

Signet Classics

Jane Austen



Emma

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD BY
SABRINA JEFFRIES

JANE AUSTEN



WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
MARGARET DRABBLE

AND A NEW AFTERWORD BY
SABRINA JEFFRIES



SIGNET CLASSICS

SIGNET CLASSICS

Published by New American Library, a division of
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street,
New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto,
Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2,
Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124,
Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,
New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632,
New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue,
Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices:
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Published by Signet Classics, an imprint of New American Library,
a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

First Signet Classics Printing, April 1964

First Signet Classics Printing (Jeffries Afterword), January 2008

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Introduction copyright © Margaret Drabble, 1996

Afterword copyright © Sabrina Jeffries, 2008

All rights reserved



REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA

Printed in the United States of America

If you purchased this book without a cover you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

JANE AUSTEN (1775–1817) was born in Hampshire, England, to George Austen, a rector, and his wife, Cassandra. Like many girls of her day, she was educated at home, where she began her literary career by writing parodies and skits for the amusement of her large family. Although Austen did not marry, she did have several suitors and once accepted a marriage proposal, but only for an evening. Although Austen never lived apart from her family, her work shows a worldly and wise sensibility. Her novels include *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1815), and *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, published together posthumously in 1818.

MARGARET DRABBLE is the highly acclaimed novelist, biographer, and editor of *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Her novels include *The Gates of Ivory*, *The Seven Sisters*, and *The Red Queen*. She lives in London.

SABRINA JEFFRIES is the *New York Times* bestselling author of more than twenty-five novels. Despite her PhD in Early Modern British Literature from Tulane University, she abandoned academics for a rewarding career writing sexy and humorous historical romances. She lives in North Carolina.

Introduction

WHEN JANE AUSTEN EMBARKED on her novel *Emma*, she is said to have said, "I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like." She could not have been more wrong. While hardly anybody has found a good word to say for Fanny Price, the heroine of the preceding novel, most readers and critics have joined in liking *Emma* and admiring the work. Mine is a dissenting voice. Much as I admire the novel, what I cannot do is "like" *Emma*. But then, one might argue, Jane Austen does not wholly intend that we should.

Emma was published on Jane Austen's fortieth birthday, in December 1815, and was the last of her works to be published in her lifetime. It is a confident and, as her own comment suggests, in some ways slightly provocative performance. It opens with great panache, with one of those great first sentences that seems so effortless that it almost deludes one into thinking one could do it oneself: "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence. . . ." The gauntlet thrown down in that word *seemed* is picked up at once by the attentive reader. Trouble is in store for the happy and comfortable *Emma*. As storytelling, this is magnificent.

It is also immediately obvious, to those readers (like its first) who have been following her work chronologically, that this new heroine will be as unlike her last as possible. Fanny Price, of *Mansfield Park*, had been unimposing in appearance (on her first introduction as a little girl we are told that at least there was nothing

in her to disgust her relations), simple, and poor. Hers was a version of the Cinderella story: the poor waif, the orphan, the ward who wins the prince from her competitive sisters through patience and humility rather than through beauty or wit. Fanny's role was to watch and wait and be silent. Emma's is more active. She can speak, command, direct, manipulate. She has, as we are at once informed, the power of choice, a very rare gift for a woman, and, of course, far rarer then than now.

Emma is rich. She is, in fact, very rich. It has been calculated that the thirty thousand pounds with which she is blessed would be worth more than a million now. She is much the richest of Jane Austen's heroines, and far richer than Austen herself had ever dreamed of being. (While writing this novel, Austen, her mother, and her sister Cassandra were in part dependent on the charity of her brothers, although by 1813 she was able to boast that from the sales of her first two published novels she had "written herself into" £250—"which only makes me long for more.") Emma Woodhouse is thus intentionally elevated above the fears and mercenary ambitions that torment and distort the lives of so many of Austen's female characters. She need not fear that she will remain an old maid. She has a handsome dowry. Offers will be made. She can choose to remain single, or she can wed. She knows she is a very lucky woman, and while she does not entirely take her good fortune for granted, she does not agonize over it, feel guilt about it, or attempt to spread it philanthropically around her as lavishly as later Victorian heroines were wont to do. She intends to enjoy it.

Her freedom of action is carefully contrasted in this most intricate of plots with the constraints under which most of the women and some of the men of her small neighborhood suffer. The first of these that we meet is Mrs. Weston, who had once been Emma's governess, though we must not say so: if we do allude indelicately to this past commercial relationship (as Mrs. Elton does on one occasion) we will get a very cold look from Emma.

True, Miss Taylor had become almost one of the family during her sixteen years with the Woodhouses—more like a friend, more like a sister, we are told. But still,

she had been a governess, and remained a dependent, until to everyone's surprise the eligible widower Mr. Weston marries her. At once, she acquires a higher status. Mr. Woodhouse may refer to her continually as "poor Miss Taylor," but everybody else knows that she has chosen very wisely. Emma in particular appreciates her friend's good luck, although it acts against her own interest, and says to her father not entirely as a joke, "You would not have had Miss Taylor live with us for ever and bear all my odd humours, when she might have a house of her own?" That "house of her own" is very important for Mrs. Weston, and the welcoming, sociable atmosphere of Randalls plays a large part in the action—larger, one might think, than the eventual arrival of a baby daughter. (Jane Austen does not seem to have cared much for babies, although she concedes that others seem to, and generously allows Mrs. Weston a happy pregnancy and successful delivery.) We do not doubt that Mrs. Weston, with "every domestic comfort," "a pleasant husband," and "a carriage of her own," has done better than she had expected. As poor Miss Taylor she must often have asked herself what her own fate would be when Emma married.

In Chapter 3, we are introduced to a new range of female characters in the persons of Mrs. and Miss Bates, Mrs. Goddard, and Harriet Smith, whom Emma is to adopt as a companion-replacement for Mrs. Weston. The first three at first meeting appear as subsidiary figures, small character parts required by the plot for the entertainment of Mr. Woodhouse and the creation of "Highbury atmosphere." We expect our attention to focus more on Harriet, who being young and pretty and of mysterious provenance (she is the natural daughter "of somebody," we are told) would seem to be more interesting material for fiction. And in a sense we are right, for Emma's manipulation of Harriet's matrimonial prospects forms one of the principal strands of the plot. Yet Harriet herself is not presented as a very interesting character, despite her interesting situation. Indeed, that is one of the points of Harriet. Her prettiness, her amiable sweetness of nature, her malleability, ignorance, and indeed stupidity are all seized upon by Emma as a foil for her own very different attractions. There is surely

something ominous in the first description of her appearance: "Her beauty happened to be of a sort which Emma particularly admired. She was short, plump, and fair, with a fine bloom, blue eyes, light hair, regular features, and a look of great sweetness." Discounting the fact that the word *plump* was used more favorably in those pre-anorexic days, Harriet nevertheless does not appear as a very strong contender for our affection or for that of any potential hero. She is firmly put in her place by her author, and remains very nearly as insipid and silly as when the novel begins (although we are told, damningly, that at least under Emma's influence she loses her schoolgirl giggle). Her fate is of little real interest, to Emma or to us. She is a diversion from the real plot, and an occasion for a display of Emma's faults and virtues: as a character, her freedom of movement and independence of thought are strictly limited.

The case of Miss Bates is somewhat different. Miss Bates is a character of great interest and originality, although she is neither young nor pretty and therefore has no active part to play in the dominant and highly conspicuous plot of matchmaking and "marriage-ability" (Emerson's dismissive term). She has almost no choices to make. The passage that introduces her is incisive in its assessment:

[S]he had no intellectual superiority to make atonement to herself or frighten those who might hate her into outward respect. She had never boasted either beauty or cleverness. Her youth had passed without distinction, and her middle of life was devoted to the care of a failing mother and the endeavour to make a small income go as far as possible. And yet she was a happy woman, and a woman whom no one named without goodwill. . . . She . . . thought herself a most fortunate creature . . . was a great talker upon little matters, which exactly suited Mr. Woodhouse, full of trivial communications and harmless gossip.

The spectacle of Miss Bates, vulnerable, powerless, foolish and happy, acts both as a scarecrow and as a moral touchstone for the conduct of others. We now

tend to find her one of the most significant portraits in the book, partly because we have been alerted to the "dark" Jane Austen, the less kindly "Jane" rescued from the "Janeites" and revealed by D. W. Harding's seminal essay in *Scrutiny*. Harding and his critical successors invite us to consider not the coziness of Highbury but its spitefulness, and to pick up from Austen's other novels what he describes as almost paranoid comments on small town and rural gossip, malice, hatred, and domestic espionage: he suggests that Austen herself used her own "unquestioned intellectual superiority" to frighten those who might hate her into respect. Her satire, he argues, is a means of self-preservation in the society in which she was trapped, but of which she was "intensely critical."

Miss Bates, then, in this reading, is Austen herself, stripped of her intellectual defenses, and laughed at, indeed possibly hated, by her neighbors? Well, not quite. For we are told, and most convincingly shown, that Miss Bates is not hated but loved. She is a welcome guest wherever she goes, and her social function is prized in a small community in need of "harmless gossip" and "quiet prosing." She talks too much, but we are never in any doubt that Emma is wrong to mock her; when Emma's "cleverness" is exposed as malice at the famous Box Hill outing, we are surely meant to feel deeply for Miss Bates. Some have argued that Emma is punished too severely by Mr. Knightley and her author for a momentary loss of temper, and that it is "priggish" to expect unfailing tolerance from a high-spirited young woman for a character who in real life, outside the pages of the book, would have been an intolerable bore. But this neglects the evidence that Emma herself has consistently neglected Miss Bates: her rudeness at Box Hill is the culmination of a series of little incidents of short-changing and thoughtlessness and dismissive thinking. It is Emma's inability to suffer Miss Bates gladly that throws Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax into the competitive clutches of Mrs. Elton. With which does Austen most wish us to sympathize and identify—the low boredom threshold of "clever" Emma, or the spinster-vulnerability and poverty of "good" Miss Bates, who is so "quick-sighted to everybody's merits"?

This seems to me to be one of the key questions of the book, and it has no very obvious answer. In *Mansfield Park* Austen, through the persons of Fanny Price and Mary Crawford, had obliged us to see the virtues of the quiet and the immorality of the clever; the moral balance, if far from comfortable, is clear. The lineup of opposing qualities here is very different. Emma far more resembles Mary than Fanny; simplicity and humility are qualities she notably lacks. Yet she is our heroine and our viewpoint on the action, if not our touchstone—indeed, she is almost the reverse of a touchstone, for she is almost invariably wrong. She leaps from error to error, sometimes taking the clever reader with her, sometimes not (the ingenuity and complexity of the plot as detective story, with its many clues, is dazzling), but through each turn and twist it is through Emma's eyes that we observe, through her heart that we feel, and most notably, with her thoughts that we think. The novel has long passages of introspection in which Emma minutely investigates her own motives and those of others: and yet, throughout, we are held at arm's length from her. We observe rather than participate in her thought processes. She may be clever, but her author is yet more clever, and we are invited to see her through the author's eyes. We cannot "identify" with Emma, however closely we follow her thoughts, because we know her thoughts to be mistaken: we are not permitted to suffer with her humiliations, or rejoice in her triumphs. We see her from outside, from a Mr. Knightley-observer-viewpoint, even while entering into the intimacies of her own delusions. It is an uncanny and puzzling performance.

Take, for instance, the events and tone of Volume I, Chapter 10, when Harriet and Emma visit the poor. Emma at this stage is already well advanced in her scheme of marrying Harriet off to Mr. Elton, and as they walk along Vicarage Lane past Mr. Elton's residence she makes pointed remarks about "there go you and your riddle-book one of these days"—remarks which may seem to have all the archness and indeed vulgarity of the future Mrs. Elton herself. We are to discover that Emma's encouragement of Harriet to fall in love is both cruel and stupid, but even had she been successful, surely she would still have been ill-advised? (Her in-

terfering with Harriet's affection for Robert Martin we have already witnessed, and, by the very different standards of her society and of our own, condemned.)

As the walk progresses, Harriet proceeds to cross-question Emma about her own matrimonial plans, which seems natural enough on her part, as Emma's mind as revealed to Harriet and the reader clearly runs on little but other people's marriages. Emma replies that she has "very little intention of ever marrying at all," partly because she has never met anybody "superior" enough for her, and partly because she has "none of the usual inducements to marry": "Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want." She comes first with her father and is mistress of her own house: why change? (Emma, as we discover, is extremely eager to take precedence, and is very put out by the appearance in her little kingdom of the newly wed Mrs. Elton.) Harriet raises the specter of Miss Bates, which prompts Emma to reassure her friend that although Miss Bates is indeed ridiculous—"so silly—so satisfied—so smiling—so prosing—so undistinguishing and unfastidious"—there is little danger of her ever resembling Miss Bates, because she has money of her own. Then comes her most devastating generalization: "A single woman with a very narrow income must be a ridiculous, disagreeable, old maid! the proper sport of boys and girls; but a single woman of good fortune is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else." She even goes on to justify the common prejudice by saying that a narrow income may indeed "contract the mind and sour the temper." Remembering the reality of the generous-hearted Miss Bates, she has the grace to retract this at once, but she does leave us with a question mark against her own contracted life and mind.

Harriet does not give up her catechism easily, despite Emma's decisive replies, and asks how Emma will employ her solitary middle and old age. Emma replies that she will occupy herself with drawing, music, carpet-work, and nieces; her confidence in her own powers is as great as the pride that the much-mocked Mrs. Elton takes in her own "resources." (Neither Emma nor Mrs. Elton, we may note, practice the piano much, or read much, or do anything very much: both are dilettantes and talk

more than they perform.) The conversation meanders on, taking in the subject of nieces and the truly accomplished niece Jane Fairfax ("One is sick of the very name of Jane Fairfax," says Emma) until the young women reach the cottage of poverty and sickness. Emma, we are told, was "very compassionate," and yet was without "romantic expectations of extraordinary virtue" from the poor, so she is able to offer "personal attention," "counsel," "sympathy," "comfort," and "advice" as well as her purse; and as she leaves she says "These are the sights, Harriet, to do one good. How trifling they make everything else appear! I feel now as if I could think of nothing but these poor creatures all the rest of the day; and yet, who can say how soon it may all vanish from my mind?"

"Very true," says Harriet, and, of course, within two minutes the poor are utterly forgotten and Emma is back at her trifling matchmaking, even going so far as to break her own bootlace on purpose as part of her plan to trap Mr. Elton into a proposal—for this accidental meeting with Mr. Elton while engaged on "a charitable scheme" must, she thinks, "bring a great increase of love." Thus even the sick and the poor are pressed to play a part in Emma's plot.

It is difficult to know quite what the author's intentions are here. We are clearly permitted to dismiss Emma's dismissal of marriage for herself as mere self-deluded bravado, young-woman talk that a serious love affair will easily dispel; equally clearly, its sociological content (particularly interesting to a feminist readership) is valid. Emma need not marry for status, as she already comes first at home and in Highbury—and it is worth bearing in mind here that although marriage was the goal of most women at this period, it too brought its disadvantages. Until the Married Women's Property Act of 1870, a woman's fortune became on marriage the property of her husband. There were other hazards in the risks of childbed and the duties of providing an heir. Mrs. Bennet must have been desperate by the time she produced her fifth unwanted daughter, and Jane Austen characteristically comments of her pregnant niece Anna Lefroy: "Poor Animal, she will be worn out before she is thirty.—I am very sorry for her.—Mrs Clement too is

in that way again. I am quite tired of so many children. Mrs Benn has a 13th." At thirty-nine, Austen might well prefer visiting nieces to the notion of children of her own, and she writes again to her own favorite niece, Fanny Knight:

You are inimitable, irresistible. . . . Who can keep pace with the fluctuations of your Fancy, the Caprizios of your Taste, the Contradictions of your Feelings? . . . Oh! what a loss it will be when you are married. . . . I shall hate you when your delicious play of Mind is all settled down into conjugal and maternal affections.

Unmarried Fanny is clearly more entertaining than married Anna; Emma Woodhouse is more entertaining than her hypochondriac married sister Isabella. Emma's anti-marriage manifesto has a grain of hard sense in it, although we are not meant to take it entirely at its face value.

Her comments on the status of Miss Bates are harder to place. Should we judge Emma seriously for them or do we take them too as the idle lighthearted talk of twenty-one years? Do we judge the society that finds "celibacy contemptible"? Does Emma judge it, or does she accept its values without questioning them? And what is our attitude to be towards Emma's own portrait of herself as a maiden aunt? Are we to find this comic, are we to find it yet another aspect of Emma's own habitual lack of self-knowledge, or are we, as suggested above, to see in it a viable prospect for our heroine?

I am not quite sure of the answers to any of these queries. It would be possible to argue that Austen's attitude towards her heroine is ironic throughout, but when we move to the short (and, of course, indirectly narrated) episode in the cottage, we are on even more uncertain ground—an uncertainty, paradoxically, caused partly by Austen's own sudden switch towards direct authorial control. When she describes Emma's attitude to the poor, there seems to be no irony at play. Emma is both compassionate and practical: so we are told, and so we must accept. Her sigh about these sights "doing one good" strikes a modern ear more offensively than it

would have struck readers in an age when private charity was considered a natural and acceptable activity for the rich, but even taking that into account, Emma's knowledge that she will (as she does) forget these "poor creatures" more or less instantly is a little worrying. Are we to admire her, at this point, for her self-knowledge, a quality in which she is so often deficient? I suspect we are: Emma's astringently quick placing and forgetting of an uncomfortable out-of-frame experience is held up for our admiration, and contrasted favorably with the sentimental vacuity of Harriet's echo, "Poor creatures! One can think of nothing else."

Emma, then, is a mixture of self-deception and self-knowledge: sometimes we see through her, sometimes she sees through herself. But where does that leave her and our attitude to the society she inhabits, with its cast of visible and invisible poor, with its small group of acceptable families, with its not-quite-acceptable but worthy yeomen, with its wealthy and respectable tradesmen ("friendly, good sort of people") who can after ten years be allowed with much deference to ask Miss Woodhouse to a dance? (We will not mention the gypsies who frighten Harriet and her friend Miss Bickerton in Volume III, Chapter 3; they are not of Highbury, and seem to come from another planet. Nor will we do more than allude to the fact that Austen was completing her final draft of *Emma* in March 1815 while Napoleon was escaping from Elba and preparing for Waterloo.) Highbury, it has been argued, is a microcosm, but a microcosm of what?

It is a peculiarly insulated world, and although the longest of her novels, *Emma* is geographically more confined than any other Austen work. All its principal events, apart from a day's outing to Box Hill and a day at neighboring Donwell Abbey, take place in Highbury itself, and when Frank Churchill goes to London or Richmond he travels beyond our knowing. Jane Austen's habitual distrust of London society is parodied, but only slightly, in Mr. Woodhouse. Emma herself seems relatively happy to stay where she is; she has none of Elizabeth Bennet's longing to see men and mountains, none of Anne Elliot's active delight in a trip to Lyme Regis. Even the timid Fanny Price, with her unexpressed desire

to see Sotherton, is more of an adventurer than Emma, who has never seen the sea. The result should be claustrophobic, and some have found it so. Others have admired the extraordinary ingenuity with which commonplace events are rendered dramatic, and the riddles of human relationships are unravelled. (The book is full of riddles, guessing games, and word games.) But admiration for the plot can go hand in hand with certain impatience with its confines: Is that famous little piece of ivory here too small even for its author?

Great claims have been made for the profundity, range and moral content of *Emma*, but I must confess to finding it more and more ambiguous and unsatisfactory. Austen's attitude towards her quick and "clever" heroine (who is so often so slow) remains unresolved: sometimes she is indulged by the author, sometimes reprimanded, like the spoiled child Mr. Knightley believes her to be. The weight given to Emma's traditional and highly conservative social values or to her personal judgment is by no means clear. As we have seen, she finds it hard to tolerate Miss Bates, and she is jealous of Jane Fairfax, with whom she sees herself in competition. Her contempt for the Eltons is largely condoned by the author, but her sense of her own dignity with regard to the *nouveaux riches* Coles is mildly mocked. When she hears the Coles are giving a dinner she looks forward to refusing, and "regretted that her father's known habits would be giving her refusal less meaning than she could wish." When, however, no invitation arrives, she is disappointed, is irritated by the prospect of being "left in solitary grandeur, even supposing the omission intended as a compliment," and accepts with something like relief and alacrity when a "properly expressed" invitation finally arrives.

This is comedy, and at her expense. But what are we to make of her reflections as she views Mr. Knightley's home, Donwell Abbey? Here she is filled with "all the honest pride and complacency which her alliance with the present and future proprietor could fairly warrant," and she inspects the estate with "an increasing respect for it, as the residence of a family of such true gentility, untainted in blood and understanding." She reflects that her sister Isabella, in marrying Mr. Knightley's brother

John, had "connected herself unexceptionably. She had given them neither men, nor names, nor places that could raise a blush."

Is there also comedy at Emma's expense here? Are we to read through Emma's patronizing approval of her sister's choice of husband to her own half-formed intention of marrying Mr. Knightley and becoming the mistress of Donwell? Certainly her competitive instincts in this sequence are strongly roused by Mrs. Elton's possessive over-familiarity with "Knightley." Maybe this country house visit is intended as a comic counterpart to Elizabeth Bennet's clearly playful claim that she began to fall in love with Darcy when she first saw the riches of Pemberley? If so, the narrative is even more double-edged, more devious than it appears, and hedges its bets so thoroughly that it almost negates itself. There *are* ironies in Emma's attitude towards the property of Donwell, expressed in her occasional (and false) solicitude about her little nephew's inheritance, a solicitude that fades away as soon as she finds herself in line to produce heirs to inherit. But we cannot be sure that the language of "honest pride" and "untainted blood" is intended satirically. Donwell does indeed house, in Mr. Knightley, the values that Austen and Emma admire, and we are meant to share Emma's view that a Harriet Smith is unworthy of them. Emma's feelings, when she discovers that she has unwittingly encouraged Harriet to hope for Mr. Knightley's affection, are appalled and appalling, and the cruelty with which she behaves to her onetime friend is truly shocking. Harriet, with her tainted blood, unfortunate name, and lack of understanding, is despatched to London, out of reach of the reproach of Emma's conscience, and we can only forgive Emma because we know Harriet is shallow, fickle, and simple, and will soon be consoled. This, of course, does not begin to excuse or to explain why Emma found her company acceptable in the first place. For this, we must judge her, but it is by no means clear that her creator does. On the contrary, when we are told in the last chapter that Harriet is the daughter of a tradesman "decent enough to have always wished for concealment," there seems to be no mockery in the judgment that "the stain of illegitimacy, unbleached by nobility or wealth, would have

been a stain indeed." The double standards whereby "concealment" is wrong for Frank Churchill, but "decent" for a tradesman, are not even discussed. They are merely, baldly accepted, as is the curious nature of the "unbleached stain."

Emma is, of course, judged by Mr. Knightley for befriending and misleading Harriet, and for being rude to Miss Bates. His speech after Box Hill, when he reproaches Emma for her unkind wit, is one of the strongest in the book, as he reminds Emma that Miss Bates "is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more." But what really takes us aback here is neither Emma's thoughtlessness nor Mr. Knightley's imaginative compassion and consideration—it is the brutal nature of the society that they and their author all accept as a given fact. That phrase, "if she live to old age, must probably sink more," is casually if considerately uttered and frankly acknowledged as fair comment; it reminds us what life was like before the old-age pension. We have already seen, in the little vignettes of the Bates's domestic life, that they live very near the edge of discomfort, worried about heat and food and doctor's bills. Yet neither Mr. Knightley nor Emma questions the priorities of this world. Indeed, they uphold the distinctions of the past, and resent the threat to the established order represented by Mrs. Elton and the Sucklings of Maple Grove.

Even the extreme situation of Jane Fairfax does not suggest any way out of this narrow cul-de-sac of vision, or any shaking of the beliefs of its inhabitants. Jane, we are told, is extremely gifted as a musician; she is highly educated and highly intelligent. Yet the only prospect conceived for her by herself, her author, or her relatives is to become a governess, a fate always painted by Austen in grim tones, and here perhaps more grimly than ever. Jane refers to the agencies that find posts for people like herself as "offices for the sale—not quite of human flesh—but of human intellect" and compares the governess trade to the slave trade. (Agitation against the slave trade was already widespread: agitation against the exploitation of governesses did not begin in earnest for another forty years.) Emma, although she does not like Jane, is disturbed by what appears to be her fate, and