Apollo flies, and Daphne Holds the Chase:

The Novelistic Rewriting of Ovid (and Shakespeare) in Austen’s Emma

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Abstract

If, as critics have noted, Austen’s Emma is a re-imaging of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, then it is also in dialogue with Ovid’s Metamorphoses, one of the main subtexts in Shakespeare’s comedy. The novel can indeed be read as an inversion of the Apollo and Daphne tale, as the heroine assumes in succession the roles of all three protagonists: Daphne, Apollo and Cupid. In Ovid’s tale, which is meant to account for the birth of poetry, Apollo loses his love in order to gain his voice. By contrast, Austen’s heroine has to give up her voice (or creative imagination) in order to become a lover. Emma’s metamorphosis is mirrored in the narrative strategies that Austen employs in order to eventually silence her heroine. The author’s gesture, finally, is emblematic of the type of transformation that Austen brings to the novel as a genre, by placing at its core what Walter Scott has described as the “mundanity of everyday life.”

Keywords: Emma, Ovid, Apollo and Daphne, elegy, realist novel.

In the ninth chapter of Austen’s Emma, the heroine is under the illusion of having triumphed in her second matchmaking attempt. Mr. Elton’s contribution to Harriet’s book of charades seems to be a declaration of love, “a prologue to the play, a motto to the chapter” to be soon followed by “matter-of-fact prose” (74). “The course of true love never did run smooth,” she quotes knowingly from A Midsummer Night’s Dream and adds: “A Hartfield edition of Shakespeare would have a long note on that passage” (75). Even though this is a moment of structural irony in the novel, Emma’s authorial comment should be taken seriously. The reference is unmistakably to the three-volume work bearing her name, whose reception — as the author had predicted while composing it — would not run smooth. Jocelyn Harris has argued that Emma is a rewriting of Shakespeare’s comedy. If this be the case, then it is also, by default, a rewriting of the play’s main subtext: Ovid’s Metamorphoses.

1 John Wiltshire, who provides a useful overview of scholarship on Austen and Shakespeare, argues that this is an instance of Austen “imaginatively rivaling her great predecessor” (222). Of special interest is also Daniel Pollack-Pelzner’s discussion of Austen as a “prose Shakespeare” (763-792), in which the critic explores the role of Shakespeare and his creative reception in the development of free indirect discourse.

2 I do not know of any systematic study that examines the possible influence of Ovid on Jane Austen, though critics make sporadic references to tales from the Metamorphoses. Samuel Johnson, whose works Austen knew very well, used several excerpts from Ovid, including Ovid’s Metamorphoses, as mottos to his Rambler essays (see Robert C. Olson’s article “Samuel Johnson’s Metamorphosis of Ovid”). By the end of the eighteenth century quite a few English translations of the Metamorphoses, or parts of the work, had been published, including the one by Arthur Golding (1565-1567) available to Shakespeare as well, that of George Sandy (1621-1626), and the 1717 collective one, put together by Samuel Garth (with contributions from Dryden and Pope). For a more comprehensive list and a discussion of Ovid in English translation, see Raphael Lyne, “Ovid in English Translation.” Stuart Gillespie and Robert Cummings also list an abridged version of the epic addressed especially to women (Ovid’s Metamorphoses epitomized in an English poetical style. For the use and entertainment of the ladies of Great Britain, 1760). For all quotations from the Apollo and Daphne tale, I am using the 1833 two-volume edition that reproduces the 1717 Metamorphoses translation (the edition includes the Epistles). The translation of the First Book is Dryden’s.

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I propose a reading of *Emma* as an inverted version of the Apollo and Daphne tale, in which the main character assumes all three main parts: those of Daphne, Apollo and Cupid. I will argue that Emma’s development marks a passage from her initial role as a poet to that of a lover; that this shift is echoed in the author’s narrative choices; and that the heroine’s metamorphosis is emblematic of the kind of transformation that Austen brings to the novel as a genre.

Let me go back to the very scene where the novelist gives us the clue for her sources. Emma possibly misunderstands the quote—as Austen often “allows even cherished works to be mangled by less perceptive readers” (Stabler 48). She thus appropriates Lysander’s words to suggest that what she perceives as an idyll between Harriet and Mr. Elton will uneventfully yield to a marriage thanks to her intervention. The Hartfield edition (*Emma*) will prove her wrong and right at the same time. Arguably, true love does not run smooth in *Emma*, as it does not run smooth in any of Austen’s novels. In fact, the course of true love in the novel follows the Shakespearean pattern: characters are bewitched and disenchanted, before their “true” love is eventually acknowledged, restored and returned. Thus, the novel ends with three marriages between people who, we assume, were meant for each other from the beginning: Emma Woodhouse and George Knightley, Harriet Smith and Robert Martin, Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax. Except for the last couple, however, who would have made the material for any of the other Austen novels, the first two make us puzzle over the question: why should their “true” love not run smooth since they are thrown together not only by sentiment, but also by birth, rank and circumstance? The answer, I contend, is that *Emma* is not really a novel about “true” love running against social constraints. It is a novel that thematizes the representation of love—or else representation itself. Then again, so are Shakespeare’s and Ovid’s works.

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is a study of transformation (of human as well as literary forms) and as such it depicts, above all, the creative struggle. Most transformations in the epic involve a process of sublimation through which the conflict between desire and reality, the ephemeral and the constant, is given artistic form. With his etiological narrative, the poet tries to explain the birth of things and, first and foremost, the birth of poetry. Hence the prominent position of the Apollo and Daphne tale which serves as an exemplum: Apollo has to lose his love (Daphne) in order to gain his voice and fame (the laurel). At the moment of his final address to Daphne, his song is aligned with that of his creator: “Be thou the prize of

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3 Among the examples Stabler gives is that of Mrs. Elton applying Gray’s *Elegy* to Jane Fairfax and Milton’s “L’ Allegro” to minor setbacks in her own marriage plans.

4 Susan Morgan has argued that it would be more fit and in line with Austen’s fiction to choose Jane Fairfax as her heroine (40-41). Commenting on Wayne Booth’s observation that Jane Fairfax is morally superior to Emma and that it was only through a stroke of fortune that Emma became the heroine of the novel, Harold Bloom maintains that Emma is a far more interesting heroine than Jane could ever be. “Austen,” he adds, “does not write a tragedy of the will, like *Paradise Lost*, but a great comedy of the will and her heroine must incarnate the full potential of the will, however misused for a time” (60).

5 See Andrew Feldherr’s most elegant exploration of metamorphosis in the *Metamorphoses* (163-179). Transformation, according to Feldherr involves both the subject matter and the work’s shifting generic affiliations, while it is also the dominant trope of representation.

6 As Lorch argues, the tale of Apollo is emblematic of the process of sublimation involved in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, through which human form turns into divine “through the miracle of art” (268).
honor and renown; / The deathless poet, and the poem, crown” (I.744-745). In this respect, the tale combines elements of the epic with the Roman elegy tradition (Feldherr 164).

Sublimation takes a different form in Shakespeare’s comedy. The reconciliation between desire and reality, poetry and love, is achieved through the introduction of the dream element. Nevertheless, the Pyramus-and-Thisbe play-within-the-play, which turns into a comedy that everyone, including the acting troupe, misunderstands, acts as a constant reminder of how “quick bright things come to confusion” (I.1.149) or else how much we are in need of bright things to keep away the confusion. The one and only reference to the Apollo and Daphne tale has the same function. When Demetrius, the former admirer of Helena, now in pursuit of Hermia, spurns and abandons his love “to the mercy of wild beasts,” Helena exclaims: “Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase” (II.1.231). The role inversion in this case certainly includes an element of parody as it overturns gender expectations—“We should be wooed and were not made to woo” (II.1.242)—and reminds us of genre conventions: unrequited love may be the material for a comedy, but it cannot hold to the end. The chase is bound to be successful.

Daphne, Apollo and Cupid

What makes Emma Woodhouse different from all of Shakespeare’s and Ovid’s heroines is that she is both the subject and the object of chase, and yet in another sense neither of the two. We are not dealing here with role inversion but with one character who assumes different roles—in parallel, or in succession. The affinities between Emma and Daphne are hard to miss. The “handsome” Emma, who joins “all the blessings of existence” and has lived “nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her” (5) resembles Diana’s rival (Daphne) who wanders happily in the groves with no care for a husband. In the opening chapters, her superior looks are praised by Mrs. Weston and Mr. Knightley who also observes that, considering her beauty, “she appears to be little occupied with it; her vanity lies another way” (39). Emma scorns her suitors and flirts with celibacy, although, as in the case of Ovid’s maiden, her form argues against her resolution. As Peneus warns his daughter in the Metamorphoses, “For so much youth and so much beauty join’d, / Opposed the state which her desires design’d” (I.656-657; cf. votoque tuo tua forma repugnant, I.489). This is precisely the case with Emma. “That you should not be married, or going to be married! so charming as you are!” (84), exclaims her naïve young protégé, Harriet Smith. The choice of adjective is important here: it is not only physical beauty that is stressed (as elsewhere in the novel), but Emma’s power of seduction. Emma charms most characters (and readers) with her ways—including her speech and creative powers—as well as with her figure.

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7 Charm derives from the Latin carmen (poem or song), which, incidentally, is placed at the opening of the Metamorphoses. According to Lorch, the carmen derives from the sacrifice of the human form (Daphne) and it is through this sacrifice that the nomen acquires its real significance and immortality in the song. Thus, Daphne’s transformation into a laurel signifies “the conquest of human time through the magic of the carmen” (270). In my reading of Emma, the opposite process seems to operate: it is the charm (the imagination, the poetic) that will have to be sacrificed for the heroine to retain her human form. The novel then affirms the reality of human time rather than aspiring to its conquest.

8 This is a point taken up by several critics. See, in particular, Roger Gard’s wonderful discussion of how Emma charms us as an “imaginist” (173-179).
There is yet another similarity between the two figures. Emma and Daphne both grow up motherless and develop a strong attachment to their fathers. It is to the river Peneus that Daphne pleads her case for virginity and it is Peneus who eventually transforms her into a tree to save her from the wild lover. The father yields to her daughter’s plea, despite his desire for her to marry and give him grandchildren. On the other hand, Mr. Woodhouse—the wonderful Mr. Woodhouse who is averse to any change, eats his bowl of gruel every day and thinks of matrimony as the origin of all evil—wants to keep his daughter to himself. In a slightly different vein, Shakespeare’s Egeus forbids his daughter’s marriage to Lysander on what seems little more than a moment’s whim, since the man whom he wants Hermia to wed, Demetrius, is of the exact same social status as his rival. Following Hermia’s refusal to obey, Theseus announces her only alternatives: “Either to die the death, or to abjure / For ever the society of men” (I.1.65-66) by becoming a nun. In all three cases then, the father figure seems to either desire or warrant the daughter’s celibacy.

Emma, however, also takes the role of Apollo, the god of poetry and of prophecy. This side of her is emphasized by the quickness of her spirit in solving charades and word games. Most importantly, she takes pride in her ability to interpret signs and to predict the future, particularly when this involves love matches. In this, she is encouraged by her father’s flattering comments: “I wish you would not make matches or foretell things, for whatever you say always comes to pass” (12). Significantly, though, Mr. Knightley calls her predictions “lucky guesses” (13). Indeed, as it transpires, Emma is too confident in her guesses and often falls prey to them, just like Apollo who “hopes what he seeks, with fluttering fancies fed / and is by his own oracles misled” (I.659-660). A typical example is the scene where she thinks she has become “mistress of the lines” of Mr. Elton’s charade (72). Emma guesses correctly the meaning of the charade (courtship) but misattributes the two-line coda: “Thy ready wit the word will soon supply / May its approval beam in thy soft eye” (71). The lines are of course addressed to herself, and although she senses that the picture painted therein does not correspond to Harriet, she chooses to interpret it as a symptomatic of the lover’s blindness. The constant references to sight (the eyes) has an ironic undertone, particularly since the reader is probably in a position to attribute the lines correctly. It is not by accident that Mrs. Weston’s marveling at Emma’s “true hazel eye” earlier on (39) follows the description of Harriet’s “soft blue eyes” (23). The irony culminates in Emma’s suggestion to Harriet that she write down the charade, omitting the last two lines: “take it away, and all appropriation ceases” (77). Naturally, it does but the (mis)appropriation had been hers to begin with, and there is no end to the heroine’s blunders which are due to her shortsightedness. She receives several warnings but, like the god of light, is too confident in her own power of vision. When John Knightley, for instance, cautions her regarding Mr. Elton’s intentions towards her, she appears amused “in the consideration of the blunders which often arise from a partial knowledge of circumstances” (112), which of course applies to her case more than to any other (a number of characters, including Lysander, Demetrius, Helena and Hermia, suffer from the same plight in Shakespeare’s play).9

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9 The broader theme of the blinding power of love, common to Austen and Shakespeare, is not the immediate object of my concern here. I am rather interested in Emma’s role as a prophet. Concerning Shakespeare’s characters, one could argue that their blindness is often due to external circumstance (magic), whereas Emma’s is self-induced. Thus, Jocelyn Harris points out that changes in Emma result “not from magic, but from the
Like Apollo then, Emma falls prey to her own arrogance and self-certitude. In the beginning of Ovid’s tale, the god of light brags about his slaying of the Python and mocks Cupid for trying to use a bow. His mockery leads to his downfall. The god of Love avenges by making him suffer the pangs of unrequited love. The same sequence occurs in Austen’s novel. Early in the novel, in her attempt to defend Harriet’s attractions, Emma tells Mr. Knightley: “Were you yourself to marry, she is the very woman for you” (64), a comment she is to bitterly regret.

Finally, Emma emulates Cupid or Puck in her matchmaking attempts. Indeed, the vocabulary Austen uses in such scenes often recalls either Puck, the prankster, laying the magic juice upon sleeping eyelids and making “man or woman madly dote / Upon the next creature that it sees” (II.1.171-172), or the god of love fixing his target and monitoring the curb of his arrows. When it comes to Harriet, “Mr. Elton [is] the very person fixed on by Emma for driving the young farmer [Robert Martin] out of her head” (34). Consequently, she attempts to give her “fancy a proper direction” (42). In the portrait scene, Emma arranges the sitting in such a manner that the two lovers are stationed across each other. Overall, she is intent on fixing and channeling the lovers’ gaze, while at the same time controlling the current of all exchanges. The metaphors relating to movement, though, extend to her own fancy, which she herself admits after Mr. Elton’s humiliating marriage proposal: “She had taken up the idea, she supposed, and made every thing bend to it” (134). Thus, Emma ends up wounded by her own arrows. “Phoebus, thy shafts are sure on all beside; / But mine on Phoebus” (I.621-622), Cupid warns the god of light in Ovid. Playing the part of both Apollo and Cupid, Emma experiences her failure most painfully in the scene where she understands her own mind, after sitting silently “in a fixed attitude” for a few minutes: “It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!” (408).

Metamorphosis

Austen critics have argued that, even though Emma is full of faults, she eventually becomes likeable as she undergoes a process of moral regeneration. Others stress that she is likeable despite her faults or on account of them and that there is no development in her whatsoever. Though I would agree with the latter that Emma goes through a process of transformation, this does not, however, lead to moral regeneration. Emma’s metamorphosis is

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understandable result of unblinding caused by better knowledge of oneself and of others” (180-181). However, as Dent (115-118) has argued persuasively, the choices of Shakespeare’s lovers are hardly ever the product of their judgment; instead, they are dictated by their imagination since the beginning of the play.

10 As early as 1963, Walter F. Staton, Jr. pointed out that “in the fairy plot of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Shakespeare [is] drawing upon and to some extent parodying Ovid” (165) or rather Ovid’s imitators (177-178). Staton points out Puck’s affinities to Mercury as a messenger and a prankster. However, the hobgoblin is also directly associated with Cupid: acting in the orders of the King of Fairies, Oberon, Puck applies the magic petal juice to the characters’ eyes, causing them to fall in love with the first creature they happen to see when they awake. The flower whose petals are used for the production of this potion, referred to as “love-in-idleness,” is the pansy (Dent 119). According to Oberon, Cupid once shot an arrow at a “fair vestal” (the allusion is to Queen Elizabeth), but instead it pierced a flower, which turned “purple with love’s wound” (II.1.167). Just as Cupid misses his target, so does Puck fail to deliver his mission when he mistakes Lysander for Demetrius.

11 The fact was picked up in the 1996 Douglas McGarth film version of Emma, in the famous scene where Gwyneth Paltrow (Emma) and Jeremy Northam (Mr. Knightley) compete at archery.

12 As summarized by Tony Tanner, her entire chapter on Emma revolves around the question of the heroine’s attractions and the reasons for her likeability (176).
of a different kind. If Apollo has to lose his love in order to gain his voice, the inverse seems to be the case for Austen’s heroine. Emma starts out as a poet—as an artist, or as an authoress. In the beginning of the novel, she is presented as a Pygmalion-like figure who wishes to sculpt her young friend Harriet Smith, a girl who, as she says, wants:

only a little more knowledge and elegance to be quite perfect. She would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintance, and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and manners. It would be an interesting and certainly a very kind undertaking; highly becoming her situation in life, her leisure, and powers. (23-24)

The certainty which surrounds this “very kind undertaking” serves to underplay Emma’s real motive: this promises to be an interesting venture, and interesting is often the adjective used by Austen to describe fictional characters, including Emma. The venture is outlined in a manner that alludes to fiction: like a creative writer, Emma distills her material from the world. She “detach[es] Harriet from her bad acquaintance” and then introduces it into a new novelistic framework. Equally interesting is the coda to this resolution: the undertaking is most suitable for the rich, celibate and agile Miss Woodhouse who, not having to worry about her own marriage prospects, has the leisure to devote herself to her artwork. Indeed, it becomes an artwork when, in a following scene, Emma devises a scheme to paint Harriet’s full portrait as Mr. Elton stands by and makes himself useful by reading to them. She cannot help admiring her own first sketch:

There was no want of likeness, she had been fortunate in the attitude, and as she meant to throw in a little improvement to the figure, to give a little more height, and considerably more elegance, she had great confidence of its being in every way a pretty drawing at last, and of its filling its destined place with credit to them both – a standing memorial of the beauty of one, the skill of the other, and the friendship of both; with as many other agreeable associations as Mr. Elton’s very promising attachment was likely to add. (47)

The recurrence of the word “improvement” here is significant: Emma means to retouch Harriet’s figure, just as she means to improve her manners and social status. Equally significant is Mr. Knightley’s comment: “You have made her too tall, Emma,” where the double meaning is retained. Emma’s view of the portrait as a standing memorial to Harriet’s beauty and her own skill indicates how she would like to see herself: beauty, of which she has plenty, is not an attribute that interests her; what she wants to be praised for is her artistic skill: her ability to show things as they ought to be seen, or rather to fashion things as they ought to be arranged—since the portrait is meant to elicit Mr. Elton’s admiration of, and

13 Joseph Wiesenfarth argues that the scene is a parody of Ovid’s Pygmalion tale (207-220). He also contests that Emma finally “repudiate[s] the role of Pygmalion for that of Galatea,” a fact that shows that “she celebrates the education of a woman who has become the equal of the good and intelligent man who has been anxious for her” (213). My reading is different as will become clear (for one thing, I doubt that Emma ever assumes the role of Galatea).
marriage proposal to Harriet. Mr. Elton’s attachment will certainly be procured, although he prefers the skillful hand to the elegant figure. In this respect, one should note the shift in Emma’s notion of representation: as she advances in her work, the attempt to produce a likeness to the original gradually gives way. Fancy predominates as the young artist uses her medium to transform the original and, indeed, to transform people’s vision.

It is the same kind of impact that she exerts in the following scene, where she persuades Harriet to reject Robert Martin’s marriage proposal. As Harriet is sadly reduced to writing her letter of refusal, and though Emma continues “to protest against any assistance being wanted,” assistance is in fact “given in the formation of every sentence” (55). Mr. Knightley sees through this at once: “You saw her answer! you wrote her answer too” (60). Emma becomes the author of Harriet’s fortunes and misfortunes as she exercises both her writing skills and her authority over her friend and she continues to do so after her aborted first attempt. Following the incident of Frank Churchill saving Harriet from the gypsies, she conceives the idea of joining the two:

Such an adventure as this, – a fine young man and a lovely young woman thrown together in such a way, could hardly fail of suggesting certain ideas to the coldest heart and the steadiest brain. So Emma thought, at least. Could a linguist, could a grammarian, could even a mathematician have seen what she did, have witnessed their appearance together, and heard their history of it, without feeling that circumstances had been at work to make them peculiarly interesting to each other? – How much more must an imaginist, like herself, be on fire with speculation and foresight! – especially with such a ground-work of anticipation as her mind had already made. (335)

It is worth noticing here how the boundaries between the narrative voice and Emma’s perspective are blurred at first. The narrator subsequently opts for distance (“So Emma thought”) but also in a sense justifies her flight of fancy (“at least”). Emma is branded as an “imaginist,” a word coined by the author, precisely because she is able to discern, even anticipate, how “peculiarly interesting” a match between the two young people would be. At surface level, the reference to mathematicians and grammarians, human types whose thought is presumably dominated by reason and rule, stresses Emma’s overpowering imagination. It also suggests, however, that fiction too abides by its own rules and logic, which are irresistible. Even if the nouns “speculation” and “foresight” appear to be ironic, they are ultimately used to legitimize the fictional project.14

In contrast to the above characters, Emma retains more clearly her claims to authorship (perhaps because she is not so fond of reading). However, the limits are blurred in cases where her fancy stretches to portray herself as a fictional heroine. This is evident in excerpts where she fantasizes about Frank Churchill. Even before the two meet she is determined that he would be the only one to tempt her out of her celibacy:

14 Emma sees Harriet and Frank as protagonists in a romance, in a manner that recalls Catherine Morland in Northanger Abbey, Flaubert’s Emma Bovary, and the prototype of both, Cervantes’s Don Quixote, characters, that is, whose romance codes, whose “lives” indeed, are modelled upon those of their literary predecessors.
Now, it so happened that in spite of Emma’s resolution of never marrying, there was something in the name, in the idea of Mr. Frank Churchill, which always interested her. She had frequently thought – especially since his father’s marriage with Miss Taylor – that if she were to marry, he was the very person to suit her in age, character and condition. (118)

The language is very similar to what we have seen so far. The adjective “interesting” has now turned into a verb, suggesting an even more active role of the imagination. The phrase “There was something in the name, in the idea” certainly bespeaks of the novelistic potential of Mr. Frank Churchill. In retrospect, it recalls Proust’s fascination with names of places evoking, through the process of sound association, images of sites unseen (“Nom de pays: le nom”). The last phrase, “he was the very person to suit her . . .” echoes formulations that we have encountered in Emma’s matchmaking attempts. It is worthwhile to note that what makes the idea of Frank Churchill irresistible is his father’s marriage to Miss Taylor and this cannot be only due to their being thrown together by providence. Her governess’ marriage is, or so Emma thinks, a product of her own contriving, of the triumph of her imagination and foretelling.

Emma’s falling in love with Frank is presented as yet another flight of fancy that, significantly, occurs after their parting scene. The heroine is under the illusion that he has come close to making a declaration:

To complete every other recommendation, he had almost told her that he loved her . . . At present, she could not doubt his having a decidedly warm admiration, a conscious preference of herself; and this persuasion, joined to all the rest, made her think that she must be a little in love with him, in spite of every previous determination against it.

“I certainly must,” said she. “This sensation of listlessness, weariness, stupidity, this disinclination to sit down and employ myself, this feeling of every thing’s being dull and insipid about the house! – I must be in love; I should be the oddest creature in the world if I were not—for a few weeks at least.” (262)

The use of italics is perhaps Austen’s way of signaling that Emma is letting herself be deluded, a fact that is underlined through a series of other narrative indexes—“she could not doubt,” “this persuasion . . . made her think”—as well as the shift from psycho-narrative to quoted interior monologue, evident in the shift from third to first person and the use of inverted commas. What is fascinating in the excerpt is the fact that her diagnosis follows a novelistic protocol. The symptoms that she perceives recall stereotypical representations of a lover’s state, ones that abound in sentimental novels of the age. What is more, Emma’s

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15 See in particular the phrase “the very person” which recurs in the novel: Emma’s early comment to Mr. Knightley: “Were you yourself to marry, she is the very woman for you” (64); her matchmaking plan for Harriet and Mr. Elton: “Mr. Elton was the very person fixed on by Emma for driving the young farmer out of her head” (34); and the moment she conceives the idea of joining Harriet to Frank Churchill: “and now it had happened to the very person, and at the very hour, when the other very person was chancing to pass by to rescue her! – It certainly was very extraordinary!” (335).
conviction is based on her (false) perception of Frank himself being in love with her, a perception that flatters her narcissism. Arguably, then, the limitations to Emma’s fancy are really challenged not when she discovers her own blunders, but when she senses the incongruities between the process of representation and that of self-knowledge. This is precisely the case in her imaginary affair with Frank Churchill, as becomes evident in the following excerpt from the novel: “With Tuesday came the agreeable prospect of seeing him again . . . of guessing how soon it might be necessary for her to throw coldness into her air; and of fancying what the observations of all those might be, who were now seeing them together for the first time” (212). Emma has to both write and act the part of the indifferent lover, that is, Daphne. The great pleasure she derives from this is that of knowing the plot and being in a position of power with respect to both her imagined lover and her audience.\textsuperscript{16} Conversely, this deprives her of the ability to express, much less examine, her own feelings. What Emma suffers from, her lack of self-knowledge, can be summed up in her inability to relinquish her authority.

That very obsession with authority lies behind both Emma’s bouts of imagination and her resolution to remain unmarried. As mistress of Hartfield, she can desire nothing that she is not already in possession of. Fortune, employment and consequence are all hers, as she says, and she is the object of adoration of at least one man, her father (85).\textsuperscript{17} Refusing to subject her imagination to the understanding\textsuperscript{18} is her way of exercising authority not only over people but also over her feelings. That she does nurture unacknowledged feelings is corroborated in the aforementioned scene of her love epiphany:

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. A mind like her’s [sic], once open to suspicion, made rapid progress. She touched – she admitted – she acknowledged the whole truth. Why was it so much worse that Harriet should be in love with Mr. Knightley, than with Frank Churchill? Why was the evil so dreadfully increased by Harriet’s having some hope of a return? It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself! (407-408)

Although this is one of the best-known passages in \textit{Emma}, and one that has been extensively analyzed, I will call attention to the trite metaphor, which Austen rarely uses, implying that Emma has been hit by the arrow of love, Cupid’s arrow. It also implies that in this nineteenth century realistic novel arrows have been replaced by internal processes, where fancy and

\textsuperscript{16} Compare the reasoning she adopts with respect to the postponement of the ball: “The loss of the ball –the loss of the young man- and all that the young man might be feeling! – It was so wretched! . . . ‘I said it would be so,’ was the only consolation” (259).

\textsuperscript{17} For a discussion on how Emma differs from all of Austen’s characters in terms of situation, see Barbara Z. Thaden, “Figure and Ground: The Receding Heroine in Jane Austen’s \textit{Emma},” pp. 48-51.

\textsuperscript{18} The motif is introduced early on by Mr. Knightley: “She will never submit to anything requiring industry and patience, and the subjection of the fancy to the understanding” (37). The character attributes this to the early death of her mother, the only person who would be able to cope with her and keep her under her subjection. Note that mothers are conspicuously absent from \textit{A Midsummer Night’s Dream} as well. But although in Shakespeare it is the father figure (Egeus) who intervenes to curb his daughter’s whims and direct her judgment, in \textit{Emma} it is the (dead) mother figure who is assigned the role.
feeling are pitted against understanding and reason, although in this case we can only surmise which of those forces or combination thereof leads Emma to her epiphany. Ironically, though, nowhere is Emma’s obsession with authority articulated in a stronger manner than at this moment when she feels overcome by it: “Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!” (emphasis added). It is worth pondering on the role of sight and touch here, though the latter is only introduced through a metaphor. There is a difference between sight that fuels the imagination, which we also encounter in Ovid and Shakespeare, and the other, no less Shakespearean kind that feeds inner vision: “She saw it all with a clearness which had never blessed her before” (408)—and has the certainty of touch.\footnote{In Ovid’s tale, the two senses are at war with each other: as Apollo pursues Daphne, her sight flames up his desire. But the god longs to touch and to possess her, which he is only able to do once the woman has turned into a tree. On the other hand, sight is a central metaphor for love in \textit{A Midsummer Night’s Dream}, as opposed to many other Shakespearean works, including the sonnets and \textit{Romeo and Juliet} where there is a stronger interplay between the two senses (even when touch is forbidden).} Emma is transformed when she concedes to sacrificing her fancy in order “to touch” and “to admit.” The process also implies that she turns from subject to object of representation.

\textbf{Emma’s Silence}

This process of transformation is arguably mirrored in the different narrative strategies Austen uses in the novel, which are more complex than in any other of her works. Emma’s thought is systematically depicted with the use of interior monologue or free indirect discourse. However, even when Austen’s technique comes close to third-person limited narration, Emma’s perspective is always somehow filtered: the subtle comments of an omniscient narrator abound, as does the use of dialogue which enlarges our scope, and gradually, as we come to decipher the hidden subplot, the double ententes and structural ironies. One could claim then that the narrative follows and represents systematically Emma’s point of view, while reminding us of her misapprehensions and distortions.

On the other hand, there are scenes towards the end of the novel when we no longer hear Emma’s voice. When Mr. Knightley confesses his love, her reply is not even given in the form of indirect speech: “She spoke then, on being so entreated. – What did she say? – Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does” (431). This is the moment when the most outspoken and talkative of characters (with the exception of the notoriously garrulous Miss Bates) is reduced to silence. One senses Austen’s determination against complying with (some of) her readers’ horizon of expectations by having her heroine display an unwarranted flow of sentimentality. Nevertheless, Emma does instantly give up her authority, her creative powers, and perhaps her identity, as she is transformed into a lady who abides by social norms. She thus becomes once more the object of representation, but in a different sense this time. If, up to now, the author represents Emma’s delusions in her imaginative / authorial attempts, she now shows her abandoning all claims to authorship and reverting to standard role-playing. Naturally, Austen continues to depict her thoughts until the end, though in the final chapters Emma’s perspective alternates with that of other characters. Then again, at the outset, Emma is kept silent once more.

The shifting relationship between author, narrator and character in \textit{Emma} gives rise to multiple modes of irony that emerges not only from mutually exclusive perspectives, but
from different perspectives that merge or blur. An example is the opening of one of the early chapters (1.XI): “Mr. Elton must now be left to himself” (91). The phrase refers to both Emma’s thoughts as she knows that she should let him take initiative with Harriet, and to the needs of the narrative as Austen must move ahead and introduce John Knightley. As meaningless as the phrase might seem, it does point to a certain synergy among author, narrator and character, which cannot be easily dismissed. There are also moments when an even stronger identification seems to operate, as is the case in the following passage, where Mrs. Weston suggests the possibility of Mr. Knightley’s being in love with Jane Fairfax and Emma is abhorred at the thought of their marriage:

How would he bear to have Miss Bates belonging to him? – To have her haunting the Abbey, and thanking him all day long for his great kindness in marrying Jane? – “So very kind and obliging! – But he always had been such a kind neighbor!” And then fly off, through half a sentence, to her mother’s old petticoat. “Not that it was such a very old petticoat either —for still it would last a great while – and, indeed, she must thankfully say that their petticoats were all very strong.” (225)

Clearly, there is a kind of writing contest at stake here: Emma’s governess tries to outdo her pupil at the game of matchmaking. Each of them insists in her own version of Mr. Knightley’s prospects. I would argue, though, that the contest operates at a different level as well. Here is an odd moment where a character in a novel actually imitates the style of her author. One could compare her monologue with that of Miss Bates that follows shortly after: “he is, in the most obliging manner in the world, fastening in the rivet of my mother’s spectacles. – The rivet came out, you know, this morning. – So very obliging! . . . And, by the by, every body ought to have two pair of spectacles; they should indeed” (236). We come across plenty of such passages in Emma, where muffled voices in the surrounding produce a general hum. In all such cases, syntax and punctuation (dashes, exclamation marks, parenthetical clauses, unfinished sentences) are used to depict the ordinary flow of speech, underscoring the mundane which is at the very core of the novel. Implicitly, the heroine competes with the author: Emma emulates Austen’s aesthetic of representation. Those instances of identification alert us to the fact that Emma’s plague might in fact be shared by the author. Austen, too, has to sacrifice her creative imagination and claims to authorship to arrive at a more accurate representation of reality.

It must be briefly noted at this point that Emma is not the only “author” in the novel. As critics have noted, most of the characters fit the description of an “imaginist,” and this includes the valetudinarian Mr. Woodhouse and his daughter Isabella, Mrs. Weston, Frank Churchill, and Mrs. Elton. One could even claim that the plot of the novel twists and turns with every new arrival at Highbury, which produces either a new storyteller or fresh material for fiction. Most of the stories are left unfinished, like Emma’s paintings and the novels that she reads. In this respect, Emma seems modeled after Cervantes’s Don Quixote, arguably the

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20 Several critics comment on this technique. For a more recent and concise discussion see Adela Pinch’s “Narrative Voices: Gossip and the Individual” in her introduction to Emma (xv-xix); also, see Gard who views Miss Bates’s speeches as an experiment in direct representation (173-179).

21 For a more detailed discussion, see Harris, “Emma,” pp. 172-173.
first novel in the modern world which sets the example for the genre. The juxtaposition of multiple storytellers, languages and perspectives, together with the accumulation of Pygmalion-like figures, ultimately undermine the very notion of authorship and authority. Ironically, in the last lines of his novel Cervantes tries to cling on to his claim of authorship and assert his right of giving the story its final closure. This is not the case with Jane Austen. At the end of the novel, as Emma and George recede silently into the background, enter the muffled voices for their Bergomask dance. Interestingly enough, those are not the voices of the wedding guests, but of the uninvited well-wishers. The last person mentioned in *Emma* is a character who makes no physical appearance in the novel: Selina. Although her name could stir up sublime associations in some romantic souls, Mrs. Elton’s sister can only be the sublime signifier of common opinion: “Very little white satin, very few lace veils; a most pitiful business! – Selina would stare when she heard of it” (484).

Austen’s way of silencing Emma is emblematic of the way she attempts to efface her own voice from her novels. The novelist tries to relinquish her authority over her characters, over the world, over reality. This has a lot to do with what Walter Scott has perceived as the “new style of novel” that she introduces, a novel about the ordinariness, the mundanity of everyday life.22 By silencing the poet(ic), Austen turns the mundane into the exemplary. Virginia Woolf expresses it in a more elegant manner: “She wishes neither to reform nor to annihilate; she is silent; and that is terrific indeed” (176). She continues, saying that “she would not alter a hair on anybody’s head, or move one brick or one blade of grass in a world which provides her with such exquisite delight” (177).

If Austen’s novel is a rewriting of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, then it begs to be considered in light of Ovid, and in particular of the Apollo and Daphne tale, not only because of the common motifs and significant deviations, but also because of the opposing ways in which the works negotiate representation. Taking everything into consideration, one could argue that Ovid’s Apollo and Daphne tale depicts the process of sublimation wherein the pangs of despised love give birth to the elegiac poet. As the god of prophecy loses his love, he gains his lyre and his voice is aligned with that of his maker. Shakespeare’s comedy resolves the conflict between reality and desire (or the imagination) by appealing to “fairy grace” (Dent 120) and our ability to dream. The poet’s fancy in this case merges with that of his characters and audience.24 It seems to me that in *Emma*, there is no sublimation taking place despite the novel’s comic elements and its “happy ending.” Life continues its natural course and both characters and makers, lovers and poets, are absorbed into it. What survives are the muffled voices that whisper the only truths that can be universally acknowledged, for example that proper weddings call for lots of white satin and lace veils, or “that a single man

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22 From Walter Scott’s anonymous review of *Emma* in the *Quarterly Review* 14 (October 1815).

23 Barbara Thaden makes a similar point, though she concludes that Austen chose to show the world through Emma’s perspective to avoid writing an overly sentimental novel that would “overpower her sense of humour entirely” and to depict with a sense of irony “the society that apotheosizes her” (58).

24 I am not disclaiming here the dark undertones that persist until the end of the play or the ambivalence that surrounds the status of the fairies. In Ronald F. Miller’s words, “literary symbols are not so easily separated from the realities to which they point” (256). Nevertheless, there is a kind of sublimation taking place at the end of the play and even a suggestion to the audience that they “have but slumbered here / While these visions did appear” (V.1.415-416).
in possession of a good fortune must be in need of a wife.” The author too is in a sense effaced by the narrative, reduced as she is to an ironic filter. Contemporary readers of Emma seeing her name on the cover of the work might of course take it as her claim to authority/authorship. However, Jane Austen’s signature did not appear in print during her lifetime. The only place where she signs is at the work’s dedication, featured after the title page: “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 servant, the author.” One could hardly be tempted to read this as the poet’s claim to the laurel.

Works Cited


25 The opening sentence of Pride and Prejudice (3).
26 I do not wish to refute critics such as Celia A. Easton who, by bringing forth the metaphorical language of sexual assault in Emma, has argued that Austen “seeks to confound the silencing of women’s voices”. What I argue, instead, is that Austen’s irony is, precisely, grounded on silence and that it most often carries an implicit criticism.


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