



Where Does the Pleasure Come From? The Marriage Plot and Its Discontents in Jane Austen's *Emma*

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She spoke then, on being so entreated.—What did she say?—Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does.

—Jane Austen, *Emma*

IS THIS TRUE? Does a lady always say just what she ought, even in a Jane Austen novel? Only the repetition of many re-readings can dull us to the extraordinary implications of this claim. Yes, the voice is ironic—but the structure of the passage also suggests a more earnest impulse behind the narrator's smooth dismissal. Who asks, "What did she say"? The reader, of course. The reader always does. By ventriloquizing her reader's curiosity, and then implying its naughty prurience through her refusal to satisfy it, Austen seems more interested in characterizing her own novelistic practice than in (not) reporting Emma's acceptance of Mr. Knightley's offer. Austen's own authorial ladylikeness allows her to say only what she ought—in this case, nothing at all. Austen alerts us here to the parameters of her own narratorial propriety: what she considers worthy and unworthy of narration.

One of the most striking things about Jane Austen's novels is that they simultaneously are rather brutally repressive of their heroines' dynamism and fancy—ruthlessly reining in their spheres of energy, activity, and even fantasy to the linear trajectory of the marriage plot—and also have given enormous amounts of reading pleasure in an uninterrupted regime of almost two

hundred years. One possible answer to this conundrum is that this very repression is the source of our pleasure, that we all secretly and somewhat sadistically enjoy watching the “instruction” or chastening of high-spirited heroines—what Eve Sedgwick has called the “punishing . . . moral pedagogy” (833) of Austen’s novels. However true this claim may be on one level, it clearly does not capture the full range of pleasures that Austen’s novels give and have given. To that end, I would like to offer a somewhat more complicated genealogy of the reading pleasure that Austen affords.

Every recent critical discussion of narrative pleasure is indebted to Peter Brooks’s seminal study *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. According to Brooks’s analysis of the Freudian “master-plot” of the classical novel, our pleasure in narrative is a kind of delayed gratification analogous to the controlling of psychic energy. What Freud calls the pleasure principle is the working of the higher mental processes on the “primary process” of the instincts: we learn to bind the anarchic energies of the instincts, to direct them at proper objects, in order to gain a greater ultimate pleasure through delayed gratification than we would by immediately heeding every infantile desire. In the novel, according to Brooks, this unbound energy or desire is the impulse to begin to narrate: “Desire is always there at the start of a narrative, . . . often having reached a state of intensity such that movement must be created, action undertaken, change begun” (38). From a state of quiescence or stasis that we infer was there before the beginning of the narrative, a crisis occurs, a desire is born, something *narratable* happens. This desire or narrative energy, according to Brooks, is always directed toward an end: the closure of the narrative, which enables us to make retrospective sense of what has come before (93–96).

The binding of this energy takes place through acts of repetition, return, and delay: for example, cases of mistaken identity or misunderstandings that are repeated before they can be cleared up—or even misguided attempts at matchmaking that must fail miserably before the proper marriages can come to pass. According to Freud (and Brooks), this process is a painful one. These abortive attempts at the right ending often take the form of thwarted expectations, unwanted attentions, painful revelations, or other such disagreeable phenomena that are only pleasurable retrospectively, in their resolution. Narrative pleasure, according to the Freud-Brooks model, is primarily reserved for the end, for closure, when there is a discharge of energy that brings the organism—or the characters or the reader—back into a state of quiescence.

For most classic, nineteenth-century novels, the initiatory excitement, the desire that brings narrative into being, is either ambition (what Brooks terms the “male” narrative) or the desire to marry (what we can call the “female” narrative, the “master plot” of Jane Austen’s novels). In the courtship model, the narrative opens upon a situation in which someone clearly needs to wed (“it is a truth universally acknowledged”). The unbound erotic energies of the eligible bachelor(ette), and thus of the plot itself, are discharged in the end in a proper marriage that channels sexual desire *and fortune* in an appropriate way, ensuring dynastic continuation, gender hierarchy, and the triumph of the narrator’s epistemological perspective. This model of narrative is implicit in most readings of Austen as a deeply conservative novelist: according to this view, her shockingly mercenary, snobbish, or even misogynist tendencies are the real motivating energies of her plots. As Lord David Cecil famously summarized Austen’s attitude toward marriage: “It [is] wrong to marry for money, but it [is] silly to marry without it” (33). In what Austen novel is it worse to be wrong than silly? The line between the two is a very slender one indeed.

And yet, as I indicated before, there is a strange emptiness or let-down in the endings of Austen novels, one might even say a kind of pain that comes *with* the so-called discharge of unbound energy rather than before it. At the end of every Austen novel is a loss that the sensitive reader, perhaps, will feel goes uncompensated in the pleasures of being wed to the right man with the right house and the right number of pounds a year. It is a loss signaled both by the language of the endings themselves and by the “chastening” process that so many of Austen’s heroines must undergo, a real curtailment of the energy and freedom—social, erotic, interpretive, creative—that the heroines had enjoyed throughout the course of the novel. As Louis Menand lyrically puts it, “[Austen] thought an unattached young woman with intelligence and some degree of physical vibrancy was the most marvelous creature in the world. . . . [T]his was the only time in their lives in which women like that had an absolute power—if only the power to withhold themselves—over the desires of a man” (15). How can we not but feel, at least in the case of the domestic novel of courtship and marriage, a profound sense of loss upon the event, whether or not there is a so-called discharge of energy (which we are supposed to find pleasurable) directed at an appropriate object?

So where does the pleasure come from? For one thing, Austen’s novels offer an astonishing number of alternative narratives to the sanctioned “main story” of the appropriately conducted courtship and final felicitous union. Her

books are full of juicy and outrageous subplots that challenge the hegemony of the main story, plots that specifically call into question the marriage narrative: elopements, seductions, adulterous liaisons, illegitimate children, secret engagements, and so on. These alternative plots perform several functions: they ostensibly serve as pedagogical contrasts to the marriage plot, demonstrating by negative example the proper courtship and marriage; they help delay the closure of the main plot so as to fend off an improper and premature ending (this characterization is again the Brooks model); and they offer what Joseph Litvak has termed “preclosural gratifications” (24).

All of these functions have to do with reading pleasure: our pleasure at feeling our interpretation and sensibilities to be in alignment with those of our narrator; our supposed pleasure in delayed gratification; and our prurient interest in all of these shocking and reprehensible mating behaviors that challenge the dominance of the proper courtship. Perhaps the most familiar of these purposes to Austen readers is the pedagogical function of the counter-narratives, which supposedly teach us the wrong ways to go about courtship. We can translate this function into the terms of Brooks’s argument: according to his model, “[t]he development of the subplot in the classical novel usually suggests . . . a different solution to the problems worked through by the main plot, and often illustrates the danger of short-circuit” or the “false erotic object choice” (104). Thus, the moral instruction and the delay of gratification come together.

Yet there is an aspect to this neat and efficient functionality that Brooks and most other critics have failed to notice. Austen is playing a dangerous game: by offering up so many juicy “preclosural” tidbits, she is in danger of overshadowing the main marriage plot, rendering it insipid, lackluster, and perhaps most damning of all, *obvious*. This obviousness is perhaps of greatest issue in *Emma*, the one novel Austen wrote that conforms to her model for narrative felicity of “3 or 4 Families in a Country Village” (9 September 1814), and—not coincidentally—the novel that offers the most explicit vision of an overly pert heroine learning to control her exuberant eroticism and marry the boy next door.

The beginning of *Emma* gives us an instructive example of what we can expect after the end of *Emma*. It is one of the few classic novels (and perhaps the only one) that opens upon a scene that we should, by rights, have no access to, since it belongs to the realm of the “happily ever after”: Emma, Mr. Woodhouse, and Knightley sitting comfortably around the fire at Hartfield, talking over the day’s events. This tableau is precisely how the lives of these three

characters will look after the novel's close: in a very real sense, then, at the beginning of the novel we already *know* how it will end. Needless to say, this is not a very cheerful prospect for a novel. The very language of first chapter alerts us to the novel's atmospherics of claustrophobia and ennui: Emma sits "in mournful thought" (6); her father and she have "no prospect of a third to cheer a long evening" (6); we are told that, now that her governess/companion Miss Taylor has married, Emma is "in great danger of suffering from intellectual solitude" (7); and so on. It is not merely the end of the novel that is a let-down, but also the beginning. Mr. Knightley's arrival should provide more relief than it does: as the unhopd-for "third to cheer a long evening," he in reality brings an unwelcome re-hash of the mournful occasion of the day, a failed joke that nearly turns into a hurtful misunderstanding, and a wet-blanket admonishment to Emma about her dangerous matchmaking schemes. Faced with the prospect of such a plot, and with the prospect of such a marriage and such domestic arrangements, who would not rather read about daring elopements, secret adulterous passions, rags-to-riches romances, seductions, illegitimate children, even imprisonments in Gothic castles, than about—as Mr. John Knightley puts it—a country family "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" (113)?

The question then remains: How does Austen contain the dangerous attractiveness of these alternative plots, the pleasures of which would seem to overshadow the healthful pleasures of her main-event courtship narrative? The first way is through a relentless course of pedagogical commentary on those alternative plots—the so-called repressive regime of the Austen novel enacted through the "community voice" discussed by such critics as Casey Finch and Peter Bowen. According to this model, Austen either simply shows how such plots do not end well and leaves the reader to form her own judgment about the foolhardiness of the parties involved, or she imports a kind of commentary on the main action through the operations of free indirect discourse.¹ For the purposes of this discussion, I am more interested in another way in which Austen contains the potentially disruptive energies of these counter-narratives—through what we might term "narratorial discretion." All of these naughty events occur off-stage: reported in letters or gossip, at a geographical distance, or far in the past. The alternative and transgressive plot is thus in little danger of upstaging the legitimate and endorsed courtship narrative. Because these events are reported, not narrated, we are

unable to invest the same emotional energy in these renegade characters: there is no cathexis, and therefore no identification.

Yet this interpretation has a problem, in that it ignores a crucial fact about Austen's novels that is often overlooked: that the main marriage plot is not exactly narrated, either. Especially with a novel like *Emma*, we can pose the uncomfortable and enlightening question of what exactly *happens* between our two romantic leads during this book. Actually, not much. The events that lead to Emma and Knightley's marriage have far more to do with what happens within Emma herself, and more significantly what happens between Emma and Harriet Smith, than with any scintillating interactions between the lovers. (And for these characters' names, we can substitute Elinor and Marianne, Elizabeth and Jane, Catherine and Isabella, etc.) One could claim with some justification that the so-called marriage plot in Austen is nearly as diffused, as tangential and inferred, as the dangerous sub-plots with which it supposedly competes.

So what does happen in an Austen novel, anyway? As I just suggested, Austen is more deeply concerned with relationships between young women of marriageable age than she is with the potential marryers themselves. While this revelation is not particularly startling, it leads to the question of what Austen considers narratable and not-narratable, or perhaps more accurately "worthy of narration" and "not worthy of narration." In other words, if there is little difference between the marriage plot and these alternative plots in terms of their worthiness of narration—the actual space they take up—then we must look elsewhere for a clue about the distinction that Austen draws, and wants us to draw, between these competing outcomes.

One way of illuminating this issue would be to look at the endings of the novels, where—even if Austen has been giving short shrift to the supposedly central courtship plot—she should finally come through with a kind of narratological pay-off. And yet at this point we run up against that famous problem of let-down. Here is a quick sampling of the triumphant conclusions of Austen's marriage plots, the supposed points toward which all the energy of the narratives has been directed: "She spoke then, on being so entreated.—What did she say?—Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does" (*E* 431). "How soon he had walked himself into the proper resolution, however, how soon an opportunity of exercising it occurred, in what manner he expressed himself, and how he was received, need not be particularly told" (*SS* 361). "[H]is first purpose was to explain himself, and before they reached Mr. Allen's grounds he had done it so well, that Catherine did not think it could

ever be repeated too often" (*NA* 243). "Elizabeth . . . gave him to understand, that her sentiments had undergone so material a change. . . . The happiness which this reply produced, was such as he had probably never felt before; and he expressed himself on the occasion as sensibly and as warmly as a man violently in love can be supposed to do" (*PP* 366). It is in the resolution of the marriage plot that Austen is most stingy with details.

This reticence on Austen's part functions as evidence for my ultimate claim: that the famous Austenian irony extends to the very model of narrative she practices, that of the linear, closure-directed plot of heterosexual courtship and marriage. Several commentators have noticed that recent Austen scholarship has self-consciously tried to free itself of the "conservative-or-subversive" binary that had supposedly hobbled an earlier generation of critics.² Whether we agree with this assessment of earlier Austen scholarship, the prescriptive element of the claim is a salubrious one, and I would like to contribute to this trend by suggesting another way out of the traditional double bind: that we attend to the ways that Austen's novels formally, or we might say narratologically, function as critiques of the supposedly conservative values endorsed by their endings.³

I would like to further my defense of this claim by turning to the important speech that Emma gives about halfway through the novel, detailing her personal attitude toward marriage: "I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry. Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing! but I never have been in love; it is not my way, or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall" (84). This claim is, of course, deeply ironic; we are meant to feel the full force of Emma's lack of self-knowledge and to smile in secret confederacy with the narrator in anticipation of her impending change of heart. But the next part of her anti-marriage speech cannot be dismissed so easily:

"I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine. Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want. . . . [M]ine is an active, busy mind, with a great many independent resources; and I do not perceive why I should be more in want of employment at forty or fifty than one-and-twenty. Woman's usual occupations of eye and hand and mind will be as open to me then, as they are now. . . . And as for objects of interest, objects for the affections, . . . I shall be very well off, with all the children of a sister I love so much, to care about." (84-86)

This model of the celibate life that Emma sketches sounds ideal (and we can even take it as a fairly indicative sketch of Austen's own life). In fact, the ending of *Emma* fails to do a very good job of convincing us that Emma's life

will be all that much better after her marriage. Her material conditions will change very little: she will still spend her evenings with her father and Knightley at Hartfield. The strangeness of this whole arrangement is testimony to the uneasiness that Austen seems to feel about the sacrifice of Emma's independence in marriage: as Mrs. Weston believes, "it was in every respect so proper, suitable, and unexceptionable a connexion . . . that now it seemed as if Emma could not safely have attached herself to any other creature" (467), particularly because Knightley is the only potential husband imaginable who would move into Hartfield and "bear with Mr. Woodhouse" (467). The whole arrangement is so seamless that it is almost as if Emma were not marrying at all! (In fact, she represents the situation exactly thus to her father.) The only indication that this marriage may radically change Emma's situation comes, in a roundabout way, from Knightley himself, who in the very first chapter attempts to comfort the Woodhouses upon the unfortunate event of Miss Taylor's marriage: "I cannot possibly say 'poor Miss Taylor.' . . . [W]hen it comes to the question of dependence or independence!—At any rate, it must be better to have only one to please, than two" (10). This little sketch of Miss Taylor's prospects in marriage functions as an ironic commentary on Emma's own prospects, which are precisely the inverse: she will, by her own prior admission, sacrifice the independence of singlehood, and her life will now be devoted to pleasing two rather than one.

Furthermore, as many critics have noted, before her marriage Emma has free rein to exercise her considerable creative energies. What is most unusual about *Emma* is that here many of the ubiquitous Austenian subplots are created by the heroine herself: the fanciful romances concocted between the other characters and, briefly, even between herself and Frank Churchill. Emma is a model for the author. What does she do, what does she imagine and scheme and plot in all her supposed meddling, that is any different from what Austen (or more properly, the narrator) herself is doing? "With insufferable vanity had she believed herself in the secret of everybody's feelings; with unpardonable arrogance proposed to arrange everybody's destiny" (412–13). Emma's impudence consists in arrogating to herself the privileges that rightly belong to an author, privileges that she must relinquish in order to suit herself for marriage with Knightley. Her education consists in bringing her epistemological perspective in line with that of her future husband, who alone, we might remember, has forewarned Emma of the outcome of the Harriet and Elton affair, foreseen the announcement of Jane and Frank's engagement, and foretold the romantic ending of his own lifelong friendship with Emma.⁴ While this point may seem almost too obvious to state, Emma her-

self must forswear her own authorial meddlings in order to be united with Knightley. The vision of chastened domestic harmony that this ending invokes is hardly to be unreservedly preferred to the fun and games Emma has enjoyed prior to her comeuppance. Austen seems to be signaling this very, and ultimate, irony by opening the novel with a scene of insupportable ennui—the future of Emma herself—that is ruptured only by the fanciful schemes and manipulations that Emma must later abandon.

One final way in which *Emma* alerts us to Austen's critique of the marriage plot is through a device common in the picaresque novel but a bit out of place in the domestic novel of manners: the dramatic rescue. The novel enacts a veritable poetics of saving and being saved. Jane's rescue by Mr. Dixon during the water party and Harriet's *two* rescues—first by Knightley at the ball and later by Frank Churchill from the gypsies—all initiate romantic plots in the mind of Emma and furnish another layer of ironic commentary on the trajectory of the linear courtship narrative. All of these plots are mistaken. There are no romances between Jane and Dixon, Frank and Harriet, or Harriet and Knightley, and by counterposing these dramatic rescues to the ones that are associated with actual romances—Harriet with her sore tooth being comforted by Robert Martin, Jane's rescue from the governess trade by the death of Mrs. Churchill, and the Woodhouses being “rescued” from wily turkey thieves by Knightley's moving to Hartfield—Austen reminds us repeatedly of the bathetic elements in these courtships, their foundation in the unglamorous, the prosaic, the everyday.

Even when she does narrate bits and pieces of her characters' burgeoning desire, Austen herself ironizes the marriage plot by choosing to eliminate what might be considered crucial: “Her pardon was duly begged at the close of the song, and every thing usual followed. He was accused of having a delightful voice, and a perfect knowledge of music; which was properly denied; and that he knew nothing of the matter, and had no voice at all, roundly asserted” (227). Or, yet again: “What did she say?—Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does.” The point here is that Austen quite consciously—and repeatedly—draws attention to the everyday decisions of what to say and what not to say and, by underscoring the interests which go into those decisions, calls into question the very plots which these decisions enable. My conclusion—which I will indeed relate—is that a reading of Austen that insists on her unadulterated (no pun intended) endorsement of the proper marriage misses crucial elements of her project, elements to which the author herself draws our attention . . . by not drawing our attention.

NOTES

1. For an illuminating critique of Finch and Bowen's characterization of free indirect discourse as part of a "disciplinary" mode in the novel, see Ferguson and Gunn.
2. Perhaps the first sustained attempt to explode this binding critical opposition is in Handler and Segal.
3. Cecily Devereux reaches almost the exactly opposite conclusion: "Ironically, however, having exposed and examined the boundaries Highbury's social order constructs in order to limit female expression, the novel does not culminate in the destruction of those restrictions" (53). I agree that Austen's critique, if we can call it that, is sharply circumscribed by the fact that nothing really changes at the end of the novel. I hope to demonstrate, however, that the fact that *nothing* really changes at the end of the novel is itself a kind of resistance-through-reticence, Austen's sly jab at the putative closural bliss of marriage.
4. For a different perspective on Knightley's knowledge (or lack thereof), see Waldron and Meyer.

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