

The Cambridge Introduction to
Jane Austen

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correspondence. Jane tries to avoid the patronising Mrs Elton by getting her own letters from the post office, so guarding her secret. Here, and elsewhere, letters have a clear material existence: at Miss Bates's, Emma is pleased to avoid the artefact even if she must hear the contents; Frank precipitates the crisis in Jane's feelings by failing to post the letter in which he counters her breaking of their engagement.

The habit of guessing and puzzling in the texture of *Emma* may influence the reader's response and lead to detection of hidden strategies. Other Austen novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* can be playfully defined in terms of secret manoeuvrings – does Charlotte scheme to attach Darcy to Elizabeth so as to advance herself and her new husband? – but the books do not demand such interpretation or their included letters such inspection. With its lack of surface story and its constant sense of undercover activities, *Emma* seems a more fruitful site.

For example, the final marriage of Harriet and Robert Martin may have been brought about by the joint act of the future Mr and Mrs George Knightley: if so, the scheming Emma would have acted inadvertently, while the Knightley brothers, those embodiments of English transparency, would have proceeded in full consciousness of their intrigue. Mr Knightley knew that Emma had prevented Harriet's acceptance of Martin's first proposal and may have intended to repair the damage. Otherwise, there is no accounting for the long conversation in which he examines Harriet's principles and even discusses agriculture with her. Presumably the purpose is to discover whether it is worth promoting her match to his tenant. It is Emma who procures the invitation from the John Knightleys to Harriet on the pretext of her needing a dentist. While she is in London, George Knightley sends Robert Martin to his brother, who purposely leaves Harriet alone with her former lover during an outing. Considering John's assertion that he never has dinner guests, the invitation to Robert Martin when Harriet is staying with his family suggests more than attractive social inclusion of someone Emma regards as much below their status. Emma and the narrator never draw attention to this manoeuvring but it seems plausible. If Mr Knightley does intrigue, it is to serve his community and also perhaps to remove another impediment to his union with Emma.

True English style

Tony Tanner has argued that *Emma* is Jane Austen's most pastoral and conservative work.¹⁵ Certainly so if the heroine's consciousness embraces the book, for it is she who invests the unimaginative hero with her conservative vision.

Emma's appreciation of Donwell Abbey becomes part of her desire for stasis – rather like Fanny Price admiring Sotherton.

She is helped by the house itself. Unmodernised Donwell contrasts with Austen's other abbey. Northanger has modern facilities and a paraphernalia of hot and glass houses the size of a village, which allow cultivation of exotic fruit like pineapples; Donwell Abbey lacks the large public rooms that had by this period become fashionable, and its grounds provide naturalised fruit, apples, and strawberries, grown without glass houses. Where General Tilney wanted pleasing views at the expense of social feeling, Mr Knightley will not move a path to improve his meadow if it will inconvenience the Highbury villagers. He is unworried by his house's 'old neglect of prospect' and in no rush to 'improve' the pleasure grounds; his avenue of limes leads to a wall and pillars framing neither house nor view. In this carelessness, he appears a devotee less of the improver Repton, admired by Henry Crawford, than of Richard Payne Knight, who found such neglect picturesque, an expression of English freedom.

Emma invests Mr Knightley with Burkean conservative values – he heads a family of 'true gentility, untainted in blood and understanding'; but she avoids one aspect of his depiction: as a modern agriculturist, the only Austen landowner seen actually producing foodstuffs. Given eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century agricultural changes, from rotations of crops to enclosure of land, a landowning man wishing to increase or keep intact his wealth had to interest himself in the new science: indeed, the agriculturist Arthur Young noted that gentlemen who had in earlier times left matters to their stewards now managed their farms themselves and studied 'husbandry' and 'rural oeconomics'.¹⁶ In his care and rural investment, Mr Knightley is depicted as this kind of modern gentleman. He rarely uses his horses for his carriage; presumably, with his tenant, he reads the agricultural reports, and he constantly converses on practical agricultural matters. In his lamentation for the torpidity of the rentier class, Trotter gives as his ideal the working farmer and his agrarian life. Unlike Sir Thomas of *Mansfield Park*, who lives in a modern (eighteenth-century Palladian) house and derives part of his income from exploitative colonial enterprise, Mr Knightley in economic terms is Trotter's farmer and, for all the feudal tone with which Emma tries to invest him, he even comes close to the approved worker in the radical Tom Paine's remark: 'the aristocracy are not the farmers who work the land, and raise the produce, but are the mere consumers of the rent; and when compared with the active world are the drones . . .'¹⁷

Mr Knightley was reputedly Austen's favourite portrait of a traditional country gentleman. If so, he seems to imply her moderate political views. He is a hereditary landowner, but neither inevitably corrupted by privilege like the radical Godwin's hereditary squire Falkland in *Caleb Williams* nor embodying