyman is here in full glory, as is the talented and elegant daughter created to the specifications of Fanny Knight. But in a return to the narrative techniques of her juvenilia—which, as Mary Lascelles has noted, so often play upon her readers’ tastes (56 ff.)—Austen shows how a literal rendering of their proposed adventures undoes the story itself. Brought down by suggested plot devices, for example, the daughter is “now & then starved to death” (*PN* 430). “All right,” Austen seems to be saying. “Here is the very text you asked for.” But what kind of text can there be when its competing conceits repeatedly kill off its heroine? As Austen concludes (following yet another reader suggestion), this

is a text “not to be [called] *Emma*.” Austen would clearly need to control or at least outwit the proprietary impulses of her audience in order to produce work that she could truly call her own.

Which brings us back to the text that Austen did call *Emma*. Surely the best evidence of Austen’s ability to outwit her audience lies here. For as Adena Rosmarin has said, echoing many other critical studies of *Emma*, “the design of the text is its design on the reader” (336). Austen deliberately plays with her readers’ assumptions throughout the novel, taking steps to mystify and mislead them and thoroughly involving them in the tangle of false readings that pervades life in Highbury. This “sophisticated fictional game” of hide-and-seek between author and audience (Davies 234) is as fundamental to the way in which the text unfolds as it is to its underlying sources of humor and delight. As the game proceeds, Austen continually reminds her readers, as well as the inhabitants of Highbury, that it is dangerous and even futile to assume that one is ever in full possession of the truth. Second readings do help us to sort through much of the information that is initially misleading. But even after multiple readings Austen still dangles tantalizing questions about meaning before us. Consider, for example, the narrator’s description of the Campbells’ response to Jane Fairfax’s decision to visit her grandmother rather than travel to Ireland with their extended family party. “The Campbells, whatever might be their motive or motives, whether single, or double, or treble, gave the arrangement their ready sanction” (166). Is this passage “mere mystification,” as Wayne Booth might say (255)? Are we dealing with a flawed narrator, someone who either doesn’t know or refuses to tell us what the Campbells’ motives are (and what would that say about other narrative comment in the work)? Is it possible for this passage to be taken at face value (and if so, how can we know what the Campbells’ *treble* motives might be?) Or is it simply meant as a joke on the “imaginist . . . speculation” (*Emma* 335) that is so characteristic not only of Austen’s heroine but of her readers’ attempts to fathom all possible levels of meaning in the story (and if so, is not the joke also on me)?

In a multitude of similar moments throughout *Emma*, Austen uses her knowledge of the audience’s tendencies to force

us to question meaning and the ways in which we look for meaning in her work. This is not to say that her work does not *have* meaning, only that we make assumptions about it at our peril. Both the themes and narrative techniques of *Emma*, supported by other evidence of the ways in which Austen responded to the demands of her audience, demonstrate with what amused sophistication she always resisted—and resists still—any attempt to impose on her text or appropriate it to some other text that Austen could not “own.” But Austen’s representation of her relationship to her audience works to our benefit as well as hers. As readers, we are not only continually forced to seek alternate meanings in her work but also invited to join the fun as her work unfolds. And in her manner of unfolding it, Austen-the-artist forever claims the work as her own.

#### NOTE

1. That the impositions of the audience are a serious problem for the female artist in Austen (and not only for *Emma*) is confirmed by Jane Fairfax’s experience with the pianoforte. Frank Churchill is not content with appropriating Jane’s performances in order to conduct his own private conversations; he also manipulates the production of those performances, supplying not only the pianoforte but also the sheet music to go with it. Jane herself owns nothing. It all belongs to the man Judith Wilt describes as “the conductor, the usurper, of the performance” (41). See her “The Powers of the Instrument: Or Jane, Frank and the Pianoforte.” *Persuasions* 5 (1983): 41-47.

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