EUROPEAN ACADEMIC RESEARCH
Vol. I, Issue 9/ December 2013

ISSN 2286-4822
www.euacademic.org

Impact Factor: 0.485 (GIF)
DRJI Value: 5.9 (B+)

The Economic Policy of Romance: Jane Austen's *Emma*

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Abstract:

Emma *is, in a sense, exceptional among Jane Austen's novels because its heroine is endowed with significant economic, familial and social advantages which are denied to the other Austenian heroines. With the exception of Mr Knightley, Emma rules her household and neighbourhood. Her rule continues throughout and is reinforced at the closure of the novel through her marriage with Mr Knightley. As a representative of the landed gentry, Emma has almost nothing to do to fill up the ennui and boredom of the landlocked Highbury society. Therefore, leisure management becomes her chief concern; she starts arranging and imagining matches. But Emma herself is confident that she will never marry. Emma seems to share her creator's avarice of marriage which was supposed by Austen to have ruined the freedom and happiness of a lady. Austen could 'afford' to remain a spinster but for women in general in her time marriage was the only option to live honourably. From one of her letters written to her sister Cassandra we understand that Austen was fully aware of the immense economic pressure that compelled the spinsters to choose between poverty and matrimony. And yet marriage was the beginning of the end for many young women whose emotion, intellect, health and life itself were at stake as an aftermath of marriage. Although fiction is silent on certain biological details of life, other evidence of the time tells us of the inexorable cycle of annual pregnancies interrupted by frequent miscarriages that most married women had to go through. It is against such background that Emma Woodhouse's marriage with John Knightley becomes so significant and exceptional an event. In* Emma *Austen rewrites the traditional romantic version of femininity mainly through the figure of its heroine. Much earlier Austen had expressed her anxiety about Emma's being not so favourite with her readers and critics. Subsequently we have seen that the prime objections against Emma have actually been prompted by her transgressing the gender*

role. But it is possible to suggest that the novel explores not only Austen's presentation of positive versions of female power but also how Emma and Knightley's equal standing are finally readjusted through their marriage, in a way which is radically different from the traditionally accepted tutor-pupil relationship between Mr and Mrs John Knightley.

Key words: Jane Austen, Emma, femininity, marriage, gender role, female power

Emma (1816) was Jane Austen's last novel to be published during her lifetime (1775—1817). Austen started writing this novel in January 1814 immediately after the completion of *Mansfield Park*; immediately after finishing *Emma* in March 1815, Austen started *Persuasion*, the last complete work she composed. In December 1815 *Emma* was published in three volumes and within the next year she completed *Persuasion*, retrieved the manuscript of an earlier, unpublished novel entitled "Susan" from its publisher Crosby, reworked on it and transformed it into *Northanger Abbey*. It was in 1816, that Austen's health started withering. She was suffering from persistent back pain, weakness and fatigue. She was contracted with Addison's disease, tuberculosis of the kidneys. Time was running out fast. Austen, however, decided to carry on; in January 1817 she started a new novel entitled "Sandition". She could not complete this one. Austen lived the most fruitful years (1809—'17) of her literary life at Chawton in a household where there was not a single male member. She used to live with her mother Cassandra, a spinster sister bearing her mother's name, her friend Martha Lloyd and her relative James's daughter Cassy. In such an all female domesticity Austen shaped all her works and re-shaped at least two – *Pride and Prejudice* (composed in 1797 as "First Impressions") and *Northanger Abbey* (composed in 1798—9 as "Susan"). However, while she was alive none of her novels bore Austen's name. *Emma* was "By the Author of 'Pride and Prejudice' " and her first novel *Sense and Sensibility* was published as "a novel by a Lady".

These facts and statistics, when taken together, give us the ambivalent picture of an independent, confident, talented and workaholic person who preferred a cloistered life. Her secluded life and choice of a restricted locale and milieu as the subject of her work have given rise to popular misconceptions about her. Perhaps the most widely circulated of those is that her chief literary concerns were marriage and match-making. Austen's works have long been considered to be without any serious idea and ideology and she has been portrayed as a storytelling aunt who never took her literary career seriously. This myth could easily be seen through by considering her intense literary activity during the final years at Chawton. She was aware of and represented some, though not all, of the socio-economic problems of her time in her novels. At the same time, this should be admitted, Austen deliberately remained silent about or even denied the existence of some significant socio-economic issues which are either disguised, mystified or decidedly absent in her works.

In this essay I would like to concentrate on marriage because it is one of the phenomena along with balls and courtships, which make the novel appear like a romantic tale of love. *Emma* is in a sense preoccupied with marriage; it opens with the reference to the marriage of Miss Taylor, Emma's former governess and Mr Weston. In its course it projects three more – those of Mr Elton and Jane Fairfax and Robert Martin and Harriet Smith. It concludes with the marital union of John Knightley and Emma Woodhouse. Apart from such a large number of marriages in its plot, the novel has considered other matches, mostly the results of Emma's imaginary match-making tendency. In spite of dealing with such emotionally charged content in her work, Austen manages to analyze emotional bonds from a precisely objective and rational standpoint. This becomes possible, as Arnold Kettle has pointed out, for "her [Austen's] almost complete lack of idealism, the delicate and unpretentious materialism of her outlook. Her judgment is based… always on the actual facts and aspirations

of her scene and people. The clarity of her social observation (the Highbury world is scrupulously seen and analysed down to the exact incomes of its inmates) is matched by the precision of her social judgments" (Kettle 1963, 114—5). Wealth, status and common sense are the determiners in marriage; mutual attraction has a lesser role to play in the making up of the conjugal bonds which are evidently pragmatic. One of the key factors behind this was the eighteenth century sensibility that conditioned Austen's mind and art. Chronologically she was writing in the Romantic period but the striking truth about her novels is that they are deliberately de-romanticized. We would do better to assert that Austen succeeded to achieve a delicate balance between the head and the heart. And she shared, according to Margaret Kirkham, the convictions of Enlightenment feminism (Kirkham 1997, 134) that empowered her to portray extraordinarily eminent heroines like Emma whom she doubted her readers would not like much.

Emma is, in a sense, exceptional among Jane Austen's novels because its heroine is endowed with significant worldly advantages which are denied to the other Austenian heroines. From economic, familial and social points of view Emma stands unique: "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence" (Austen 1982, 19). Apart from possessing a considerable amount of personal wealth she is practically the head of the family when the novel begins. The memory of her long-deceased mother has faded into oblivion; her elder sister Isabella has been married off and settled in London leaving her the guardianship of the Woodhouse family. Unlike other Austen heroines, her family never stands in her way. Her former governess Mrs Weston, who has played a sort of surrogate mother to her, has been as indulging and non-interfering as her father Mr Woodhouse. With the exception of Mr Knightley, Emma rules her household and neighbourhood.

Her rule continues throughout and is reinforced at the closure of the novel through her marriage with Mr Knightley.

We will come back to Emma's rule later. Meanwhile, as a representative of the landed gentry, Emma has almost nothing to do to fill up the ennui and boredom of the landlocked Highbury society. Therefore, leisure management becomes her chief concern; she starts arranging and imagining matches. Such arrangements have, as we know from the text, their own tragi-comic aftermath that considerably shapes the ending of the novel. But Emma herself is confident that she will never marry. Emma seems to share her creator's avarice of marriage which was supposed by Austen to have ruined the freedom and happiness of a lady. In a letter dated 20—21 February 1817, Austen wrote to her niece Fanny Knight on the impending perils of the latter's marriage:

> You [Fanny] are inimitable, irresistible. You are the delight of my Life. … It is very, very gratifying to me to know you so intimately. You can hardly think what a pleasure it is to me, to have such thorough pictures of your Heart. – Oh! what a loss it will be, when you are married. You are too agreeable in your single state, too agreeable as a Niece. I shall hate you when your delicious play of Mind is all settled down into conjugal and maternal affections. Mr J. W. frightens me. – He will have you. – I see you at the Altar. (Austen 1995, 328—9)

But among Austen's heroines Emma stands, as we have already pointed out, as an exceptional creation. Austen could 'afford' to remain a spinster but for women in general in her time marriage was the only option to live honourably. From her letter to her sister Cassandra written on the 13th March, 1816 we understand that Austen was fully aware of the immense economic pressure that compelled the spinsters to choose between poverty and matrimony. Death of Jane Austen's father George Austen in 1805 left his widow and two unmarried daughters (Jane and Cassandra) with a yearly income of 200 pounds which was insufficient, and an equal amount was contributed by Austen's brothers to keep the family going modestly (Noakes 1997, 274—5). Austen's income from her writings, which was less than 1500 pounds during and after her

lifetime, was a welcome supplement to this family (Gray 2002, 405). And of yet marriage was the beginning of the end for many young women whose emotion, intellect, health and life itself were at stake as an aftermath of marriage.

With her comfortable back up of 30,000 pounds Emma could luxuriate in a thought of leading a life of spinster. In Austen's novels marriage has been presented as an elaborately ritualistic art followed by proposal, courtship, balls and dinners. But beneath all these, marriage meant a huge anxiety for the ladies as Meenakshi Mukherjee explains in *Re-reading Jane Austen:*

> Jane Austen ascribes to her heroines rationality and sense – and sometimes even wit and good humour – to convince the reader about the positive potential of their marriages. But, mercifully, the convention demanded a closure at that point, because there is one consequence of matrimony from which even Jane Austen's ironic mediation could not have protected her heroines if she had to follow their careers after marriage. Although fiction is silent on the messy biological details of life, other evidence of the time tells us of the inexorable cycle of annual pregnancies interrupted by frequent miscarriages that most married women had to go through. In late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century England, one child in every four was still-born, and 50 per cent died before they reached the age of two. (Mukherjee 1995: 33)

Mukherjee refers to Austen's shock and pity as expressed in one of her letters occasioned by the news of one of her nieces' conceiving once again (ibid). Such relentless cycle of pregnancies withered out women physically; they lacked vitality, immunity and not infrequently, this vicious cycle ended with the death of the mother during pregnancy or childbirth. In *Emma*, there are at least two references which are indicative of two types of hazard / danger the married women had to go through. Emma's sister Isabella has five children in her seven years' married life. The case of Emma's long-deceased mother should also be taken into account – she too might not have been

released from this incessant chain of pregnancies had she not died, presumably at an early age, just after the birth of Emma. We may conjecture that she might not have recovered completely from the damage that childbearing induced.

It is against such background that Emma Woodhouse's marriage with John Knightley becomes so significant and exceptional an event. In *Emma* Austen rewrites the traditional romantic version of femininity mainly through the figure of its heroine. Emma is widely believed to have undergone a process of education and purification guided by Mr Knightley who is her only critic. At this point, against traditional critical views, Margaret Kirkham reminds us that if we fail to notice the subtle and balanced form in which Austen arranges the virtues and vices of her heroine and hero – their class prejudice and generosity – we will not be able to understand Austen's feminism: "As the novel unfolds, the education of hero and heroine, about themselves and one another as moral equals, is shown in a way which subverts the stereo-type in which a heroine is educated by a Hero-Guardian" (Kirkham 1997, 138). The logical extension of this point culminates in celebrating what we have pointed out earlier as Emma's rule.

Much earlier Austen had expressed her anxiety about Emma's being not so favourite with her readers and critics. Subsequently we have seen that the prime objections against Emma have actually been prompted by her transgressing the gender role. None of Austenian heroines is in so privileged socio-economic position as Emma who is in command not only of her own life but also of those belonging to her close circle. This has offended almost all of Emma's male critics even as late as the mid and late twentieth century (Johnson 2000, 402—4) and therefore the interpretation that has long been predominant in the discussions on Emma's character is that she is ultimately cured of her snobbery, short-sightedness and other deficiencies through her marriage with John Knightley who appears as her mentor. But *Emma* is not only about Emma's education; it is possible to suggest that at the end of the novel, or even before it

concludes, what Emma, and Knightley, learns is that they have been so alike each other ethically as well as ideologically. Claudia L. Johnson's reading of the novel explores not only Austen's presentation of "positive versions of female power" (Johnson 2000, 404) but also how Emma and Knightley's equal standing are finally readjusted through their marriage, in a way which is radically from the traditionally accepted tutor-pupil relationship between Mr and Mrs John Knightley:

> In order to secure Emma's prestige and the prerogative that comes with it, the ending of *Emma* turns back on the very outlines it seems to confirm. Mr. Knightley himself avers, "A man would always wish to give a woman a better home than the one he takes her from" … . But while Donwell Abbey is surely "a better home" than Hartfield, *Emma* closes by deferring Knightley's wish indefinitely to a time none wish to hasten — that is to say, until Mr. Woodhouse's death. As Emma well knows, Knightley's move into Hartfield is extraordinary considering his own power and independence … .The conclusion which seemed tamely and placidly conservative thus takes an unexpected turn […]. In moving to Hartfield, Knightley is sharing *her* home, and in placing himself within her domain, Knightley gives his blessing to her rule. (412—3)

Emma's marriage with Knightley is a typical case where the emotional contents of marriage are evidently less important than financial prospects. Pragmatic issues are of prime importance to Emma as she considers, in Chapter 51, the pros and cons of her marriage and Knightley's shift to Hartfield: "It is remarkable that Emma, in the many, very many, points of view in which she was now beginning to consider Donwell Abbey, was never struck with any sense of injury to her nephew Henry, whose rights as heir expectant had formerly been so tenaciously regarded. Think she must of the possible difference to the poor little boy" (Austen 1982, 351—2).

Thus, marriages are not made in heaven, at least in Austen's fiction which is decidedly deromanticized, pragmatic and definitely shaped by the eighteenth century sensibility. At

the height of her literary power, in a household consisting of only female members, Austen created Emma as an exceptionally empowered, from the point of view of class as well as gender, heroine whose "perfect happiness of the union" (Austen 1982, 378) must be understood in mundane, material terms.

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