

Studies in English

Volume 9

Article 8

1968

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Sarah Latimer Marshall
University of Mississippi

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Recommended Citation

Marshall, Sarah Latimer (1968) "Rationality and Delusion in Jane Austen's Emma," *Studies in English*: Vol. 9 , Article 8.

Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/ms_studies_eng/vol9/iss1/8

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RATIONALITY AND DELUSION IN JANE AUSTIN'S *EMMA*

by Sarah Latimer Marshall

Rationality informs delusion in Jane Austen's *Emma*. That Miss Austen uses what C. S. Lewis recognizes as the "great abstract nouns of the classical English moralists"¹ seems appropriate. What is it, however, that renders her work in Mr. Lewis's words: "hard, clear, definable"? Analysis of Miss Austen's manipulation of one of these great abstractions, the concept of rationality (which embraces sound judgment, good sense, sensibleness, reasonableness, even sanity) helps to define *Emma* while it answers the question.

Although the numerous appearances in the novel of the word *rational* or of its implications suggest the importance of the concept to the work, the significance lies in the author's brilliant architectonic handling. Serving as it does to implement her irony, linked as it is signally to each important marriage or engagement blunder, the concept of rationality (as it is or as it merely seems to be) undergirds *Emma*. For, although some critics consider that marriage or match-making is the subject of the novel, deception of self or of others seems paramount. Emma's trust in her own judgment—what Howard S. Babb labels her "most basic trait"²—initially causes her self-deception and leads ultimately to her deception about others. Deception in the work, then, pivots around judgment. Emma's illusion

¹ C. S. Lewis, "A Note on Jane Austen," in *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Ian Watt (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 28.

² Howard S. Babb, *Jane Austen's Novels* (Hamden, Connecticut: The Shoe String Press, Inc., 1967), p. 176.

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about her judgment—that it is sound and rational—produces the over-riding irony of the book. Her illusion, in fact, is the great irony. The concomitant and sometimes resultant illusions of others deepen the entanglements and enrich the novel. Consequently the study of the relationship between rationality and delusion illuminates both plot and character.

Miss Austen carefully establishes and builds on Mr. Knightley's good sense. She, in fact, introduces him as "a sensible man,"³ she puts words of good sense into his mouth, she reveals his admiration for good sense, and she illustrates his consistently rational behavior. That this man, who seems thus to epitomize good sense, can succumb to imagination, can substitute the veil of illusion for reality, seems impossible. But even his rationality does not remain inviolate. And although in a sense Miss Austen's insistence on Mr. Knightley's rational behavior and his exercise of good judgment positions him as a foil for Emma or as a yardstick against which her misjudgments can be measured, the fact that he does succumb to illusion, instead of weakening his character, humanizes him and adds to the irony inherent in the word *rational*.

Jane Austen's own words about Emma—that in her she planned to create "a heroine whom no one but myself will much like"⁴—seem suspect. The contrary idea persists: that Miss Austen would have been disappointed had others not liked her Emma. Why else did she present Emma sympathetically? To be sure, Emma's actions are not always laudable, but the heroine is almost universally liked; she is spoiled and proud, but she is not irreparably so.

Carefully, deftly, the author bestows on her heroine every reason to be as she is—selfish. "Handsome, clever, and rich" (p. 1), Emma has always been sheltered, pampered, and en-

³ Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. by Lionel Trilling (Riverside Edition; Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1957), p. 4; hereafter page numbers of quoted material, referring to this edition, will be inserted in the text.

⁴ James Edward Austen-Leigh, *Memoir of Jane Austen*, ed. by R. W. Chapman (first published 1870; Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 157.

Emma ignores the praise and volunteers the information that Harriet has already refused the proposal. Her news shocks Mr. Knightley, who reacts by telling Emma that Harriet's refusal shows that "she is not a sensible girl" and that Martin "is as much her superior in sense as in situation" (p. 45). But Emma blithely insists that Harriet has better sense than Mr. Knightley recognizes. Exasperated, Mr. Knightley, who does not deny Emma's capability for sound judgment, sadly objects to her abuse of her faculty: "Better be without sense, than misapply it as you do" (p. 48).

Accurately assessing Emma's influence in the refusal, Mr. Knightley warns her that if she thinks Mr. Elton will marry Harriet, Emma has misjudged the ambitious young vicar too. Mr. Knightley knows that behind Mr. Elton's sentimental words lies rationality of action and that, regardless of her beauty, the vicar will not marry a penniless girl. Both vexed, the two arrive at an impasse and part. To herself, however, Emma admits that she does not "feel so absolutely satisfied with herself, so entirely convinced that her opinions were right and her adversary's wrong, as Mr. Knightly" (p. 50). But this twinge does not long deter Emma. She continues to misinterpret; she encourages Harriet's consideration of Mr. Elton.

Emma's refusal to recognize Mr. Elton's charade as a compliment to herself furnishes a ludicrous incident. Even though Mr. Elton tells Emma that his poem is not for Miss Smith's collection, Emma thrusts it into the young girl's hand and proceeds to entangle it for her. Undeterred even by such words as "Thy ready wit" and knowing full well Harriet's lack of cleverness, Emma nevertheless persuades her friend that Mr. Elton is indeed courting her.

Even Emma's brother-in-law, Mr. John Knightley, who brings his family from London for a visit, needs only a little time to assess the situation. Shortly after his arrival he warns Emma that she herself is Mr. Elton's object and that her behavior seems to be encouraging the man. Again blithely, Emma muses on "the mistakes which people of high pretensions to judgment" (p. 86) ever fall into; again blindly, she fails to recog-

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nize her own "high pretensions to judgment." Mr. Elton's final declaration of his love for Emma can only result in ill feeling, in this case lasting ill feeling. That Emma could have considered Harriet an appropriate wife for the vicar affronts him. Too late Emma recognizes the Knightley brothers' penetration and laments her own active participation. But characteristically, wondering how to soften the blow for Harriet, Emma considers the possibility of another suitor. With such yeast her imagination begins to ferment anew.

Almost immediately, however, Emma's concern about Harriet becomes eclipsed by the anticipation of Frank Churchill's visit to the Westons. Here again Mr. Knightley's idea of good sense conflicts with Emma's. Emma, whose imagination has already magnified her ex-governess's step-son, excuses his delayed visit to his father. She tells Mr. Knightley that she can understand Frank's difficulty in leaving his guardians. But Mr. Knightley insists that "a sensible man" (p. 113) would have had no difficulty in declaring and administering his filial duty. Emma argues for the young man's dependence upon the Churchills, while Mr. Knightley just as stoutly maintains that Frank should have questioned unworthy attitudes in their authority "as he became rational" (p. 114). The implication that Frank's maturity has not included his rational faculty is strong. Thus, before the young man makes his appearance, his good sense seems questionable.

Notwithstanding Mr. Knightley's comments, Emma's first sight of Frank Churchill confirms the opinion that her imagination has formed. Immediately she notices his good looks and his poise, important characteristics to Emma. "Quick and sensible" (p. 146) he seems. His return on the next day to Highbury with Mrs. Weston confirms Emma's previous opinion; this visit affords her enough time in which to form a "reasonable judgment" (p. 151). To be sure, her opinion is soon shaken by Frank's journey all the way to London ostensibly to have his hair cut. Such behavior hardly accorded even "with the rationality of plan" (p. 157) that Emma had discerned in him. But since she wants him to be what she thinks he is, she soon makes light of his silly action. In fact, her imagination produces

couraged, even in her deception about her judgment. Surrounded, almost smothered, by her doting, valetudinarian father and her somewhat worshipful governess, Emma can be no other person. Miss Austen more than suggests her heroine at the outset; she exposes Emma completely: "The real evils indeed of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself; these were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments" (p. 1). The following sentence contains the germ: "The danger, however, was at present so unperceived, that they did not by any means rank as misfortunes with her" (p. 1). The remainder of the novel is concerned with the perception of the evils of Emma's situation, the disadvantages which contribute to her deception.

Elizabeth Jenkins' implication that Emma would have behaved rationally had she been busier needs clarification.⁵ Emma stays busy. She is perpetually concerned with other people's business. That she is allowed her own way and that she feels herself capable of ordering the lives of others encourages her in her busy-ness. Her blunders grow plausibly, therefore, from her imperceptions. These blunders admittedly provoke momentary dissatisfaction with Emma; her pride in her judgment provokes even more—an actual distaste. But the twinges of conscience that follow the blunders and deepen as the novel progresses help to gain sympathy for Emma. Unsympathetically pitted against Mr. Knightley, Emma would have gone down in defeat, obscured by his good sense. Instead, she emerges from her education out of deception a heroine appropriate even as wife to the nearly incomparable Mr. Knightley.

Rationality applied to blindness and blunders helps untangle the web of *Emma*. An ambiguously sensible atmosphere surrounds Emma's first blunder, the Smith-Martin-Elton fiasco, ambiguous since what seems sensible to one seems not sensible to another. Snobbishly Emma attributes good sense to Harriet Smith because the orphaned parlour-boarder seemed "grateful

⁵ Elizabeth Jenkins, *Jane Austen* (New York: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1949), p. 285.

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for being admitted to Hartfield" (p. 15). On such a superficial basis Emma weaves her first deception. Even though Mr. Knightley's tenant, Robert Martin, appears sensible to Emma at the first meeting, even though she admits that his letter of proposal to Harriet expresses good sense, and even though Emma later repeats that he is, no doubt, "a sensible man" (p. 37), she ignores these rational deductions. Her imagination has transformed the parlour-boarder, has placed her out of the reach of a mere farmer, although he is a man of sense. Ironically, Emma believes that she maintains a penetrating insight into Harriet's situation. Undeterred by Harriet's blighted parentage, disregarding Harriet's lack of cleverness, Emma decides to sponsor the young orphan. She convinces herself that "it would be an interesting, and certainly a very kind undertaking; highly becoming her own situation in life, her leisure, and powers" (p. 16). Here, as elsewhere, Emma believes that she exercises her reason even when, as Joseph M. Duffy comments, "she is most under the influence of her imagination."⁶

Mr. Knightley mistrusts Emma's growing intimacy with Harriet. Seeing both girls accurately and fearing the result of their relationship, he voices his fear to Mrs. Weston, whose love of Emma serves to blind Emma's ex-governess. Mrs. Weston cannot admit that any harm will come from the uneven friendship; she twits Mr. Knightley: "I either depend more upon Emma's good sense than you do, or am more anxious for her present comfort" (p. 28). Here Mrs. Weston reveals that she wears blinders not only regarding Emma but also in regard to Mr. Knightley. In truth, Mr. Knightley knows Emma well enough to fear her good sense; he remains anxious about her comfort in a more real sense than does anybody; he is even anxious about the comfort of her conscience.

When Mr. Knightley suggests Robert Martin as Harriet's husband to Emma, their confrontation revolves around *good sense*. Mr. Knightley bestows upon the farmer high praise: "I never hear better sense from any one than Robert Martin" (p. 44).

⁶ Joseph M. Duffy, Jr., "Emma: The Awakening from Innocence," *ELH*, XXI (March, 1954), 43.

an equally silly rationalization: "Silly things do cease to be silly if they are done by sensible people in an impudent way" (p. 163). She has prejudged Frank as sensible; she is determined to maintain her fiction. And because she has earmarked him for Harriet, Emma continues to misconstrue the subsequent events. Her fabrication of the mysterious donor of Jane Fairfax's piano-forte; her illusion that Frank has fallen in love with her; her refusal to recognize his many appearances at the Bateses, where Jane is visiting—all indicate Emma's willing subjection to her imagination.

Before the second engagement blunder becomes fully apparent, the third has begun. Its nexus to the others lies in another misapplication of *sensible*. Miss Austen, indeed, cleverly foreshadows the outcome with that one word. Emma—musing on Harriet's tender heart, on her own lack of this quality, and on its importance to a wife, especially to the wife of a sensible man—furnishes the clue. Here Emma equates sensible with Frank Churchill; but Harriet equates sensible with Mr. Knightley. Henceforth, Harriet interprets the subject of Emma's every remark as Mr. Knightley, when in reality Emma is speaking of Frank. Miss Austen's artistry renders the situation plausible. No names appear in the conversations. Because of this initial misunderstanding of the identity of the sensible man, the subsequent incredible events become believable.

Emma and Harriet are not alone in their blindness, and Emma is not the only match-maker. In their desire to promote a romance between Emma and Frank, the Westons overlook his numerous attentions to the Bateses. Not content with one romance, Mrs. Weston imagines another: one between Jane Fairfax and Mr. Knightley. When Mrs. Weston mentions this possibility to Emma, Emma's instant reaction, "Mr. Knightley must not marry!" (p. 173) reveals more about Emma than she herself knows. She neither recognizes the extent of her love for Mr. Knightley nor her proprietary attitude toward him for what it really is. Ironically, Emma, whose imagination has no bounds, accuses Mrs. Weston of allowing her fancy to run free. But the seed has been planted. And henceforth Emma will read more

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into Mr. Knightley's actions than they imply while Harriet simultaneously misinterprets them.

Frank's return after Mrs. Churchill's two month illness prompts the Westons to renew their plans for a ball at the Crown. The ball masks more illusion. Emma senses that Frank's absence has lessened his love for her, but she still mistakenly attributes his restlessness to agitation in her presence. He is, of course, awaiting Jane's arrival. Emma, disturbed by Mr. Knightley's failure to dance, dislikes his thus classing himself with "husbands, and fathers, and whist-players" (p. 254). She still however, does not understand her perturbation. Mr. Knightley, accurately recognizing Mr. Elton's refusal to dance with Harriet as an insult not only to Harriet but also to Emma, pities the humiliated girl. Consequently he dances with Harriet. Both he and the grateful Emma are unaware of the meaning that Harriet attaches to his action. After witnessing other insults by the Eltons at the ball, Mr. Knightley unwittingly buttresses Emma's opinion that Harriet is suitable for Frank when he tells Emma that the young girl has first rate qualities that Mrs. Elton lacks—qualities "infinitely to be preferred by any man of sense and taste" (p. 258). Emma, who believes Frank to be such a man, assumes Mr. Knightley's tacit consent for the romance. Thus the ball serves to heighten the numerous deceptions: Emma's deceptions about Frank's love for herself, Harriet's suitability for Frank, and Mr. Knightley's concurrence in such a match; and Harriet's deception concerning Mr. Knightley as her approved suitor.

After the ball Emma anticipates a happy summer which would include certain ingredients: "Harriet rational, Frank Churchill not too much in love, and Mr. Knightley not wanting to quarrel with her" (p. 259). When a few days later Harriet relinquishes her treasures—relics of her imaginary love affair with Mr. Elton—to Emma, Harriet offers their destruction as proof that she has grown rational. Emma interprets this move as a portent of her happy summer, never dreaming that the encounter will in reality produce deeper entanglements. And Harriet's subsequent confession that she will never marry quickens Emma's fertile imagination. Emma, believing that the

basis of Harriet's decision lies in her awareness of the superiority of Frank Churchill's situation in life, suggests that such differences have been overcome before. Since no names are mentioned, Emma's remarks merely encourage Harriet's affection for Mr. Knightley, for now Harriet believes that she has Emma's approval.

Throughout the summer the comedy of entanglements continues to revolve around misconceptions. Mr. Knightley senses something between Frank and Jane, while the Westons promote Frank for Emma and Emma intends him for Harriet. When Mr. Knightley tells Emma of his suspicion, she laughingly accuses him of being too free with his imagination. Her confidence that nothing exists between the two staggers Mr. Knightley. Very soon her turn to be staggered arrives. Frank and Jane's secret engagement becomes known. The poor Westons fear Emma's reaction; Mr. Knightley, who has misinterpreted Emma's interest in Frank, fears Emma's reaction; Emma wonders how Harriet will stand this second blow. But Emma soon convinces the Westons that she never did love Frank, and Harriet assures Emma that the engagement means nothing to her. Next comes the staggering blow. Harriet confides her love for Mr. Knightley, her belief that he returns her affection, and her assumption—which stems from their different interpretations of the sensible man—that Emma approves. Harriet's confidence rends Emma's illusion. Suddenly, as the force of her own love for Mr. Knightley penetrates, Emma faces her irrational behavior and her lack of sensitivity to others. Her remembrance of Mr. Knightley's opinion of Harriet's qualities adds to her despair. She laments every facet that the sudden illumination has revealed except one—the depth of her attachment for Mr. Knightley. The saddened Emma, who recently anticipated a happy summer, now only hopes that future winters, though they may be less filled with gaiety, will find her “more rational” (p. 332).

The sun soon shines again on Emma. Mr. Knightley's reappearance removes the remaining illusions: his concern that Emma cares for Frank and Emma's belief that Mr. Knightley returns Harriet's affection. After Emma assures him, however, that the Churchill-Fairfax engagement means nothing to her,

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Mr. Knightley reveals his love for Emma. In half an hour all "ignorance, jealousy, or distrust" (p. 339) disappears. Only Harriet remains to cloud Emma's happiness. Again Harriet's hopes will be destroyed; again Emma is responsible, although inadvertently, for these hopes. By now Emma wishes that she had never seen the unfortunate girl; Emma's opinion that "it really was too much to hope even of Harriet, that she could be in love with more than three men in one year" (p. 354) speaks characteristically not only of Emma, as she contemplates another match for Harriet, but also of Harriet, the depth of whose attachments remains questionable.

Emma, who still maintains faith in her own judgment, arranges for Harriet to spend some time with the John Knightleys in London—time which Emma hopes will offer Harriet diversion and peace of mind, thus hastening her recovery. And besides, Emma can more fully enjoy her own newly discovered love free from Harriet's palling presence. This time Emma has judged accurately; the therapy works. Soon Mr. Knightley brings Emma the news of Harriet's engagement to Robert Martin, the sensible farmer. Both Emma and Mr. Knightley admit to errors—errors which had turned on misjudgment. Emma had failed to recognize the value of Martin's good sense, and Mr. Knightley had judged Harriet too harshly.

With the disappearance of this last cloud, Emma reveals her maturity: "What had she to wish for? Nothing, but to grow more worthy of him, whose intentions and judgment had been ever so superior to her own. Nothing, but that the lessons of her past folly might teach her humility and circumspection in future" (p. 374). Since Emma will remain Emma, her humility and her circumspection may fluctuate. To be sure, her awareness of the feelings of others has deepened, but her joy in Mrs. Weston's baby daughter suggests future match-making. Mr. Knightley, however, will be there, as he has been through the years, to show Emma the truth. Thus Emma's assessment of Harriet's ultimate situation extends to Emma's own: "She would be placed in the midst of those who loved her, and who had better sense than herself" (p. 379). And thus the aura of

good sense hovers over the end of the work as it did the beginning.

Since this umbrella-like atmosphere, indeed, pervades *Emma*; since the characters—whose disparate viewpoints distort the concepts—reveal their dependence on common sense and judgment; and since the consequent distortion of judgment or misconstruction of common sense causes the major blunders; the concept of rationality provides, in a sense, the web for *Emma*—the web in which Emma, Harriet, Mr. Elton, Mr. and Mrs. Weston, and even Mr. Knightley become entangled. Miss Austen's penchant for irony enabled her to spin the web from the fabric of one abstract concept, that of rationality. In *Emma* people and situations are seldom what they seem, and what seems rational to one appears not sensible to another. But Miss Austen's genius for manipulating truth and illusion produced in *Emma* a likable heroine, who ultimately rues her misjudgments and reveres Mr. Knightley's judgment, and in *Emma* a durable, sparkling prose comedy that remains, in Arnold Kettle's words, "a warm and living work of art."⁷

⁷ Arnold Kettle, *An Introduction to the English Novel* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1960), I, 100.