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Prof. Richard Cronin, University of Glasgow

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8. Emma and Harriet: Walking Companions

The aspect of *Emma* which has always disturbed me, and made me keep company with those readers whom Jane Austen imagined would not like a heroine whom she herself liked very much, is Emma’s friendship with Harriet, which involves her from the start in unwarranted intrusion into the life of another woman, and an assumption of her right to launch such an invasion that I have always found shocking and almost frightening. But Mark Twain, who did not, of course, like Jane Austen, tells us that if we’re afraid of something the best thing is to take a good hard look at it—and that is what I have tried to do in preparing for this talk, which will examine the way the novel presents Emma and Harriet’s relationship, the way it treats Emma’s notions of friendship, and in particular the way it looks at the usefulness of friends as ‘walking companions’ (I iv 25). Emma, I don’t need to remind you, has begun the novel by losing her oldest, dearest friend, Miss Taylor, to marriage. At the novel’s opening she is contemplating a humdrum existence in a small Surrey village, with, at age twenty, her adoring but unstimulating father as more or less her only companion. Emma is bored and—we’ll look at this in a moment—lonely.

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1 See, for example, ‘Jane is entirely impossible. It seems a great pity to me that they allowed her to die a natural death!’ (from a letter dated January 18, 1909 to W. D. Howells; reprinted in *Jane Austen: Critical Assessments*, ed. by Ian Littlewood, 4 vols (Mountfield: Helm, 1998), I, p. 435. Twain’s advice about the value of keen scrutiny does not seem to appear verbatim as above, but might be a memory of the episode in which Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn find reasons to delay entering the haunted house and then eventually enter, ‘ready for instant retreat [...] In a little while familiarity modified their fears and they gave the place a critical and interested examination’, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, ed. Peter Stoneley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 148.
But in this fast-moving novel, Emma meets a new friend, Harriet Smith, in another moment we will look at later, in Chapter iii, and as Chapter iv opens, Emma’s ‘Quick and decided’ ways have insured that the ‘intimacy’ between the two girls is becoming ‘a settled thing’; there we learn that:

As a walking companion, Emma had very early foreseen how useful she might find [Harriet]. In that respect Mrs. Weston’s loss had been important [...] since Mrs. Weston’s marriage her exercise had been too much confined. She had ventured once alone to Randalls, but it was not pleasant; and a Harriet Smith, therefore, one whom she could summon at any time to a walk, would be a valuable addition to her privileges. (I iv 25)

The late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries had reconfigured walking from a mode of transport for those who could afford no other, to a leisure pastime, and in a way that looks forward to the country and sports supply stores of our own time, had invented knapsacks, walking boots, customized walking coats with side pockets and pocket books of poetry and fiction to be carried in them.  

We see much walking in Jane Austen’s other novels. You’ll recall that, after some struggle, Northanger Abbey’s Catherine Morland manages a country walk with the Tilneys, where they discuss up-to-the-minute topics such as politics and the Picturesque, as well as Gothic fiction, and that in Pride and Prejudice, Miss Bingley winds up an attack on Elizabeth Bennet with the sneer that “She has nothing, in short, to recommend her, but being an excellent walker!” (I viii 39). Mary Musgrove, in Persuasion, resents ‘not being supposed a good walker’ (I x 89) and, of course, it is a last walk to the Cobb at Lyme Regis which proves to be that novel’s turning point.

But I think in Emma, walking is particularly highlighted by the village setting, and the small distances which this very confined, almost claustrophobic, novel allows its characters to travel. Hartfield, Emma’s home, is on the edge of the village of Highbury, its grounds are ‘a sort of notch in the Donwell Abbey estate’ owned by Mr. Knightley; it is a half-mile from Randalls where Miss Taylor/Mrs. Weston has gone (I xvi

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All of these are within walking distance, though not, or at least not very willingly, within the reach of a solo female walker, even an energetic and healthy young one like Emma, something which we will think about soon. But first let us glance at the busy walkers of Highbury: it might be possible to map the area as a kind of walking course, to track the walkers we see and hear about. Leaving Emma and Harriet for later, we see first of all Mr. Knightley, who walks over to Hartfield, with “Not a speck” on his shoes at the end of Chapter i (I i 8). Mr. Knightley is later applauded by Emma for not walking to the Coles’s dinner party, but using his carriage but this reflects how often, with much to do and lots of vigour and energy (and a lot on his mind, as we later learn) he walks—‘keeping no horses, having little spare money and a great deal of health, activity, and independence, was too apt, in Emma’s opinion, to get about as he could, and not use his carriage so often as became the owner of Donwell Abbey’ (II viii 230). Mr. Knightley’s tenant, Robert Martin, as we’ll see in a moment, similarly active and independent—and lovelorn—frequently gets from place to place by walking, too. And Mr. Perry, who sometimes rides, and is having a carriage pressed on him by his anxious wife, also frequently walks. Like Mr. Knightley and Robert Martin he walks to and from his work. Emma, lingering outside Ford’s shop while Harriet dithers within, sees ‘Mr. Perry walking hastily by’ (I ix 251).

But most of the walking we see in Emma is what might justly be called leisure walking, or even pleasure walking, a pastime. When Emma and Harriet out walking meet Robert Martin, it is an interesting example, almost Wordsworthian, of leisure walkers meeting someone who is walking for transport. Robert Martin, moving purposefully back and forth to his work on the farm, may not be trying for an elegance of appearance on this accidental meeting with the most consequential young woman of the neighbourhood and her new friend. At one he looks ‘very respectfully’, at the other—poor love-struck man!—‘with most unfeigned satisfaction’ (I iv 31). As always for Emma the wish is mother to the thought so although, when she first sees Martin, her actual observation is that ‘His appearance was very neat, and he looked like a sensible man’ (I iv 31), she forsakes the truth, for a crushing dismissal of their fellow pedestrian (and a man Harriet has known and liked for a long time), and declares him “remarkably plain [...] very
clownish [...] totally without air’’’ (I iv 32). Harriet is ‘mortified’, but does not attempt to defend her old friend against her new one, and as they walk on, Emma begins her campaign of using Mr. Elton ‘for driving the young farmer out of Harriet’s head’ (I iv 32; 34).

Emma wants to transplant Harriet from the environment where she has found her to one which is defined in the novel precisely by its habits of leisured walking: ‘Her father never went beyond the shrubbery, where two divisions of the grounds sufficed him for his long walk, or his short’ (I iv 25); Mrs. Weston and her stepson, Frank Churchill, strolling from Randalls to Highbury, Hartfield as their avowed goal (at least as far as deceived Mrs. Weston knows) and the Bates’s house, and Jane, as their real one; perhaps most tellingly, Mr. Elton, turning from his purposeful walk to work, of visiting the poor, turning at the very door of the poor parishioners’ cottage, where those within are hungry and sick, to join the young ladies in their amble. Walking thus becomes a kind of quiet metaphoric powerhouse for the novel, an emblem of its confinement to one place, its deliberate repetitiveness, and its mode of presenting character through comparison and contrast.3 Walking in Emma is almost as revealing as speech. We will see how this operates even in the last walk we see Emma take, but first let us look at some other modes of walking, other motives.

A notion had arisen, in the eighteenth century, that an important part of life for those who did not do physical labour for a living, was exercise. George Cheyne, the influential eighteenth-century physician, born in Scotland, but practising in Bath, that hive of hypochondria, attributed both ‘the English malady’ of nerves, and the obesity from which he himself suffered, in part to lack of exercise.4 On meeting Emma, Frank has inquired whether she is a rider or not. Now, though Jane Austen rode when she had the opportunity, and though several of her heroines, including timid Fanny Price, are equestriennes, one surmises that Mr. Woodhouse’s anxieties for both his daughter and his horses would

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prevent their indulging in that dangerous exercise, so walking—given her few opportunities to dance—is Emma’s only physical outlet, her only exercise. We see vigorous Mr. John Knightley out exercising his little boys during a spring visit to Hartfield and, on that outing, they meet Jane Fairfax walking alone to the Post Office; the re-reader knows why, and if any first-time reader is fooled by Emma’s fantastic notions about Jane’s adulterous passion for Mr. Dixon, a clandestine motive can be supplied by that; but what Jane says, in the protracted defence of her solitary walking that she is obliged to mount against the whole assembled company while in the drawing room at Hartfield in Chapter xxxiv, is to bring up health and exercise: “I am advised to be out of doors as much as I can” (II xvi 319). Presumably the advice is from fellow-pedestrian Mr. Perry, who, as really a very subtle man, knows how hard it must be for a sensitive young girl to be cooped up all day long in a single parlour with a deaf grandmother and an endlessly talking aunt. Later we see Jane setting out on a solo walk home from Donwell to Highbury, though Emma attempts to prevent her—it’s a hot day!—and Frank Churchill, we learn later, tries to accompany her, with nearly disastrous consequences; and later still, Jane is ‘seen wandering about the meadows, at some distance from Highbury’ and this is reported, in this highly surveillant neighbourhood, to Emma, who is mortified, since Jane has on the same day refused an outing with her. In Highbury, even those who walk alone are not really by themselves (III ix 426). But Jane tries. Late in the novel, we learn along with Emma, and perhaps a little ahead of Emma, that Jane has spent a great deal of the novel hating Emma, who spends much of the novel disliking her. But Jane does make one straightforward admission to Emma, even during this period of mutual antagonism—it ‘seemed to burst from an overcharged heart’: “Oh! Miss Woodhouse, the comfort of being sometimes alone!”’ (III vi 394).

So, walking alone, nearly impossible though it may be to avoid observation even if you avoid company, is not a positive error of conduct in Highbury in 1813–14, as, say, being seen walking side by side with Frank Churchill would have been. Why then can’t Emma do it? Why can’t she walk alone? Randalls is, once again, a half-mile away. We never see Emma walk there unaccompanied. And when we do finally see her take a few walks alone—I will save one for last, but we can take a second
to glance at her walk to Highbury to atone to Miss Bates for her rudeness on Box Hill—this solitary endeavour is unquestionably a moment of high moral victory for her, of real self-conquest and accomplishment: she ‘went early, that nothing might prevent her’ (III vii 410). The visit, coinciding with Jane’s momentous decision to change one nightmarish situation for another, does not go terribly well, but Emma has shown her contrition and her good will, and returns, again walking alone, and pensively meditating, to find that her unaccompanied expedition has raised her in the estimation of the waiting Mr. Knightley.

But that is, I think, the first time we see her venture alone beyond the shrubbery. Emma, with all her resources, and her scorn for Mrs. Elton’s passion for company, is not shown, herself, bearing solitude very well. We will turn to our first view of Harriet in a moment; let’s pause to turn right back to page 1 and our first look at Emma. When we meet Emma, the heroine who of all Jane Austen’s heroines, puts herself forward for our notice from the very beginning, she is dejected, genuinely bereft after Miss Taylor’s departure from Hartfield into her new life as Mrs. Weston of Randalls, and it is important for the reader’s very complicated connection with Emma, I think, that we meet her on this first occasion of her experiencing ‘mournful thought of any continuance’ (I i 4). Very soon we will be hearing Emma boast of her ‘“active, busy mind, with a great many independent resources”’, and her music and drawing, but on this afternoon of ‘melancholy change’ none of that manifests itself (I x 92; I ii 5). In a mood of post-wedding let-down, ‘she had then only to sit and think of what she had lost’, and this grief over the marriage she believes she has engineered, this ‘black morning’s work’, takes us into Emma’s thoughts for six paragraphs, until her father awakens and echoes those thoughts back to her word-perfectly (I i 4). Never one himself to boast of his activity or resources, Mr. Woodhouse says with wonderful simplicity just what Emma is thinking: ‘“I wish she were here again”’ (I i 6).

Emma has to fight off tears until, of course, Mr. Knightley walks in. But before we leave this chapter and move a couple of chapters on to the one which will introduce Emma to her new friend, to her walking companion Harriet Smith, just note one aspect of Emma’s existence that is seldom discussed by critics, never referred to by Mr. Woodhouse, Miss Taylor or Emma herself, but only, and only once, by Mr. Knightley,
which is the loss of her mother, mentioned in an almost cavalier fashion as having happened ‘too long ago [for Emma] to have more than an indistinct remembrance of her caresses’ (I i 3). Emma was five when her mother died and was replaced by Miss Taylor; five-year-olds talk, and feel, and remember, though perhaps not very clearly. Mr. Knightley, who would have been twenty-one at the time of this event, obviously has memories which are not so indistinct, and later tells Mrs. Weston, ‘“In her mother she lost the only person able to cope with her. She inherits her mother’s talents”’ (I v 37–38).

The loss of a mother, in those days of multiple childbirths and primitive medical care, was a much less rare event in childhood than now. It happened to several of Jane Austen’s own nephews and nieces, and to three of her heroines, if we include Eleanor Tilney. But I have always thought of it as more a part of Emma’s life, and felt as such by Jane Austen, than might seem at first obvious. Emma’s brittleness and her fantasies of self-sufficiency and omnipotence seem plausible effects of being early deprived of a mother, as might also Harriet’s ‘habits of dependence and imitation’, Frank Churchill’s tricks and mischief and Jane Fairfax’s seeming reserve (I x 94). Each member of this whole strange foursome, for which some country dance involving three women and one man ought to be invented, has lost one or both parents in infancy: Jane Fairfax is utterly parentless, Harriet virtually so, and Frank and Emma, who perceive ‘“a little likeness”’ in each other—a like littleness?—have lost mothers (III xviii 522). Whether losing Miss Taylor does or does not revive the death of Emma’s mother, it is in itself a real loss, of a friendship described in thoughtful, unexaggerated language that nevertheless displays honest warmth and tenderness: ‘a friend and companion such as few possessed, intelligent, well-informed, useful, gentle […] one to whom she could speak every thought as it arose’ (I i 4–5). Hold onto those words when we look at the dawning friendship with Harriet.

Female friendship, in its many aspects, is always to Jane Austen an interesting topic. She found unintended comedy in the romantic notions of eternal friendship at work in sentimental novels such as Richardson’s *Sir Charles Grandison*, in which every girl who falls in love with the eponymous hero tries to step aside to give place to someone worthier, or Maria Edgeworth’s *Belinda* where female friendships shift like musical
chairs. These exaggerations of feeling were burlesqued by the Irish writer Eaton Barrett in his 1813 novel *The Heroine*, which Jane Austen admired, but she had already done a very good job herself while still in her teens, in her tiny epistolary novel *Love and Freindship*. Most of the letters in that are written by Laura, sentimental (and selfish) heroine who rejects one candidate for friendship because the young lady ‘neither in the Course of her Visit [half an hour], confided to me any of her Secret thoughts, nor requested me to confide in her, any of Mine’ but a few hours later, having been, as she tells her correspondent ‘deprived during the course of 3 weeks of a real friend’, Laura comes across a perfect candidate, Sophia, and on first meeting each other they ‘flew into each others arms and after having exchanged vows of mutual Freindship for the rest of our Lives, instantly unfolded to each other the most inward Secrets of our Hearts’ (Letters VII 112; VIII 113–14). Again, let’s keep that in mind, deliberately silly as it is: friendship at first sight, like love at first sight (we might recall that love at first sight does not usually work out in Jane Austen) and the sharing of confidences.

Here comes confiding little Harriet Smith, seventeen years old to Emma’s twenty, from the parlour of Mrs. Goddard’s school, into Emma’s world:

She was a very pretty girl, and her beauty happened to be of a sort which Emma particularly admired [...] She was not struck by any thing remarkably clever in Miss Smith’s conversation, but she found her altogether engaging—not inconveniently shy, not unwilling to talk [...] shewing so proper and becoming a deference, seeming so pleasantly grateful for being admitted to Hartfield [...] that she must have good sense and deserve encouragement. Encouragement should be given [...] She would notice her; she would improve her [...] she would inform her opinions and her manners. It would be an interesting, and certainly a very kind undertaking; highly becoming her own situation in life, her leisure, and powers. (I iii 22–23)

Even on a first reading one is aware of the satiric voice at work in this passage, as Emma’s thoughts are exposed in a way that raises doubts about her judgment as it shows her flattering herself about her intentions. We have already been told of her ‘disposition to think a little too well of herself’ (I I 3). But what is also worth noticing here is that Harriet’s development as a character, such as it is, her very existence as a figure in the novel, is from the start coolly and deliberately placed inside
Emma’s imaginings and scheming. We are told almost nothing about Harriet that does not come to us through Emma. We do sometimes hear others talking about her, memorably Mr. Knightley and Mrs. Weston, and occasionally Frank Churchill—and of course, Mr. Elton has remarks about Harriet dragged out of him by Emma—but it is all really as an accessory to Emma, in the context of her effect on Emma’s life, that Harriet exists, as if she were a character in a fiction not by Jane Austen but by Emma, or as if she were a doll. Let us pause to think about this a little: Emma herself recognizes from the outset that Harriet will not be the sort of friend she had in Miss Taylor, but that’s fine:

Such a friend as Mrs. Weston was out of the question […] Two such she did not want. It was quite a different sort of thing—a sentiment distinct and independent. Mrs. Weston was the object of a regard, which had its basis in gratitude and esteem. Harriet would be loved as one to whom she could be useful. (I iv 25–26)

We can only shudder at the ways in which Emma turns out to be ‘useful’ to Harriet. ‘Useful’ is not always a bad word in Jane Austen, it does not mean what we might mean by ‘using’ people; Miss Taylor, too, was a ‘useful’ friend. But when applied to Emma’s incursions into Harriet’s existence as an autonomous being, her meddling, the word becomes almost savagely ironic. Harriet, scarcely an entity in the novel outside Emma’s thoughts, provides an outlet for her imagination. Her illegitimate origins do not, for Emma the imaginist, signify shame as they do for realistic Mr. Knightley. Though we scarcely ever see Emma reading anything (I’ll say a little more about that), she must have read novels such as Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* or Fanny Burney’s *Evelina*, in which a young person’s obscure origins eventually reveal their fathers to be a squire or even a baronet, a grand marriage following as a matter of course. This is the type of story she invents for her little friend, Harriet Smith.

The introduction of Harriet into the text (‘she was the natural daughter of somebody’, later expanded by Mr. Knightley into ‘“the natural daughter of nobody knows whom”’ (I ii 22; I viii 64)) are almost the only words attached to Harriet until much later in the novel that are not located inside Emma’s thoughts. When Emma stops thinking about Harriet, as once the first infatuation is passed, she does for quite long periods, it is almost as if Harriet ceases to be. The story of Emma and
Harriet is really located in Volume I (though it threatens to come back with a bang in Volume III) while Volume II is given to Emma and Frank Churchill, and Volume III to a wider set of relationships, among which Jane Fairfax moves into greater prominence. The stories of Frank and Jane are, like the story of Harriet, versions of fairy tales about foundlings and orphans. But these stories occupy a place, in the novel, much more independently of Emma than does that of poor Harriet. Frank’s story appears first, in Chapter ii, as part of his father’s, Mr. Weston’s, but is also added to in several later instalments before he appears. We learn of the death of Mr. Weston’s first wife, and Frank’s mother, the grand Miss Churchill of Enscombe, and of how that was soon followed by the little boy’s adoption by his proud, snobbish uncle and aunt, who ‘having no children of their own [...] offered to take the whole charge of the little Frank [...] the child was given up to the care and the wealth of the Churchills [...] it had become so avowed an adoption as to have him assume the name of Churchill on coming of age’ (I ii 14–15).

Later we hear of ‘“the letter [...] the very handsome letter”’ Frank writes his stepmother on her marriage (I ii 16). We never see that letter, nor, in this novel, any other letter until Frank’s long last self-exonerating letter to Mrs. Weston near the end of the novel, although in another way the novel is full of letters, letters talked about and letters not talked about until much later. Frank, ‘one of the boasts of Highbury [...] [though] he had never been there in his life’ (I ii 16), is woven into the texture of the novel and into the thoughts both of Mr. Knightley, so comically and touchingly prejudiced against this unknown young man, and of Emma, who

in spite of [her] resolution of never marrying [...] found] something in the name, in the idea of Mr. Frank Churchill, which always interested her. She had frequently thought [...] that if she were to marry, he was the very person to suit her in age, character and condition. (I xiv 128)

And is not what attracts Emma exactly what alarms and even threatens Mr. Knightley?—the air of romance attaching itself to the never-seen, youthful Frank, the foundling story which plays such a role in sentimental and Gothic eighteenth-century fictions and which is ubiquitous in this novel. In their different ways, both Emma and Mr. Knightley are paying their respects to this literary tradition in their response to Frank, but,
unlike the romance Emma invents for Harriet’s origins, the romance of Frank’s story is alive in other minds than Emma’s.

Jane Fairfax is also known, like Frank Churchill, by her letters and, just as Mr. Knightley will later exclaim about Frank, “‘His letters disgust me’”, Emma will express her own exasperation with Jane’s epistolary traces: “‘Every letter from her is read forty times over [...] I wish Jane Fairfax very well; but she tires me to death’” (I xviii 260; I x 92). Her hostility to Jane is a double of Mr. Knightley’s to Frank, and, like his, has a strongly comic side. In Chapter xix Emma, visiting the Bateses under the illusion that there will not be a letter from Jane to be read, fairly sprints from the house on finding to her horror that there is. But the chapter that follows Emma’s lucky escape takes the same format in telling Jane’s story from the beginning as is used for Frank’s birth: loss of both parents, early childhood in Highbury, and her adoption by the well-off Campbells. But it is clear that in her case there is no pending inheritance except work: ‘she should be brought up for educating others [...] To provide for her otherwise was out of Colonel Campbell’s power [...] his fortune was moderate and must be all his daughter’s [...] Such was Jane Fairfax’s history’ (II ii 175). And how neatly Jane’s history slots into Frank’s, matching in so many respects, and contrasting only in the matter of fortune—enough to make a Cinderella conclusion for these two so very appropriate. And Emma, as we have seen and will see, has a taste for fairy tale endings, and when she meets him, the reality seems to match up but, whether in reality or fantasy, she has always been repelled by Jane’s reserve: ‘she could never get acquainted with her’ (II ii 178).

Instead, it is Harriet with whom she chooses to become acquainted. We have examined the heartfelt language of female friendship which Emma attached to her feeling for Mrs. Weston—“‘I certainly do forget to think of her [...] as having been anything but my friend and my dearest friend’” (II vi 216), she declares, in one of the warmest and most sincere statements she makes anywhere in the novel—and we have glanced at her lack of enthusiasm for Jane Fairfax’s virtues. This might be the moment to examine the language that grows up around her attachment to Harriet. We will see quite quickly, I think, that though Mr. Knightley terms her feeling an “‘infatuation’”, there is a sense in which, almost
throughout the novel, Emma is aware of nothing so much about Harriet as her limitations: as a friend; as a fellow creature; as anything at all (I viii 64).

Certainly as an intellect. In Chapter iii and again in Chapter iv we are told, and this is the judgment of Emma Woodhouse, whose cleverness is declared in the first sentence of the novel, ‘Harriet certainly was not clever’ (I iv 25). This chapter, detailing the early stages of their intimacy, establishes that Emma is not seeking any sort of equality in this friendship she has taken up: ‘Harriet […] only desiring to be guided by any one she looked up to […] exactly the something which her home required’ (I iv 25). Again, the language displays Emma’s vanity in a manner at once unflinching, and, as many critics have noted, rather forgiving.\(^5\) The tone of the narrative, as Emma’s mode of being useful to Harriet ranges from the mildly absurd to the nearly catastrophic, retains a comedy to which the much-repeated word ‘blunder’ gives the clue. Emma is being foolish, is deluded. The potential which this meddling holds for real damage and real wrongdoing is kept out of sight for many chapters, for she is aiming at improvements—the girls are ‘meaning to […] read together’ (I v 37)—but, as Mr. Knightley foresees, this does not happen, and throughout this first part of the novel Emma and Harriet really do little but stroll from place to place idly chattering. And as winter sets in and the weather grows cold for walking, the girls are shown preoccupied, not with even the first chapters of books which they once managed, but with Harriet’s riddle collection, a perfect occasion for showcasing Emma’s cleverness, Harriet’s stupidity, and the banal emptiness of their joint object, Mr. Elton. Scarcely pausing to glance at Harriet as she sits puzzling over his courtship riddle ‘in all the confusion of hope and dullness’, Emma romps through it with the ease of a born cryptic crossword-solver (I ix 76). Even in the moment, Emma is given pause by the thought that Mr. Elton’s charade attributes to her friend a ‘ready wit’, or any wit at all. “‘Humph! […] A man must be very much in love indeed, to find her so’” (I ix 76). Later, as her confidence that Mr. Elton is in love with Harriet begins to wane in view of his marked attentions to her, she still clings to the hope that a man who ‘can see

\(^5\) See, for example, Tony Tanner, *Jane Austen* (Houndmills: Macmillan 1986) and Janet Todd, *The Cambridge Introduction to Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511607325
ready wit in Harriet’ may still prove to be stupid enough to marry her (I iii 119).

In the chapters after she realizes her blunder over Mr. Elton, she often wearies of Harriet’s droning on about him, and finds that Mr. Martin is sometimes ‘useful as a check’ to Mr. Elton (II iv 198). And it is always clear to the reader that Harriet’s devotion to ‘dear Miss Woodhouse’—what Mr. Knightley calls her unconscious flattery—operates as a kind of imitation, flattery’s sincerest form: her words often echo Emma’s, if in a muddled fashion. There is comedy in this, as when in their talk about Jane Fairfax’s superb musicality, the discussion of taste and execution, in which Emma ruefully admits that Jane Fairfax has both, Harriet’s reply is the clueless, “I saw she had execution, but I did not know she had any taste. Nobody talked about it’’ (II ix 250) Emma, so aware of tone, and taste, and vocabulary—how she will despise Mrs. Elton ‘‘with her Mr. E., and her cara sposo’’ must notice Harriet’s feeble grasp of anything resembling an idea (II xiv 301). She shows, indeed, that she does, in Chapter xxi, when she discounts Harriet’s quite moving account of her meeting with the Martin family with the inward shrug of ‘‘and besides, what was the value of Harriet’s description?—so easily pleased—so little discerning;—what signified her praise?’ (II iii 192). This is phrasing that the reader sees, though Emma does not yet, that is incompatible with real friendship. In a terrible, unmissable contrast to the language of friendship attached to Mrs. Weston, the language of Emma’s affection for Harriet combines patronization with dismissiveness and almost with contempt.

In the course of the novel we see Emma make up stories about Frank Churchill: he is in love with her; and she with him; all poppycock. And about Jane Fairfax: she is in love with Mr. Dixon; also utterly untrue. But the story she is busiest at, and most dangerous, to herself and to others, her most active foolishness, which amounts, from its first effects, to real harm, is the story of Harriet Smith, whose illegitimacy and obscurity must—because Emma Woodhouse wills it—be a cloak for high birth and no impediment to a grand marriage. The friendship with Harriet (“You have been no friend to Harriet Smith”, Mr. Knightley tells her early on, and he is more right than he knows (I viii 66)) is no more than a story she tells herself “one idle day” (I i 11)—one idle season, perhaps—a sort of daydream, such as a very little girl might have about her doll.
Ferociously young for her age, Emma treats Harriet as a plaything: her fancies about Harriet imagine no independent action on Harriet’s part at all. And this is what gives the moment late in the novel, when, as it were, Harriet the doll, the walking doll, comes to life, and begins talking back, a quality almost of horror. It is of course set on a sunny morning at Hartfield; *Emma* must be, in setting, the least Gothic of Jane Austen’s novels. But the moment when Harriet stops behaving as if Emma had made her up, dressed her, taken her from one suitor and handed her to another, stifled her schoolgirl giggle and given her, as Mr. Elton stupidly but prophetically says, “‘So much superadded decision of character!’”, when Harriet decides, for herself, that she is going to marry Mr. Knightley, this moment has a distinctly chilly, Gothic feel (I vi 44).

It is Chapter xlvii, and it is—almost—the last in a veritable cascade of revelations: Mrs. Weston has astonished Emma with the news that Frank Churchill is in love with Jane Fairfax, and she with him; they are engaged and have been for nine months; Emma has relieved Mrs. Weston with the news that she is not in love with Frank Churchill herself; and now Harriet’s being mildly surprised but not really interested in the news, has amazed Emma further. But there is much more to be revealed: as Harriet shrugs off Frank Churchill, Emma

> could not speak another word.—Her voice was lost; and she sat down, waiting in great terror till Harriet should answer [...] ‘Are you speaking of—Mr. Knightley?’ ‘To be sure I am.’ (III xi 441–42)

If Emma has lost her voice, Harriet has found hers. It is the only chapter in which Harriet’s words outnumber Emma’s, for some of the exchange she is turned away from Emma (also rare) but she talks in great, long paragraphs, fifteen, sixteen lines at a time, and even her single lines signal a new independence. “‘Oh! Miss Woodhouse, how you do forget!’” (III xi 442) is something the Harriet of Volume I would never have been able to say. As Harriet’s words roll on, more than once, ‘Emma could not speak’ (II xi 443). It is an intensely dramatized, stage-worthy but never stagey, scene, Harriet at the window, Emma clinging to her seat: so, Emma is looking up at her as she asks ‘in consternation, “Have you any idea of Mr. Knightley’s returning your affection?”’ and Harriet is looking down at her as she replies ‘not fearfully’—“‘Yes [...] I must say that I have’” (III xi 444). The momentary reversal of the usual
power relation between the two young women is sudden and absolute: if Harriet has been something of an automaton, she now partakes of the horror-effect of the automaton who comes to life.

And the trappings of courtesy which conceal the workings of the marriage market are stripped away to reveal the skeleton beneath, of sheer head-to-head rivalry over scarce resources; the two friends are really only rivals. But, of course, Harriet is, even here, very ‘useful’ to Emma, is she not? For what else would have revealed to this young woman, so clever but so lacking in instinct, what else would have made her ‘understand, thoroughly understand her own heart’? (III xi 449). The revelation which follows on Harriet’s wish to marry Mr. Knightley is that ‘Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself’ (III xi 444). And no one does. For this chapter, with its hundreds of Harriet’s words, is also the last chapter in which she speaks. Emma, entirely understandably, suggests by note that they not meet just then. The novel, perhaps less sympathetically, removes Harriet, once Mr. Knightley is out of her reach, to London and the dentist in 1814, the year before Jane Austen’s nieces visit a London dentist and end up having a number of surprise extractions, and a few years before the composition of Sanditon, with its dental horrors. It might seem that Harriet is well punished for those less-than-deferential speeches to Miss Woodhouse. We never hear Harriet speak again, and we never again see her walking with Emma.

Instead, we see a sad, suffering Emma, have at least one sleepless night to mull over her ‘blunders’ of the past few months, now given the stronger and more accurate name of ‘blindness’ (III xi 448). Sad Emma reflects rightly on her ‘insufferable vanity [...] her arrogance [...] mischief [...] evil [...] a folly which no tongue could express’ (III xi 449–50). Just as the novel’s opening established a forgiving tone toward Emma’s ‘disposition to think a little too well of herself’, this crashing recognition of that propensity, so fully and almost humbly shared with the reader, disarms much of the desire which may have grown up in the reader over the novel’s 400 or so pages, to see Emma humbled. We realize we don’t really want that to happen: or we don’t want it to be the last thing that happens, don’t want this black day to be ‘but the beginning of wretchedness’ (III xi 448). So sorrowing, self-accusing Emma takes a walk, alone with her very uncomfortable thoughts, but she is joined on the walk, and by Mr. Knightley. They take one turn around the shrubbery,
as though they were embarking on Emma’s father’s winter walk, and reach almost total misunderstanding on the way. All is lost. But it is not winter but summer: they take another turn, and this final, shared walk, is the occasion for Mr. Knightley to produce one further, greatest of all, revelations: he loves her, and for Emma, full of the deliriously happy, if also shockingly egotistical, recognition that ‘Harriet was nothing [...] she was every thing herself’—for Emma to offer one more revelation, the novel’s final one: that Emma and Mr. Knightley, are meant to be, and always will be, the perfect walking companions (III xiii 469).