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Jane Fairfax's Choice: The Sale of Human Flesh or Human Intellect

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EMMA DOES NOT LIKE JANE FAIRFAX. We are given various reasons for this dislike: Jane's reserve, Emma's jealousy, Miss Bates's talking. Perhaps Emma merely wants to retain control—wants to make the decision for herself—since "it had been always imagined that they were to be so intimate—because their ages were the same, every body had supposed they must be so fond of each other" (166-67). Regardless of Emma's feelings, however, Jane Austen clearly *does* like Jane Fairfax.

There are few characters in Austen's novels depicted as quite so elegant and talented. Even Emma admits to Jane's positive attributes: "elegant, remarkably elegant; . . . her face—her features—there was more beauty in them all together than she had remembered" (167). Emma is not immune to sympathy for Jane's plight: "when she considered what all this elegance was destined to, what she was going to sink from, how she was going to live, it seemed impossible to feel any thing but compassion and respect" (167-68). But Emma was still "sorry;—to have to pay civilities to a person she did not like through three long months!" (166). Jane, in fact, remains in the background of the novel, rarely even speaking for herself.

It is Jane Fairfax's story rather than Emma's, however, that exposes the grim reality of life for many women of the nineteenth century: the attractive and accomplished but penniless young woman

is *not* rescued by a good man. She marries a man who in Austen's other novels would have been rewarded by a mindless flirt (Lydia Bennet) or an adulteress (Maria Rushworth). Through Jane Fairfax's story—her life-defining choice between selling herself in the marriage market or the governess trade—Austen subtly exposes the grim reality of life for many women who were handsome, clever, but *not* rich. Jane Fairfax, perhaps even more than the minor characters in Austen's other five novels, provides the author the opportunity to portray “the difference of woman's destiny” (384). By considering the focus of Jane Fairfax's education and the grim financial as well as psychosocial reality of her future life as a governess, contrasted with her ultimate choice to marry a man who acts contrary to social norms and treats her with disrespect, Austen exposes the limitations faced by a poor woman with a genteel upbringing. Austen shows us that women's choices are grim: they must be sold in one market or the other.

Emma is put off by Jane Fairfax's reserve, but that passivity is Austen's way of depicting the only socially acceptable behavior available to dependent women. Jane's movement is always controlled by others. She is “sought out” by Colonel Campbell upon his return to England so that he can repay the kindness of her father (163); she is educated by the masters in London at the Campbells' expense; she is sent back to her aunt and grandmother once Miss Campbell marries; she must look to Mr. Knightley's or Mrs. Elton's carriages to transport her to various Highbury engagements. Since she is “‘in such retirement, such obscurity, so thrown away’” living with her aunt and grandmother (283), Jane Fairfax must tolerate the attentions of the officious Mrs. Elton. Jane is financially dependent and must be passive.

By contrast, Emma's financial independence allows her activity. When she does not wish to walk or when the weather is inclement, she may choose to order her carriage. She even offers to provide a servant and transportation for Jane when she is determined to leave the strawberry-picking party at Donwell Abbey (362). Emma actively involves herself in the lives of others, rejecting Jane's “coldness and reserve” (166). The most telling aspect of Emma's independence, of course, is her fortune, which gives her the option not to marry. The contrast between Emma's relatively active life and Jane Fairfax's submissive one is important since the main difference in their independence rests solely on their income.

From the start, independence is the key contrast between Emma and Jane—between a woman who can choose her life and one whose choices are made for her. Richard Handler and Daniel A. Segal consider the value of independence within the social constructions of Austen's world and compare the young man's options to the young woman's:

In contrast to the independence of an eldest son, younger sons “must be inured to self-denial and dependence,” as Colonel Fitzwilliam puts it (*PP* 183). Because they are not born to independence, younger sons must be placed “out” to make their way in trade or in the genteel professions of the army, navy, law, or church, while daughters are placed “out” to marry. Significantly, the term “to be out” is never applied to eldest sons. This absence suggests that a person who is “out,” be it a woman in want of a husband or a younger son in search of a living, is a person who lacks a fixed position *in* society. (694)

Jane Fairfax, with all her elegance and grace, is “out” on the market. She gives herself until the age of twenty-one to be chosen by a wealthy suitor, then she puts herself “out” in the governess trade.

Jane Fairfax’s value then has little to do with her elegance and everything to do with her lack of fortune. As she is coming to her own self-realization, Emma considers the disparity between women of means and those without: “The contrast between Mrs. Churchill’s importance in the world, and Jane Fairfax’s, struck her; one was every thing, the other nothing” (384). Jane Fairfax is a beautiful, accomplished, well-educated young woman, and while she is praised for those attributes, she has no marketable value beyond her ability to earn her keep. The rest of Highbury society enjoys her company and praises her talents, but they do not assume she will remain in a genteel position. Mr. Elton would never have considered the “accomplished” and “elegant” Miss Fairfax as a potential mate since her accomplishments do not come with the requisite £10,000. Emma and Mrs. Elton, women with fewer charms, are valued chiefly for their income. Jane Fairfax appears to be what would be considered one of the category of “‘surplus’ or redundant women” in the 1851 census (Davidoff and Hall 453). She is an attractive, talented burden and becomes something to be patronized and pitied by those (such as Emma and Mrs. Elton) who have means.

This idea of the woman trained for redundancy who is destined to train other women to be just as redundant is a “Catch-22” that Mary Wollstonecraft scrutinized in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft describes “the neglected education of [her] fellow creatures,” who are “rendered weak and wretched. . . . [L]ike the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty” (31). By “acquiring a smattering of accomplishments,” and neglecting their intellectual and physical health, women are left only one option through which to “rise in the world,—by marriage” (35). Where Wollstonecraft is direct in her criticism of educational norms for women, Austen is subtle. Just as Austen chastises Emma for enlarging Harriet Smith’s world and potentially eliminating her chance for marriage, she questions the kind of education a penniless orphan such as Jane Fairfax is given.

Although the narrator tells us that Jane Fairfax has been educated in the best way possible for a woman of her time—"her heart and understanding had received every advantage of discipline and culture," and "every lighter talent had been done full justice to, by the attendance of first-rate masters" (164)—Austen shows us that this education is inadequate. Wollstonecraft's observations are also relevant here. She points out that the "experts" on female education, such as Rousseau, Dr. Gregory, and Dr. Fordyce, "have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters, than they would otherwise have been; and consequently, more useless members of society" (53). Jane Fairfax might be considered an example of a woman whom Wollstonecraft describes as receiving a "careful education" (112) that prepares her mainly for ornamenting the parlor. Although Wollstonecraft argues for a complete overhaul in the educational system—educating girls alongside the boys, preparing them for an intellectual and perhaps a professional life—Austen does not go this far. Instead, she subtly exposes how destructive the current system is for a poor woman with a genteel upbringing. The "first-rate masters" developing Jane Fairfax's "lighter talents" may have done her an injustice. Miss Campbell, with a similar education *and* her father's money, was able to attract a marriage partner. With no fortune, Jane Fairfax's prospects are not as good.

A "careful education" does not secure a woman's independence. Dale Spender has examined the correlation between the limitations on women's education and the concomitant limitations on their freedoms:

That literacy can be dangerous in those who are ruled has been the deeply-held conviction of many of those who have done the ruling. This is why "the masses," the working class, were so long denied education in England (see Raymond Williams, 1975); this is why it was illegal in the United States to teach slaves to read and write; this is why for so many centuries women were excluded from formal education. (3-4)

Though Jane Fairfax's education has not been neglected, it has, like other women's, been limited. So, at the end of Volume II, Jane Fairfax's implicit comparison of the governess trade to the slave trade—"the sale—not quite of human flesh—but of human intellect" (300)—is not as outrageous as Mrs. Elton considers it to be. Because of their limited education and forced dependence, poor but educated women were in danger of being abandoned and forgotten. A poor woman's education might just restrict her options; if she could not marry, she would need to teach other girls how to be just as useless as she had become.

A woman like Jane Fairfax, with no wealth to bring to a marriage, had few options or expectations other than to enter into the governess trade, or as Austen describes it, to "complete the sacrifice, and

retire from all the pleasures of life, of rational intercourse, equal society, peace and hope, to penance and mortification for ever" (165). Certainly, Colonel Campbell believed he was doing Jane a great service "by supplying the means of respectable subsistence hereafter" (164). Becoming a governess would no doubt be better than living with her aunt and grandmother in their small rooms in Highbury. At least her skills and education could be put to use. But let us consider for a moment, strictly in financial terms, Jane Fairfax's situation if she had taken the position with the Smallridge family. According to Edward Copeland, "For the position of governess, the most common employment open to a young woman educated in all the fashionable refinements, Lady Diana Beauclerk paid a woman in 1805, twenty guineas a year: that is, around \$400 a year [in 1972 dollars], plus room, board, and a seat in the parlor" ("What's a Competence?" 163). Copeland explains that with this minimal salary, the governess was to afford "the expenses of the millinery and hairdressing necessary to put in a genteel appearance in the parlor" (163). She would need to look and act like a lady without the income a lady would normally have. (Mrs. Elton's fortune of £10,000 might earn £400 in annual interest—hardly comparable to the twenty guineas [or thirty pounds] that was the annual salary of the governess.) Her salary would no doubt leave little or nothing to put aside for a genteel retirement or a dowry to attract a marriage proposal.

Beyond the monetary disadvantages, the psychosocial consequences must be of grave importance to a woman who equates this form of paid servitude to slavery. As Mary Ann Mason Burki argues, the lack of independence that comes with employment is the real evil: "being a governess produced great tensions for a woman who valued her independence. Depending on her background, it could represent either a secure step up into the middle class, or a dismal step down. In either case she could exercise no individual control" (195). As Copeland illustrates, the direction of the "step" was significant and could be compared to "Newton's law: the ground appears more threatening to those who are falling *towards* it than to those who are rising above it" (*Women Writing* 25-26). Copeland also explains the humiliation a character such as Jane Fairfax might feel: "Female employment looms as an especially nettling matter for the genteel heroine, who, when she seeks employment, unavoidably betrays her own class and all its urgent aspirations for station" (*Women Writing* 161). This dilemma is repeated in most women's novels of Austen's time: "Employment, either vaguely or specifically imagined, represents in women's novels a hostile universe for the middle-class woman of whatever station" (Copeland, *Women Writing* 166). For Jane Fairfax, a woman educated by the "first rate masters" of London, who has lived as an equal among genteel families, rivals Emma Woodhouse in her beauty, and surpasses her in accomplishments, the step *down* is dismal indeed.

Within *Emma*, Austen gives us various perspectives from which to judge the desirability of becoming a governess. Those not horrified by Jane Fairfax's prospects are those whose opinions we are not allowed to trust. Mr. Woodhouse thinks that Jane should be content to be "comfortably settled" and to be to the Smallridges what "poor Miss Taylor" was to his family (387). Mrs. Elton relishes the fact that she can help to secure a fine "situation" for Jane where she would have "a right to move in the first

circle . . . , have as many rooms as [she] like[s], and mix in the family as much as [she chooses]” (301). But Mr. Woodhouse and Mrs. Elton are ironic characters, and we cannot credit them with carrying the author’s opinion.

Moving in the first circle, moreover, is not to be equated with *belonging* to that circle. The place of the governess would always be known, and Jane would be consistently reminded of that place. As Copeland writes, “Paradoxically, it is the [governess] position’s traditional association with gentility that destroys it as a desirable, genteel resource. Food, housing, and a genteel seat in the parlor may be in the contract, but self-respect is not” (*Women Writing* 175). After her first evening employed as a governess, Mary Wollstonecraft writes in a letter to her sister, “I cannot easily forget my inferior station—and this something betwixt and between is rather awkward” (qtd. in Copeland, *Women Writing* 175). Mrs. Elton proclaims that Mrs. Smallridge has wax candles in the schoolroom, emphasizing the genteel extravagance of the Smallridge household, but Jane Fairfax understands the difference between being a guest in the parlor and a servant in the schoolroom—wax candles notwithstanding.

Jane Austen, through her depiction of Jane Fairfax’s condition, understands the downward trajectory of the governess. Mrs. Weston, who has been in Jane’s situation and is now “settled in a home of her own, and . . . secure[d] of a comfortable provision” (11), is eager to match Jane with Mr. Knightley, thus removing her from the governess trade. Even Emma, who “was sorry;—to have to pay civilities to a person she did not like through three long months!” (166), considers Jane’s future life as a governess to be needful of “compassion and respect” and that “the sacrifices she had resolved on” were “pitiable” and “honourable” (168). Jane’s description of her outlook is telling: she will “dispose” of herself (300); her “mortification” would be greater if she were with a rich family (301); the peddling of her talents is compared to “the sale . . . of human flesh, . . . widely different certainly as to the guilt of those who carry it on; but as to the greater misery of the victims, I do not know where it lies” (300-01). It is safe to assume that Austen understands the “mortification” of a woman who must sell her accomplishments to the highest bidder in the “governess-trade” (300).

Much has already been written considering Austen’s views on slavery and abolition, especially in regard to the passages in *Mansfield Park* dealing with the Antiguan plantations of Sir Thomas. Although Edward Said may have misread Austen’s concerns about slavery in her references to Antigua (Fraiman), Austen does not appear to be radical in her thinking. As Alistair Duckworth notes, “though [Austen] occasionally resembles [Mary] Wollstonecraft in her awareness of women’s ‘enslavement,’ she shows no signs of advocating alternative roles for women” (175). But Austen’s imagining suitable or even fortunate marriages for her female characters does not mean that she was unaware of the negative or even degrading aspects of those marriages. Kuldip Kaur Kuwahara has traced the postcolonial symbols within *Emma*, seeing Jane as a manifestation of the Churchill jewels she will now wear. Although “Jane Fairfax’s sparkling jewels reflect her inner joy and fulfillment,” they are also a symbol of the power she

acquires by trading herself to the highest bidder (Kuwahara par. 8). Jane is aware that she must sell herself and realizes that she must enter the governess trade because her engagement seems to have fallen through. Jane's reference to slavery may not equate the governess trade with black slavery; rather, it may be hinting at a connection between the governess trade and the marriage market—in neither case is the "victim" in control of her destiny.

Jane Fairfax is saved from "mortification" through her marriage to Frank Churchill. By examining this relationship, however, we can see that this kind of marriage is not necessarily a reward. Austen wraps up each of her novels with neat marriages, and readers might assume she was supportive of the status quo. Her depiction of marriage in general, however, shows that she does not see it as a panacea for women. Women of means, such as Emma, could choose a partner or even choose not to marry, but the majority of women needed to peddle their accomplishments and whatever income they had to the few potential mates they found in a limited society. As Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall argue, "For women, marriage was indeed a 'trade' and as economic actors they appear as shadows behind the scenes of the family enterprise" (273). While the major characters in Austen's novels achieve ideal marriages, uniting genuine affection with practical considerations, many of the other marriages are flawed—especially those where the women settle to secure their futures. These minor marriages of convenience serve as examples of the reality many women face: Lucy Steele marries the vain and pompous Robert Ferrars but only tolerates his company once he has been awarded his mother's inheritance; Charlotte Lucas marries the odious Mr. Collins in order to secure a comfortable future but finds a way to avoid her husband's company by hiding in her back parlor; Maria Bertram marries the bumbling Mr. Rushworth to secure her house in town but later finds herself divorced and banished from her home. By providing examples of convenient marriages that end with varying states of unhappiness, Austen reveals that this marital pattern was something to resist. The marriage of Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill is another such convenient marriage since Frank's character and behavior are so seriously flawed that he cannot be considered a reward for a deserving woman.

While Jane Fairfax may believe she has secured the highest bidder on the marriage market in Frank Churchill, her hopes are dashed when he flirts with another woman—one with a large income—and then publicly repudiates matches made "upon an acquaintance formed only in a public place" (372). Since Jane is rescued from the "mortification" of Smallridge schoolroom by Mrs. Churchill's timely death, we might assume that all will be well. Evidence from the novel, however, suggests otherwise. Frank Churchill may be "handsome, clever, and rich" (5), but will he prove to be a good husband for Jane? Marriage to Frank Churchill is only a good because it is better than the alternative—paid servitude as a governess.

Jane and Frank's secret engagement and correspondence diminish Jane's self-worth. Once her secret engagement to Frank is made public, Jane confesses to Mrs. Weston, "I never can be blameless. I have

been acting contrary to all my sense of right” (419). Conducting a love affair without the sanction of the community would have been considered an egregious wrong. Although Emma absolves Jane for her part in the improper affair (“If a woman can ever be excused for thinking only of herself, it is in a situation like Jane Fairfax’s” [400]), she condemns Frank for the secret engagement and double dealing—his “distinguish[ing] any one young woman with persevering attention, as he certainly did—while he really belonged to another” (396). Yes, both parties are blamed for the improper engagement, but the greater part of the responsibility is placed on Frank. Thus Austen hints that Jane Fairfax’s choice is not one to celebrate.

Frank Churchill could hardly be considered among Austen’s exemplary heroes. Frank is clearly the aggressor; Jane is passive and reserved. Frank teases her with the gift of the piano—a public display that Jane has a difficult time explaining. He taunts Jane by flirting with Emma. He is unwilling to relinquish his potential fortune for the woman he loves, but he is also unwilling to give her up even as the strain of their secret relationship is a clear burden on her health and reputation. He is self-indulgent, narcissistic, and an outright liar, but readers, even those who understand why Emma is not in love with him, are often ready to forgive him since, in the end, he “does right” by Jane Fairfax. Mr. Knightley, though clearly speaking through his self-interest where Emma is concerned, seems to be the voice of the author in his late assessment of the would-be rake:

“Frank Churchill is, indeed, the favourite of fortune. Every thing turns out for his good.—He meets with a young woman at a watering-place, gains her affection, cannot even weary her by negligent treatment—and had he and all his family sought round the world for a perfect wife for him, they could not have found her superior.—His aunt is in the way.—His aunt dies.—He has only to speak.—His friends are eager to promote his happiness.—He has used every body ill—and they are all delighted to forgive him.—He is a fortunate man indeed!” (428)

Unlike the rakes in the other novels, Frank is rewarded with a woman who might possibly improve him. He is not saddled with a Lydia Bennet or Maria Rushworth. He keeps his Jane and his fortune too.

But the strategy of “saving” Jane from the life of a governess by a marriage to a defective partner underlines Austen’s discomfort with Jane Fairfax’s choices. In a novel where all the other couples are matched according to rank, demeanor, and amiability, Jane and Frank are mismatched. Has Jane chosen Frank because she loves him or because a life with him is better than a life with Mrs. Smallridge and her ilk? Since Austen shows that Frank Churchill is not a good choice for a woman who *can* choose, she may also be showing that choosing such a man is really the last resort for a woman who has few choices—and that this lack of choice is a social problem.

Jane has made her choice. We cannot know whether she lives happily ever after, but most of the evidence regarding Frank's character argues that her life will not be happy. Can Jane improve Frank, as Mr. Knightley hopes? We know enough about human behavior to understand that such a plan for marriage rarely works. It is likely that Frank will continue to flaunt decorum, lie, tease, and find excitement in intrigue. Jane will not have an easy time in her marriage. Given the alternatives in a world where the portionless, accomplished young woman must be "out" on one market or another, however, Austen shows that, in a world of few choices, Jane Fairfax has made the best choice she could.

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