

Court vs. Courtship in Jane Austen's *Emma*

Shamsad Mortuza

University of Dhaka

Abstract

The paper examines the royal dedication of Jane Austen's *Emma* as a critical engagement with the regency crisis. Austen decided to comply with a royal request to dedicate *Emma* to the Prince Regent and inserted it almost as a last-minute adjustment, even though she had the option to include it in one of her future works. I shall argue that this inclusion of the dedication is far from an accident. While the novel's preoccupation with marriage and courtship probably hides its courtly interest, the textual treatment of contextual foils and foibles, disease and decadence directly implicate the 'regency crisis'. The paper adopts a new historicist approach and claims that *Emma* is an Austenite search for an ideal ruler at a time when the court was troubled by the deficiencies in the reigning monarch.

Of the six novels written by Jane Austen, *Emma* is the only one to feature a dedication page. It is indeed remarkable for a novel, which does not even have its author's name printed in the first edition, to get the royal permission of getting the insignia of the Prince Regent on its spine and a formal dedication in favor of the future King of England, George IV. The humble tone and regal manner of the dedication poses itself as one of the many conundrums found in the novel. On the one hand, it belies the Tory sympathizer Austen's apathy towards the regency, which relied heavily on a parliament controlled by the Whigs. On the other hand, the royal endorsement of an 'incognito' writer (identified simply as "the author of *Pride and Prejudice*") appears to be an appreciation of a heroine whom Austen herself thought "no one but I will much like" (Austen-Leigh 157). The irony becomes even more intense once we go beyond the novel's explicit theme of courtship and start considering Austen's work as a representation of the regency period. The false air of vanity of an heir who has accidentally become the governess of the house at the expense of an ailing father bears uncanny resemblance to the Prince Regent to whom the book is

dedicated. However, Emma's charm lies in her failed attempts to understand the visual and verbal clues that surround her; her seeming control over her social setting is upset once she begins to recognize the true scope and nature of a ruler in society. Austen's royal dedication thus offers a contextual dilemma that contributes to the novel's prevalent textual dialectic between the exterior and the interior.

The title-heroine of Austen's novel, Emma Woodhouse, is a frivolous girl who wants to control her surroundings. In her imaginative world, Emma plots events, manipulates situations, and dreams and designs the future. She considers herself responsible for the marriage of her governess Miss Taylor, whom she has helped to move into the social ladder and get her new identity as Mrs. Weston. She has a scheme of finding a suitor for her protégé Harriet Smith. She makes a portrait of Harriet, and thereby turns her into an object of her female-gaze, a subject of her art, and an eventual mantelpiece. Her snobbery is evident in her reservation about independent characters like the yeoman Robert Martin or the wage-earner governess Jane Fairfax; and in her raillery against Miss Bates. Emma asserts her authority and tries to script the narrative of everyone that surrounds her; yet her prominence comes at the expense of her ailing father.

Interestingly, the 'surrogate author' of the narrative, Emma ultimately dedicates herself to George Knightley--a name heavily laden with Englishness. While George is the name of the patron saint of England (not to mention the name of the ruling king), Knightley echoes the chivalric code of Middle Age romance or the crusade. Emma's espousal of George Knightley at the end of the novel forces us to rethink the role of the title heroine in the novel. In particular, we are forced to reconsider Austen's view of an ideal ruler. Her criticism of Emma and eventual approval of Knightley offer a possible allegorical reading of Emma in which Austen is promoting certain aristocratic, albeit conservative, values needed for the consolidation of the regency.

In October 1815, Austen was staying with her brother at Han's Place in London with the double duty of nursing her brother Henry who had fallen sick and negotiating with her 'civil-rogue' publisher John Murray (Le Faye, "Letter 121" 291). Henry's doctor Charles Haden was an acquaintance of one of the physician's of the Prince Regent. Austen's presence in town was reported to the Prince who in turn asked his librarian Rev. James Stanier Clarke to arrange for her a guided tour of his Carlton House residence. During this tour, Clarke suggested that Austen could consider dedicating one of her future books to the Prince Regent. Austen later wrote to Clarke, asking whether it was 'incumbent' upon her "to shew my sense of the Honour, by inscribing the Work now in the Press, to HRH" ("Letter 125 D" 296). Clarke replied, "It is certainly not incumbent on you to dedicate your work now in the Press to His Royal Highness; but if you wish to do the Regent that honour either now or at any future period, I am happy to send you that permission" ("Letter 125 A" 296). Instead of deferring the dedication request for a future publication, Austen acted on the suggestion to include a dedication page for a book that was already in the press, and even asked her publisher to make specially bound copies for the Prince Regent. The publisher made presentation copies in scarlet with the Prince of Wales's feathers on the

spine of the volumes and, as instructed, sent them to Clarke three days before the book was publicly available. One wonders, why Austen, not a big admirer of the regency anyway (an idea to which I shall return), went ahead with the dedication request for a book that was in the press, rather than deferring it to one of her future publications. Was there anything in the text that Austen thought would be relevant for the regency?

The dedication page was made as a last minute adjustment. It is inserted in the front leaf where normally the half-title page appears. Because of this late inclusion, the half-title page is found at the back leaf of the first volume.¹ Austen wrote to Murray asking him to include the dedication on Monday December 11, 1815 (the book was advertised to be published in the coming Saturday (“Letter 130” 304). Her ignorance, if not indifference, to royal protocol is evident in the letter in which she instructed Murray: “the Title page must be, *Emma*, Dedicated by Permission to H.R.H. The Prince Regent” (ibid.). Fortunately for Austen, Murray saved her from a potential protocol “blunder” by rewriting the title page, to read, “To His Royal Highness, The Prince Regent, This work is, By His Royal Highness’s Permission, Most Respectfully Dedicated, By His Royal Highness’s Dutiful and Obedient Humble Servant, The Author.” Austen was quick to thank Murray for “putting her right,” adding: “Any deviation from what is usually done in such cases is the last thing I should wish for” (“Letter 131” 305).

The royal librarian graciously acknowledged receipt of the “handsome copies” of the novel on December 21, stating that the copies have “gone to the Prince” (“Letter 132 A” 307). He went on to request Austen to write a book on the House of Saxe Cobourg from the perspective of a clergyman with a dedication for his new master, the Prince’s new son-in-law Prince Leopold. Austen made light of the situation saying that she would keep to her own style as she had no plan of writing a historical romance, and thereby avoided the possibility of any further royal dedication.¹ While Austen maintained correspondence with Clarke, she showed little enthusiasm over royalty. When Clarke informed Austen of his promotion in the household of Prince Leopold, she curtly replied: “The service of a court can hardly be too well paid, for immense must be the sacrifice of Time & Feeling required by it” (“Letter 138A” 311). Austen’s characteristic irony makes it difficult to ascertain whether this comment is actually meant as a compliment on Clarke’s success or on her own failure to avoid the Prince Regent’s dedication, which had earned her nothing more than a “fine compliment” (“Letter 128” 300).

The “disreputable and somewhat ludicrous” Prince Regent was far from popular in his time.² The Prince of Wales was handed with the permanent Regency when the King, suffering from recurrent delusional fits probably due to a disease known as Porphyry, was declared unfit by the Parliament. The regency crisis was worsened by the prince’s reckless behavior in both private and public spheres. In a letter to her friend Martha Lloyd, Austen shared her dislike for the Prince Regent, especially for his treatment of his estranged wife, Caroline of Brunswick. The prince had earlier launched a “delicate investigation” to pry into his wife’s secret love life just to get a formal divorce; he also declared his wife unfit and unworthy of receiving visits from their daughters. Caroline wrote a letter to the Prince,

which was published by her Whig supporters (including Lady Oxford) in the *Morning Chronicles* (Sales, 1994 68). Responding to the double standards of the Prince Regent, Austen wrote in February 1813:

I Suppose all the World is sitting in Judgement upon the Princess of Wales's Letter. Poor woman, I shall support her as long as I can, because she is a Woman, & because I hate her Husband — but I can hardly forgive her for calling herself 'attached & affectionate' to a Man whom she must detest ... I do not know what to do about it; but if I must give up the Princess, I am resolved at least always to think that she would have been respectable, if the Prince had behaved only tolerably by her at first. ("Letter 82" 208)

While Austen's apathy towards the prince is based on a mere sisterhood (the bond that she felt towards the Princess of Wales), it is also possible to make a case for Austen's reaction to the idea of the public disciplining of a wife. I think Samuelian has it right in contextualizing this letter vis-a-vis Austen's most celebrated novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, which came out 1813. She wrote: "This assumption of ultimate male responsibility for female behavior. ...is at the heart of *Pride and Prejudice's* conservative ideology, and the paradigmatic figure for identifying and controlling feminine impropriety is Darcy, the idealized private gentleman whose ability to enact his impeccable will on the social landscape is perfected and extended by his eventual union with the hybrid Elizabeth" (283). The constant disciplining of Emma offers a similar possibility. However, Emma does not render any straightforward surrender to a central figure of authority. Her assertion of imaginative power problematizes the issue of control.

In June 1814, the Prince Regent offered a huge banquet for several heads of states in commemoration of one of his victories over Napoleon. The celebration was followed by an extravagant parade to which Austen responded, "I long to know what this bow of the Prince will produce" (qtd. in Sales). Austen was in the middle of writing *Emma* at that time; she "composed Emma in only fourteen months, from January 21, 1814 to March 29, 1815" (Copeland et al eds. 1997 24). It is strange that Austen, who is not shy to express her abhorrence for the Prince Regent, concedes the royal request and dedicates the book to someone whom she detests. Records show that she consulted at least with her sister Cassandra, brother Henry and publisher Murray before making that decision. Probably, she thought the royal insignia would help enhance the sale of her books. Austen's dilemma is evident in her letter written to Cassandra: "I *did* mention the PR in my note to Mr. Murray, it brought me a fine compliment in return; whether it has done any other good I do not know, but Henry thought it worth trying" ("Letter 128" 300). Austen is way too 'sensible' to be flattered by Clarke's claim that "The Regent has read and admired all your publications" (296) or the Prince Regent has a set of all her books in all of his residences.³ Although it is not clear whether the Prince had actually read Austen's novels, Clarke maintained, "Lord St. Helens and many of the Nobility who have been staying here, paid you the just tribute of their Praise" ("Letter 138A" 311).

The admiration for Austen's works by men who are at the center of power brings us to the issue of Austen's readership and reception. While Austen's marriage plot and regulated women made her popular among nineteenth century female readers, her reception by the male readers has been skeptically treated by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. For them, "Austen's story is especially flattering to male readers because it describes the taming not just of any woman but specifically of a rebellious, imaginative girl who is amorously mastered by a sensible man" (qtd. in Byrne 70). By the same token, is it possible to view Austen's consent to add the dedication in her book as a similar act of submission? The argument does not hold water if we take the ending of the novel as the match of two equals. After all, Emma espouses Knightley as an equal, and thereby saves herself from degrading into the role of governess like her foil Jane Fairfax. Nevertheless, the name of her spouse Knightley offers a possible allusion to the court.

Janine Barchas, in her *Matter of Facts in Jane Austen*, mentions that Austen names her characters after those found in England's most prominent political families (e.g. Darcy, Emma, Anne). This, for Barchas, is more than a mere display of her familiarity with English history; it demonstrates her "authorial ambition for the type of audience she wished to court with her fiction" (5). The "redeployment" of famous names would appeal and delight the aristocratic audience who could relate to these names in their memory. Austen's hatred for the Prince Regent did not necessarily take her interest away from the English monarchy; after all, at the age of fifteen, she had written the burlesque "The History of England," which was illustrated by her sister Cassandra.

Austen's obsession with historical, and particularly royal figures, is obvious in the naming of her characters. Emma's surname Woodhouse dates back to the thirteenth century aristocratic family of Yorkshire, Wentworth of Woodhouse; one of the founders of the family Robert Wentworth marries a rich heiress named Emma Wodehouse (Barchas 3). The surname of Jane, Fairfax may refer to Thomas Fairfax, a Parliamentary general during the English Civil War. Like him, Jane Fairfax is sickly but honorable; even Charles I, whom Fairfax helped depose, called him a man who "ever kept his word" (qtd. in Gentles). And John Milton made the name famous in his poem "On the Lord Gen. Fairfax," and urged him to use his "firm unshak'n vertue" (l.5) to clear "the shamefull brand/ Of Public Fraud" (ll.12-13).

Jane Fairfax's secret marriage to Frank Churchill hints at a scandal that stained her namesake. At the same time, the secret marriage can allude to the Prince Regent's scandalous first marriage to Maria Fitzherbert. The public row over marriage that Jane Austen's generation experienced could also be traced in the Box Hill episode in which Frank Churchill dramatizes the public display of a private marriage. As readers, we know that Frank's comments on the Eltons are actually intended for his secret spouse in the audience:

"How many a man has committed himself on a short acquaintance, and rued it all the rest of his life!"

Miss Fairfax, who had seldom spoken before, except among her own confederates, spoke now.

"Such things do occur, undoubtedly."—She was stopped by a cough.

Frank Churchill turned towards her to listen.

“You were speaking,” said he, gravely. She recovered her voice.

“I was only going to observe, that though such unfortunate circumstances do sometimes occur both to men and women, I cannot imagine them to be very frequent. A hasty and imprudent attachment may arise— but there is generally time to recover from it afterwards. I would be understood to mean, that it can be only weak, irresolute characters, (whose happiness must be always at the mercy of chance,) who will suffer an unfortunate acquaintance to be an inconvenience, an oppression forever” (*Emma* 281-2).

Regrets over public marriage could be a subtle reference to the Royal wedding fiasco. The Prince Regent was no stranger to the suffering from “an unfortunate acquaintance.” The Prince’s marriage was troubled from the beginning. The Prince Regent had run into serious debts because of his extravagant lifestyle, which prompted parliament to intervene. A parliamentary grant was agreed to on the condition that the then Prince of Wales would marry someone who would furnish the country with an heir. Although already married to someone below his stature, the Prince Regent was compelled to marry his first cousin Caroline in 1795 despite his disliking for her. The prince was disgusted by his “ugly and unhygienic” wife from whom he remained estranged, except for his drunken honeymoon night. His attempt to bring charges of female impropriety against Caroline did not go well with the general public.³

The Prince Regent is also credited with bringing an end to the Napoleonic War in Waterloo in 1815. Yet, he had little to do with its outcome. Similarly, in the comic inversion of Austen, Emma’s attempted marriage missions come to a surprise ending over which she has little control. References to the Corn Law and to the abolishment of slavery are few other avenues through which contemporary politics and historical events enter the ante-room of Jane Austen’s domestic novel, *Emma*.

However, the most obvious political reference in Austen’s comic world is the inverted gender role. The ‘sickness’ of society is present in the figuration of the effeminate figure-heads that allows Emma to assume her domineering role. Analogous to Prince Regent’s assumption of power against the backdrop of an invalid father, we find Emma Woodhouse becoming the mistress of the house with her ageing father settling for a relegated role in the household. In the House of Enscombe, Mrs. Churchill is also an ailing governess who wants her son Frank Churchill to take over the estate (Frank has to keep his marriage secret until the demise of his mother).

Mr. Woodhouse’s sickness is described as hypochondria. But one of the riddles that he shares, from a book written by Garrick, involves a ‘kitty, a frozen maid’ (62). Jillian Heydt-Stevenson, in her influential *Austen’s Unbecoming Conjunctions—Subversive Language, Embodied History* has argued that the riddle is about men with venereal diseases who used to copulate with virgin girls in search of cure. Anne K. Mellor, while reviewing Heydt-Stevenson, puts it succinctly:

Unpacking and solving this riddle, which depends on the folk belief that syphilis could be cured by intercourse with a virgin, she [Heydt-Stevenson] shows that the novel, like the riddle, is fundamentally engaged with questions of male impotence, venereal disease, and the commodification of women. In *Emma*, a woman too easily becomes the sexual possession of a man—the penniless Jane Fairfax is likened to a slave, and even Emma is finally but a “notch” in the larger estate of Donwell Abbey.⁴

Mr. Woodhouse's health condition suggests that he too suffers from a disease that is not uncommon among English monarchs. In other words, Emma inherits a certain invalidity of her father that has to be cured for the betterment of society. Her marriage to Knightley promises the supplement required for the future health of Highbury. Significantly, the honeymoon takes place at Weymouth, a seaside resort near Dorset, where George III and his Queen stayed in 1789 (Le Faye 619).

Mr. Knightley is sixteen years older than Emma. Knightley's maturity is something that Emma requires in a relationship. But when Emma earlier considered whether her relationship with Mr. Knightley is that of a brother or not, she was quick to dismiss the idea; “brother and sister, no, indeed” (250). The idea of marrying a cousin echoes the Prince Regent's marriage with his cousin Caroline of Brunswick. Incidentally, George Knightley's brother John resides in Brunswick Square. Northcote notes that this could actually allude to the Princess of Wales (56).

Before Emma finally settles for Knightley, she has a momentary fling with Frank Churchill. Frank makes his characteristic advances to Emma by appreciating her eyes. Emma, after all, has “the true hazle eye--and so brilliant!” (31), and when Frank desires his future wife to have “hazle eyes,” Emma thinks of Harriet, “[h]azle eyes excepted” (282). Emma, being too obsessed with her marriage mission of finding the right suitor for her protégé, could think of Harriet Smith only. Emma's gullibility makes her unfit for becoming the ideal ruler of her society. She needs someone with the insight necessary to see through Frank Churchill's “aimable” scheme. Knightley's estimate of Frank offers one such example: “No, Emma, your amiable young man can be amiable only in French, not in English. He may be very ‘aimable’, have very good manners, and be very agreeable; but he can have no English delicacy towards the feelings of other people” (105).

Although Knightley is dismissive of Emma's word-play, he himself uses the pun that makes us aware of the tension about the aftermath of the French Revolution, and the suspicion with which the English aristocratic class viewed the French. The distinction between ‘amiable’ and ‘aimable’ is what separates Mr. Knightley from Frank. Frank's pseudo-frankness of purpose--his gallantry-- is loaded with an aura of artificiality that can be identified with courtly dandyism. Alistair Duckworth in *Emma and Her Dangers of Individualism* points out: “Churchill's game -playing is not to be dismissed as venial. It is symptomatic of a world in which once given certitudes of conduct are giving way to shifting standards and subjective orderings. Churchill rejects an inherited body of morals and manners for a little world he himself creates” (in Byrne 66).

George Knightley and Frank Churchill have been identified with England and France respectively. Byrne posits: "Whereas Knightley (his name itself the same as St George, the patron saint of England) epitomizes the 'true English style' of few words and 'nothing of ceremony', Frank Churchill is associated with French gallantry, verbal wit and charm, especially by Knightley whose jealousy manifests itself in his 'Frankophobia'" (2004 9).

Knightley's criticism of Frank (read France) alludes to the general mood of Francophobia that the English nobility feared following the French Revolution. The novel's final outcome confirms her Tory sensibility as she seems to idealize a true English 'gentleman'. For Austen, the real man is the one who finds his bond with the land and the one who is courteous to his family and his people. Austen's love for the land is not driven by a Romantic urge of disregarding city-life and returning to savage nature; she views the land as a pastoral setting where she can materialize her Utopian dream; a land where women enter into a courtship without surrendering her rights and where the landed gentry keep on patronizing farmers. Knightley, for Austen, is the ideal aristocratic figure as he keeps on mentoring Robert Martin the farmer about farming. In order to bring true solidarity to England, a certain pragmatism is required and that we find in Mr. Knightley; he is not even ashamed of accepting women as equals. Thus when Emma says that she must stay back in Hartfield to look after her ailing father, Knightley readily agrees to the proposal of moving in to her wife's house once they are married.

Emma, on the other hand, by courting Knightley makes sure that she remains dutiful to her ailing father and her future spouse is okay with that. Mrs. Weston's response to Mr. Knightley's renunciation of his home is couched in Mary Wollstonecraft's ethos championed in the *Vindication on the Rights for Women*. For Mrs. Weston, the solution makes "all right, all open, all equal. No sacrifice on any side worth the name" (354). Claudia Johnson reads Knightley's decision to come to Hartley after the wedding as an endorsement of Emma's rule. "In moving to Hartfield, Knightley is sharing her home, and placing himself within her domain, Knightley gives his blessing to rule" (in Byrne 81).

The novel on courtship suddenly appears to be a courtly one, and the first name of Emma's husband, George, which is the same as that of the incumbent King, acquires added significance. Interestingly, Emma has always preferred addressing George as Mr. Knightley. Right before the formal proposal, Emma recalled that she once tried to offend Mr. Knightley by using her Christian name. "I remember once calling you 'George' in one of my amiable fits, about ten years ago. I did it because I thought I would offend" (Ch 53). Emma, 'the queen of her society' has married someone who shares the name of the king. Johnson's observation on Mr. Knightley as "an ideal" is pertinent here as in him we find "a 'humane' rather than 'gallant' hero" (in Byrne 86). Knightley is the kind of hero who ensured fluidity and mobility, "...tolerance of past and future classes, or part of the sensibility that helped England avoid a French revolution" (in Byrne 69).

There are so many allusions in *Emma* that involves the Regency politics that it is almost impossible to consider the dedication as a mere coincidence. Austen was deeply

engaged with the political milieu while composing the story of the “rich, clever and handsome” (5) heroine, Emma. Austen was aware of the deficiencies in her heroine just as she was aware of the follies of the Prince Regent. Emma’s ultimate surrender to a figure of wisdom can be a coded desire for an ideal ruler who will embrace sense and sensibility, understand the social stratification, and remain not gallant, but humane. I think Anne K. Mellor, who was commenting on the Regency women writers, has it right to claim that with the dedication, Austen “presented her monarch with a heroine who, by learning from her own mistakes, could teach him how to rule with more wisdom, benevolence and justice than was his wont” (47).

Endnotes

¹ In the catalog entry for the rare first edition, Keynes notes that “the collation of the first volume is peculiar in that the first sheet consisted only of the title-page and the dedication to the Prince Regent, while the half-title was printed on the last leaf, which would otherwise have been blank.” <http://www.abebooks.com/>

² Austen made fun of Stanier Clarke in her “Plan of a Novel,” written before the publication of *Sandition*, using some of the exact words that they used during the correspondence regarding the dedication of *Emma*. See Michelle Levy’s article “Austen’s Manuscripts and the Publicity of Print.”

³ Thomson, David. *England in the Nineteenth Century*. Baltimore: Penguin, 1950. p.21.

⁴ Mellor, K. Anne. Book Review: Jillian Heydt-Stevenson, *Austen’s Unbecoming Conjunctions—Subversive Language, Embodied History*. *Romantic Circle*. <http://www.rc.umd.edu/> Accessed on April 22, 2014.

⁵ Jane Austen has long been considered as an ahistorical writer. Craik’s observation provides an example: “A twentieth century reader of Jane Austen may deduce from what she writes that the Romantic revival in literature is well underway, but would probably not be able to postulate all that is implied by the word ‘regency’, or even the existence of prince Regent, to whom, at his own request, she dedicated Emma. ...The whole world of national politics, of the industrial revolution, of Europe inflamed with revolutions and struggle for power, the world containing Cobbett, Nelson, the Duke of Wellington, Napoleon, Blucher, and Prince Metternich is apparently ignored” (Craik, 1969: 8). However, as Looser has pointed out, “Nowadays it may seem difficult to fathom, but Jane Austen was once branded an ahistorical writer” (qtd in Barchas, p.10)

⁶ I don’t think Roger Sales’s observation that “The Dedication may be best read as an ironic statement and therefore placed alongside the mock-dedications that were such a distinctive feature of the *Juvenalia*” (1994, p.71) is accurate in this context. While I agree with the ironic aspect of the Dedication, I do not think the Dedication could be a mockery; after all, it was written by the publisher Murray--not by Jane Austen.

⁷ Kristin Fliieger Samuelian in her article, “Managing Propriety for the Regency: Jane Austen Reads the Book,” argues that Austen responded to the debate of ‘female impropriety’ by shaping the character of Lydia in *Pride and Prejudice* after the injured queen Caroline. But this does not support Austen’s letter to Martha Lloys, which Samuelian too quotes, in which the author expressed her unending support for the queen. *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Summer, 2009), pp. 279-297. www.jstor.org/stable.

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