Higher Stakes in *Emma*

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the class struggle that Jane Austen depicts is tricky and vague as people try to redefine gentility and decide what it takes to be an aristocrat. The fight becomes much more fierce in *Emma*. The middle class is continuing to rise and the slippery definition of gentility that Austen establishes in *Pride* is even more unstable in *Emma*. In *Pride*, it is innate, exhibited in an "air" or "manner," but in *Emma* social status is entirely based on the "consideration of the neighborhood" (108). The changes in the social order between *Pride* and Emma make staying on top of the Highbury social ladder very difficult, and signal a greater change in the mindset of the middle class toward a more equal society.

This social order makes it harder to get away with indecent behavior, because moral character is the basis for judgment. George Wickham almost manages to pass off his false gentility, but his lower social status absorbed some of the scandal of his duplicity. Frank Churchill, however, is a gentleman, and that makes his fraud much worse. By deceiving all of Highbury about his relationship to Jane Fairfax, and then still treating her poorly, he overturns the definition of gentility that Elizabeth and Darcy worked so hard to figure out in *Pride*. In his deceit, Frank risks not only his reputation, but also his social standing in Highbury. If Frank acts in a less genteel manner than Robert Martin, who rides all over the country just to get walnuts for Harriet, then the social hierarchy is in trouble. Robert Martin is a farmer, and therefore can't possibly be more of a gentleman than a Churchill. A gentleman who does not behave like a gentleman will not be considered a gentleman by his neighbors.

Because moral character is such a relative standard for judgment, the social hierarchy in Highbury is much more volatile than in Hertfordshire. In *Pride*, Caroline Bingley feels secure in the fact that her brother's fortune places her firmly above Elizabeth and will allow her to

continue to climb the social ladder. However, Caroline only obtained her place the hierarchy in Pride is also beginning to fall. This means that Elizabeth has an opportunity to make a social jump just like the Bingley family. This makes Caroline feel threatened, so she does not show any real friendliness to Elizabeth. But she also never directly insults her. The conversation at the card party is full of Caroline's snide hints that Elizabeth is inferior because she could never measure up to the standard of accomplishment that she and Darcy have constructed. The only time Caroline blatantly insults Elizabeth is at the end of the novel, when she comments, "I must confess that I never could see any beauty in her" (181), and she does it neither to Elizabeth's face nor in front of a large group of people. It is part of a private conversation with Darcy. On the other hand, Emma snubs Miss Bates not only openly and in front of all their friends, but also betrays a long friendship in doing so. Miss Bates, even though she talks a lot, does not know how to use language to socially elevate herself—the language that should be her best tool is actually her greatest embarrassment. She is not a threat to Emma, yet Emma uses this disadvantage to further humiliate her.

The basis of the social order changes from an innate "special something" *Pride* to conversation and opinions in *Emma*. Caroline Bingley relies on others on her class level, and her father's fortune to validate her status. Emma also comes from new money, but she only holds her place at the top of her village's hierarchy because her neighbors put her there and think highly enough of her that they allow her to stay there. In *Pride*, the aristocracy and the gentility decide who goes where on the social ladder based on their "air." Caroline, therefore, can afford to miss a party held by her inferiors, and would probably be more offended at being invited than not. On the other hand, Emma's place in Highbury is so dependent on what others say about her that she cannot afford to snub her neighbors. She looks forward to receiving an invitation to the Coles'

party so that she can refuse it and teach the Coles that "it was not for them to arrange the terms on which the superior families would visit them" (161). But when the invitation does not come, she realizes that the Coles have taken "the power of refusal" from her (161). They, and the rest of Highbury, see themselves as equal to Emma; they have obtained their social status the same way her father did before she was born. She sees that her position is entirely dependent on her neighbors and, in her mind, the Coles' failure to invite her shows that they don't see her as superior to them. She panics because she realizes that if she does not attend the party, she will not get to dictate the conversation that determines the social hierarchy, and, more importantly, she will not avoid being talked about herself. Not being at the party would mean not being able to reassert her position above the Coles.

The real threat to Emma's social power is Jane Fairfax. Her status as a future governess makes her social path very downwardly mobile, and also makes her "very accomplished and superior" (83). This worries Emma, because she realizes that if someone as socially doomed as Jane can possess all the accomplishment and superiority of an aristocratic woman, then nothing really distinguishes Jane from Emma, and there is almost nothing that can stop Jane from overtaking Emma in the social hierarchy. Nothing is really holding Emma up above all of her neighbors. To top it all off, Emma cannot control what everybody else thinks of Jane, and this puts her at the risk of being considered equal or inferior to Jane. However, Emma does not do a lot to ensure Jane's downfall or control her social mobility. She relies on the assurance of Jane's lot as a governess and even resolves to befriend her and show her "greater attention" (228). Emma is so convinced that Jane's status is fixed forever, that she does not feel threatened by her and makes no move to control her. In *Pride*, it is the lack of accomplishment that worries Caroline Bingley. She only saw Elizabeth as a threat because she saw that Darcy was willing to

change the definition of accomplishment and gentility that Caroline worked so hard to establish at the beginning of the novel. Elizabeth is hardly accomplished and Caroline takes comfort in that fact until Darcy is willing to overlook it. Once the definition of gentility is opened to include unaccomplished young ladies, it becomes clear that the things Caroline has done to ensure her status no longer matter.

Mrs. Elton also sees Jane Fairfax as a threat, but, unlike Emma, Mrs. Elton does something about it. This is evident in the way that she constantly talks about Jane and tries to convince Jane to get a job as a governess. Mrs. Elton knows that the only ways to secure Jane's status are through marriage or a job, and until either happens Jane has a good chance of rising through the ladder just as Mrs. Elton herself is trying to do. As long as Jane remains in Highbury, she is a threat to Mrs. Elton. She promises to "be always on the watch…that nothing really exceptional may pass us," because she would hate to miss a good opportunity to be rid of Jane (236). From the moment Mrs. Elton arrives in Highbury, she understands how the social hierarchy works, and she is determined to manipulate it in her favor. Her marriage to Mr. Elton is similar to Charlotte's in *Pride*: socially, it does almost nothing for her except to ensure that she does not end up like Miss Bates. However, unlike Charlotte, Mrs. Elton sees the social hierarchy crumbling around itself and sees that as an opportunity to bring herself to the top. She knows the power of language in defining social status, which is why she tries to talk Jane into a job. She frequently brings up her brother-in-law's estate and fortune, hoping that by mentioning them, she will be allowed to take a high spot in Highbury society. She slips up, however, during her conversation with Mr. Weston, by saying that her sister is "no fine lady" (240). She realizes that she has given Mr. Weston the wrong impression of her sister, and that he may think Selina undeserving of the Maple Grove estate because she is not "fine." If that was the case, then Mrs.

Elton's social standing in Highbury would be compromised, because she had worked so hard to achieve it on the basis of her sister's status.

Mrs. Elton's conversation with Mr. Weston shows that the words of others are what now define the social hierarchy, as well as how convoluted the language that defines the hierarchy has become. The word "fine" has two meanings in the conversation: of a good moral character, or of a good, aristocratic family. This leads to confusion between Mrs. Elton and Mr. Weston (240). Social standing is no longer innate or inherited, and members of the upper class are no longer the only ones who can possess aristocratic qualities. The only thing that determines a person's place is how others think of them, and those opinions can change at the drop of a hat. Emma's social world is much less permanent than the world of Elizabeth and Darcy in *Pride.*

It is no accident that this conversation occurs with Mr. Weston. Like the Gardiners the Westons are the source of most of the social mixing in the novel. Even though they have an interest in a relaxed social ladder, they are also very conscious of their place on it, and are very unwilling to give it up. Mr. Weston and Mrs. Elton fight hard for a turn to speak about their wealthy relatives during their conversation—at one point, he jumps in when she is "stopped by a fit of coughing" (242). While Mr. Weston regales her with an account of his aristocratic family, Mrs. Elton takes the opportunity to remind him of her sister's status and estate. Mr. Weston and Mrs. Elton recognize each other as powerful people in Highbury society, who each have some control over the hierarchy, and each is unwilling to give up the place they have won.

At the end of the *Emma* Austen allows the situation in Highbury to return to calm down a little, but things will not go back to normal. Emma's marriage to Mr. Knightley secures her spot at the top of the hierarchy, but the rest of the novel has shown that the hierarchy is crumbling and soon marriage to a poor aristocrat will not mean much. True to form, the Westons have

overlooked the social jump that Jane Fairfax makes in her marriage, and gladly welcome her into their family. The fact that Jane's elegance and superiority once endangered Emma's no longer matters, because once she is married, Jane will no longer be a part of the Highbury social circles. Some conflict still exists, however, between Emma and Mrs. Elton. Austen makes it very clear that Mrs. Elton was not invited to the wedding, and had to hear about everything from her husband. She makes sure to tell everyone that it was "extremely shabby and very inferior to her own," and that her rich sister would never approve of it (381). Emma believes herself so fixed in her new social status that she does not need lace and finery to convince everyone else of her station. She has nothing to prove to anyone anymore. But Emma should feel more worried than ever, not secure in her marriage. The meaning of gentility is changing, and it will never go back to what it was before, in the time of *Pride*. Like the new social order, Mrs. Elton is a permanent fixture in the village landscape, and she will not stop trying to convince her neighbors that she deserves to sit on the throne of Highbury. Soon, not even being married to a land-owning aristocrat will save Emma from her neighbors.

Works Cited

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