Some Criticisms on Jane Austen’s “Emma”

By

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It is a matter of common knowledge that all of Jane Austen’s six completed novels fall into two periods. The first period covers roughly five years (1794-98), while she was in her early twenties and lived at her father’s parsonage in Steventon, and Pride and Prejudice (1796-97), Sense and Sensibility (begun in November, 1797), and Northanger Abbey (1797-98) belong to this group. The second period covers six years (1811-16) of her Chawton days while she was in her late thirties, and includes Mansfield Park (1811-13), Emma (1814-15), and Persuasion (1815-16).

As A.C. Bradley has pointed out in his excellent essay on Jane Austen, ‘there are two distinct strains in Jane Austen. She is a moralist and a humourist. These strains are often blended or even completely fused, but still they may be distinguished.’ When Jane Austen recommenced her novel-writing in 1811, after the interval of thirteen years which divides the two periods, the moral temper was predominant in her mind. Her intention was serious. We can no longer perceive that youthful exuberance which animated Pride and Prejudice. The atmosphere of Mansfield Park, which the authoress disapproves, is strangely dull. As for the characters, although they show remarkable traces of improvement upon those of her first period, none of them is fascinating; the hero and the heroine are both prigs. On the other hand, Persuasion, her last completed novel, was written when her health was already declining. And although it is the mellowest and the most beautiful of her finished novels, we cannot but detect a certain dullness, which, according to Virginia Woolf, is the mark of the ‘transition stage between two periods.’ Had Miss Austen lived a few more years, Mrs. Woolf conjectures, ‘she would have been the forerunner of Henry James and of Proust,’ that is to say, she would have entered her third period.

Emma, produced chronologically between Mansfield Park and Persuasion, is a work in which her instinctive talent of the humourist is displayed in the highest degree. It seems that after finishing Mansfield Park Jane Austen discarded the serious attitude of the moralist and returned to her favourite attitude of the humourist. Here, unlike the other novels, the scene is confined exclusively to a little country town of Highbury. But, compared with the
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heavy, suffocating atmosphere of Mansfield Park, the ambient air of Highbury is bright. *Emma* is a comedy. ‘In *Pride and Prejudice*,’ says Professor Bradley, ‘the sources of mirth lie chiefly in the minor characters, and the main subject is not, on the whole, treated humorously.’ In *Emma* however, the very plot is comic.

Emma Woodhouse, ‘handsome, clever, and rich,...had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.’ Her mother had died long ago, and she had been brought up by ‘a most affectionate, indulgent father’ and Miss Taylor who as governess had fallen little short of a mother in affection.’ The real evils indeed of Emma’s situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself. In short, though having a good disposition, she was something of a spoilt child which Jane Austen was delighted to depict. And out of such environment and character of hers arises the complication of this dramatic novel. In order to dismiss the loneliness of her heart after the marriage of Miss Taylor, she chooses for a friend Harriet Smith, an illegitimate girl, lovely, docile and stupid. She persuades Harriet to refuse the proposal of marriage from Robert Martin, a decent farmer in the neighbourhood, and tries to make a match between Harriet and Mr. Elton, the good-looking vicar of Highbury. Mr. Elton, however, mistaking her encouragement, proposes to the great Miss Woodhouse herself, and when she blamed him for his inconstancy to Harriet, he cries out, ‘Miss Smith!—I never thought of Miss Smith in the whole course of my existence—never paid her any attentions, but as your friend: ...Miss Smith, indeed!—Oh! Miss Woodhouse! who can think of Miss Smith, when Miss Woodhouse is near!’

After she has committed this blunder, her mind is attracted to Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill, both of whom have come to Highbury for a short visit. Jane Fairfax is a girl who is her equal in intellect and accomplishments, though socially her inferior. And Emma slight her, because she cannot patronize her as she does Harriet Smith. Besides she supposes Jane to be in love with somebody’s husband, and confides this quite groundless suspicion, of all persons, to Frank Churchill to whom Jane is secretly engaged. As for Frank Churchill, she at first fancied him to be in love with her, and for a short time she too convinces herself that she is in love with him. But, having discovered that her love for him was fictitious, she encourages Harriet to fall in love with him, this time, however, without mentioning the name of the man. When the secret engagement between Frank and Jane is revealed, she feels very sorry for Harriet, for she was jilted for the second time. But when she imparts this sad news to Harriet, Harriet cries out, echoing Mr.
Elton’s very words. ‘Mr. Frank Churchill, indeed! I do not know who would ever look at him in the company of the other. I hope I have a better taste than to think of Mr. Frank Churchill, who is like nobody by his side.’

It was Mr. Knightley that she was thinking about. And when she heard from Harriet’s mouth that Mr. Knightley was returning Harriet’s affection, ‘Emma’s eyes were instantly withdrawn; and she sat silently meditating, in a fixed attitude, for a few minutes. A few minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart. …It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!’

The thought of losing Mr. Knightley made her miserable. On the other hand, Mr. Knightley, who has been in love with Emma ‘ever since she was thirteen,’ was also miserable, having seen Emma’s flirtation with Frank Churchill. When they next meet, however, their mutual misunderstandings are removed, and they engage themselves to each other. Harriet Smith marries Robert Martin, her original lover.

As may be seen from the above bare outline, this novel is full of misunderstandings, great and small. Indeed, the whole plot-architecture depends upon misunderstandings. All the principal characters are involved in this human comedy of errors. Even Mr. Knightley, a paragon of good sense, is no exception. He has a strong prejudice against Frank Churchill because Frank is his rival in love, and this, contrasted with his virile personality, gives a peculiar comic effect. And all the errors are concentrated on Emma Woodhouse, the first lady of Highbury society. It is true that this device which Jane Austen makes use of to develop the plot was trite. Miss Lascelles says that it was a device which had long lost its freshness on the stage. But her way of using it is very clever. There is neither a character nor an incident but advances the story. For example, Mr. Elton, having played his principal part in the early part of the book, brings with him that delightful comic character Mrs. Elton, and towards the end of the book he himself again plays that important part of slighting Harriet at the ball which finally leads to the dénouement.

In discussing the plot, I might add another point which has attracted my attention. Miss Austen is fond of parallelism. In some of her novels we see two pairs of lovers. In Pride and Prejudice the relation between Bingley and Jane Bennet is contrasted with that of Darcy and Elizabeth. But, in this case, two love affairs do not intermingle. The former may be regarded as a sub-plot designed to enhance the latter by the difference in quality. Also in Sense and Sensibility we have a story of Marianne and Willoughby, and another of Elinor and Edward Ferrars. And though both stories are accorded equal weight, these being different kinds of love stories, the reader compares
them with each other and separate them in his mind.

In *Emma*, however, two pairs of lovers, Emma and Mr. Knightley on the one hand, and Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill on the other, are intermingled so delicately by misunderstanding, jealousy etc. that it is difficult to separate them. This, I think, is one of the reasons why of all her six novels *Emma* gives us the sense of compactness most. Besides, some small types of parallelism might be detected in this novel. The patronage of Emma for Harriet is contrasted with that of Mrs. Elton for Jane, the jealousy of Emma against Jane with that of Mr. Knightley against Frank Churchill.

Professor Bradley says, 'Jane Austen, who is said to be Shakespearian, never reminds us of Shakespeare, I think, in her full-dress portraits, but she does so in such characters as Miss Bates and Mrs. Allen.' This gives us a good starting-point, as Miss Lascelles puts it, for inquiring into the nature of comic characters in Miss Austen's novels.

George Gordon distinguishes Shakespearian Comedy from French Comedy and defines that while the latter appeals to the intelligence pure and simple, to our heads alone, the former appeals to our emotion as well as to our intelligence, and arouses the laughter of heart and mind in one. French Comedy is impersonal, critical and its purpose is corrective; it tries to correct any one who has deviated from the ordinary custom of the society in which he lives. Whereas Shakespearian Comedy is emotional, romantic and one of the salient characteristics of its comic characters is their resistance to all outward pressure of conformity.

Before writing *Emma*, Jane Austen said, 'I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like.' This diffidence on the part of the authoress as to the popularity of the heroine may be partly due to her misgiving lest the moral temper of 'the heroine she was going to take' should disagree with the moral tendency of the time. At any rate, Emma is a horrible snob. And as she commits a number of follies one after another, we are amused by the incongruity between her illusion and the reality as the authoress conceives it. In *Northanger Abbey* the illusion of Catherine Morland is derived from the Gothic romance, whereas the source of Emma's illusion might be attributed to her environment and her inherent character. But it is evident that Jane Austen makes use of the same pattern, burlesque. In the end, however, Emma realizes that she has been in the wrong. In this respect, Emma seems to conform to French Comedy.

On the other hand, we see that the authoress takes great pains to make Emma's folly appear excusable. We can detect her kind sympathy for the heroine on every page. Jane Austen's attitude to life, in the real world as well as in the world of her creation, seems to be much the same as that of
Elizabeth Bennet when she exclaims, 'Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can.'

This good-humoured sympathy for her characters does not square with the impersonally critical spirit of French Comedy. When we come to such minor characters as the gentle, polite, ever-whimpering invalid Mr. Woodhouse or that harmless but incorrigible chatter-box Miss Bates, we see that her characters depart more and more from the French type and closely approach the Shakespearian. We do not want Mr. Woodhouse and Miss Bates to be otherwise than they are. After all, Jane Austen belongs to that school of English novelists who depicted human nature rather than manners.

The casual reader who has been blinded by the brilliance of the witty and playful style of her early novels will think that Jane Austen was a perfect stylist from the start. Nevertheless, the careful reading of her novels will prove that she had much to learn. If as an example we take up her use of dialogue in her novels, we see that she shows a considerable development in this technique. Already in *Pride and Prejudice* she displays a superior talent in this field. But when we compare *Pride and Prejudice* with *Emma*, we perceive that in the latter the authoress gains the fine shades that distinguish her characters from one another and the subtle tones that express their diverse moods by the use of dialogue. This is especially the case in her delineation of the minor characters. This, I think, is the chief reason why the minor characters in *Emma* seem more real than those in her early novels. Everything taken into consideration, it may not be too much to say that *Emma* is the most flawless work of an authoress who is said to be the most flawless of English novelists.

**NOTES**

1. *First Impressions* is the original title. Published in 1813.
2. *Elinor and Marianne*, in epistolary form, might be the original of *Sense and Sensibility*, but it must have been completely recast. Published in 1811.
3. In 1803 the manuscript was sold to the publisher Crosby, who advertised it as *Susan*, but went no farther. In 1816 Henry Austen, one of the brothers of the authoress, bought back the manuscript and copyright. Published posthumously with *Persuasion* in 1818.
4. Published in 1814.
5. Published in 1816.
10. Ibid.
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11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid. chap. xv.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid. chap. lviii.