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Equivocal Beings:
Politics, Gender, and
Sentimentality in the
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AFTERWORD

My copy

"Not at all what a man should be!":
Remaking English Manhood in
Emma

I began this book about politics, sentimentality, and gender in late-eighteenth-century fiction by observing how Austen's achievement seemed to erase that of her slightly older contemporaries. For many years, it was universally acknowledged that Austen defined herself negatively vis-à-vis the figures I gather here, shunning the plots of Wollstonecraft's radical feminism, Radcliffe's exaggerated gothicism, and Burney's escalated melodrama, and opting instead to exercise the cameoist's meticulously understated craft. But effects are not intentions. In *Northanger Abbey*, that novel which was to have been her first published work, Austen launches into a spirited defense of her chosen genre over and against those who would decry it as "only a novel." Rather than proceed through negations, she inaugurates her career by asserting solidarity with a distinctively feminine tradition of novelists that developed in the late eighteenth century, a tradition in which Burney and Radcliffe ranked very high. Though Wollstonecraft remained an unmentionable throughout Austen's career, there is ample evidence that she too was a figure Austen reckoned with. Indeed, in many respects *Emma* actually succeeds at Wollstonecraft's grand aim better than Wollstonecraft did: diminishing the authority of male sentimentality, and reimmasculating men and women alike with a high sense of national purpose.

This claim may sound highfalutin'. Given the lingering grip of janeism in Anglophone culture, however, virtually any large claim about Austen tends to sound excessive and desecratory.¹ Besides, no less discriminating a critic than Lionel Trilling himself advanced a similar thesis in 1957, when he declared that *Emma* "is touched—lightly but indubitably—by national feeling." With its tribute to "English verdure, English culture, English comfort," *Emma* tends, as Trilling put it, "to conceive of a specifically English ideal of life." As it so happens, Trilling also regards *Emma* as what I have been calling an

"equivocal being": "The extraordinary thing about Emma," he argues, "is that she has a moral life as a man has a moral life." Beyond alluding to de Tocqueville now and then, however, Trilling is not interested in pondering what these assertions mean historically. By calling *Emma* an "idyll"—a genre he considers definitionally cut off from "real" history—he forecloses the possibility that *Emma* may be enmeshed in the national ideals of its period, just as he insists that Emma's manliness has no relation to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century debates about women's rights when he remarks that she possesses it not "as a special instance, as an example of a new kind of woman, which is the way George Eliot's Dorothea Brooke has her moral life, but quite as a matter of course, as a given quality of her nature."² For Trilling, these assertions remain at some distance from each other: there is and can be no connection between Emma's manly moral life and *Emma's* "national feeling." By historicizing the treatment of femininity and masculinity in *Emma*, I will attempt in the following pages to integrate the arguments about female manliness and national feeling which Trilling keeps apart, and in the process to show that Austen engages the work of her predecessors more positively and more intricately than is generally supposed.

In part because Austen's canonization—unlike Wollstonecraft's, Radcliffe's, or Burney's—was so steady and so assured, we have had as a rule very little historical imagination about her and about our relation to her. Before considering the subjects of nationality and gender in *Emma* it will be instructive to review Austenian commentary on this subject as well. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's paper "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl" was savagely attacked in the press for having violated the monumentally self-evident truth that Austen had the good fortune to predate such indecorous sexual irregularities as homo- and autoeroticism. In her novels, the supposition runs, men are gentlemen; women are ladies; and the desires of gentlemen and ladies for each other are unproblematic, inevitable, and mutually fulfilling.³ As any full-time Austenian knows, however, a lively and explicit interest in the sexual irregularities of Emma Woodhouse has been the stuff of "establishment" criticism for almost fifty years now. Indeed, Trilling's assertion about Emma's manliness was certainly the least original thing about his essay. For post-World War II critics writing on Austen immediately before Trilling did, Emma was as "unsexed" a female as any of the heroines I have assembled here. The difference between late eighteenth- and mid-twentieth-century notions of what it means to be "unsexed" is that discourses of deviance drawn from psychoanalysis came to occupy this category during our century, so that far from signifying immodest heterosexuality, it has now meant being homosexual, manhating, and/or frigid. The sexual ambiguities of Radcliffe's and Burney's happily or unhappily equivocal heroines were, to be sure, spared commentary on their deviance by literary scholars only because no one paid attention to them at all. Wollstonecraft was not always

so lucky. In *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (1947), Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham maintained that modern-day "feminists" too were unsexed, and that they had Wollstonecraft to thank for their debilitatingly "severe case of penis-envy."⁴

Postwar discussions of Emma Woodhouse were rarely as clinical as that of Lundberg and Farnham, but they were fixated on Emma's lack of heterosexual feeling to such a degree that Emma's supposed *coldness* became the central question of the novel: was Emma responsive to men? could she ever really give herself in love, and thus give up trying to control other people's lives? would marriage "cure" her? Ever since Edmund Wilson's review essay "A Long Talk about Jane Austen" (1944), Emma was commonly charged with lesbianism. Wilson does not actually use the l-word, but his attention to Emma's lack of "interest . . . in men" and to "her infatuations with women"—along with his allusion to a certain, unspecified "Freudian formula"—makes his point clear. Pooh-poohing G. B. Stern's and Sheila Kaye-Smith's book *Speaking of Jane Austen* (1944) for treating characters as "actual people . . . and speculating on their lives beyond the story," Wilson does the same, arguing that Emma's offstage lesbianism is that "something outside the picture which is never made explicit in the story but which has to be recognized by the reader before it is possible for him to appreciate the book." In the following meditation on the conclusion, especially as it relates to Knightley's imprudent decision to move in at Hartfield, Wilson trails off into a fantasy about ménages-à-trois that threaten the domestic and erotic sovereignty to which a husband is entitled:

Emma, who was relatively indifferent to men, was inclined to infatuations with women; and what reason is there to believe that her marriage with Knightley would prevent her from going on as she had done before: from discovering a new young lady as appealing as Harriet Smith, dominating her personality, and situating her in a dream-world of Emma's own in which Emma would be able to confer on her all kinds of imaginary benefits, but which would have no connection whatever with her condition or her real possibilities. This would worry and exasperate Knightley and be hard for him to do anything about. He would be lucky if he did not presently find himself saddled, along with the other awkward features of the arrangement, with one of Emma's young protégées as an actual member of the household.⁵

Try as Wilson did to dignify his commentary by differentiating it from the merely gossipy discussions of the women critics he is reviewing, his dilatory sixth-act fantasy about Emma's extramarital infatuations with women and her autonomy from male authority is on a par not only with Miss Stern's effusions but also with Miss Bates's. And like Miss Bates's prattle, I hasten to add, Wilson's here is in its own way exceedingly sensitive to the drama rep-

resented or hinted at in the novel.

On the subject of Emma's sexual irregularity, Marvin Mudrick is Wilson's direct descendant. For him, Emma's "attention never falls so warmly upon a man" as on Harriet, whom she observes "with far more warmth than anyone else." Wilson's discussion of Emma's homosexuality, though aligned in sympathy with a husband bewildered to find himself displaced by a woman, nevertheless takes the liberal tone of a man of the world. Mudrick is more censorious: Emma's interest in women is pathological, stemming from the same defensive fear of commitment, the same detachment, and the same need to control that he diagnoses in Austen herself on virtually every page of *Irony as Defense and Discovery*: a woman's emotions ought to be passionately committed to a man, even if this means she might not, then, wish to write brilliant novels. But when Mudrick's scolding ceases, his discussion of Emma is astute: "Emma's interest in Harriet is not merely mistress-and-pupil, but quite emotional and particular: for a time, at least . . . Emma is in love with her: a love unphysical and inadmissible, even perhaps undefinable in such a society; and therefore safe.⁶ Without knowing and certainly without intending it, Mudrick verges here on a theory of the closet: aware that sex and gender are not equivalent, and alert to the relation between sexuality, gender, and social power, he suggests that sexuality is a discursive practice: "inadmissible" forms of sexuality become undiscussable, "undefinable," and therefore under certain circumstances, even "safe."

Wilson's and Mudrick's essays on *Emma* had an incalculable impact on Austen studies from the 1950s through the mid-1970s. Their work is discernible, as we have already seen, in Trilling's Introduction to *Emma*; they are also behind Mark Schorer's widely reprinted "The Humiliation of Emma Woodhouse" (1959), which accepts the gothically strained love of Jane Fairfax for Frank Churchill as wholesome and normal and treats Emma's chilliness as a pathology deserving of the wondrously salubrious humiliation heralded in his title;⁷ and finally they are the targets of Wayne Booth's indignation in his "Control of Distance in Jane Austen's Emma" (1961). This immeasurably influential essay, which links an intensely normative reading of Emma to the genre of fiction itself, attacks Mudrick and Wilson for suggesting that Emma "has not been cured of her 'infatuations with women'" and thus for doubting that "marriage to an excellent, amiable, good, and attractive man is the best thing that can happen to" her. For Booth—and a generation of Aristotelian-oriented formalists—the novel's comic structure and moral lesson are the same. Because heterosexuality is encoded teleologically onto a rhetoric of fiction, Emma's drama, her "development" and "growth" are inseparable from her learning to desire a man. Booth's rebuttal equates the perversity of women who indulge such "infatuations" with the perversity of novel critics who refuse to accept a happy ending when they see one.⁸

Clearly, a long time before feminists came along, "classic" Austenian

critics considered the sex and gender transgression of Emma their business. The generation of male academics returning to American culture after the war made Emma go the way of Rosie the Rivetter, and enforced imperatives of masculine dominance and feminine domesticity without examining the historical contingencies of these imperatives and their own investment in them. Pained as I am by the cheeriness of their misogyny, I also think they were basically right about Emma: quite susceptible to the stirrings of homoerotic pleasure, Emma is enchanted by Harriet's "soft blue eyes" (E 23, 24); displaying all the captivating enjoyment of "a mind delighted with its own ideas" (E 24), Emma is highly autonomous and autoerotic; and, finally, displaying shockingly little reverence for dramas of heterosexual love, Emma's energies and desires are *not* fully contained within the grid imposed by the courtship plot. By restoring Austen to the specific social and political context I have been reconstructing throughout this book, we can examine in a more sustained and responsible way the slippages of sex and gender which post-World War II critics discussed by fits and starts.

Emma indeed pays conspicuous attention to gender definition. But whereas mid-twentieth-century critics were mostly preoccupied with Emma's waywardness as a woman, *Emma* itself evinces amazingly little anxiety on the subject. This omission itself is highly unusual, and it demands an explanation. Many late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century novels responded directly to Mary Wollstonecraft and/or her "disciple" Mary Hays by introducing into their novels protofeminists who challenged the ways in which sexual difference had been defined. In the same year Austen started *Emma* she also read Burney's belated *The Wanderer* (1814), where as we have amply seen, Elinor Joddrel torments herself as well as the women and men around her with her doomed feminist mania. Austen also knew and admired Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801), featuring the mannish Harriot Freke, who erupts into feminist diatribes. It is also likely that Austen read Charlotte Smith's *Montalbert* (1795), which includes an "Amazonian" who is (like Emma) destitute of vanity about her personal appearance and who exhibits other "symptoms of a masculine spirit" that make the proper heroine cringe with horror;⁹ Elizabeth Hamilton's *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800), whose Bridgetina Botherim is a malicious spoof on Mary Hays; and Amelia Opie's more sympathetic *Adeline Mowbray* (1805), whose heroine strives not only for emancipation from specific sexual mores, particularly as these relate to the institution of marriage, but also for the autonomous, self-responsible "moral life" Trilling detects in Emma.

Considered in the context of these heroines, Austen's prediction that no one but herself would like Emma makes enormous sense. Although precedents for doing so were abundantly at hand, Austen never faults Emma's "masculine spirit." Postwar critics groove on what they are pleased to call Emma's *humiliation*, her *chastisement*, her *submission*. But *Emma* is not

interested in subjecting the masculine independence of its heroine to disciplinary correctives.¹⁰ To be sure, Emma has flawed and unattractive ideas about the class structure of her world—and unlike her feminist prototypes, she is ridiculed for being too little rather than too much of a democrat—but we are never invited to consider her infractions against “femininity” per se to be the cause of her problem as a snob. On the contrary, the narrator trots out Emma’s sister, Isabella Knightley, as a “model of right feminine happiness” (E 140), an indulgent mother and adoring spouse, as blissfully oblivious to the faults of her husband’s temper as she is to the vapidity of her own conversation. Rather than pathologize Emma’s deviations from “right feminine happiness,” the novel introduces Isabella for the sole purpose of making Emma look better by comparison. The narrator says that Isabella’s “striking inferiorities” (E 433) throw Emma’s strengths into higher relief in Knightley’s own mind. And when the novel explicitly describes Emma’s behavior in ways that bend gender, it does so without the slightest hint of horror. As Mr. Knightley puts it, for example, taking care of Emma at Hartfield proves a sort of conjugal training camp for Miss Taylor: “You were preparing yourself to be an excellent wife all the time you were at Hartfield . . . on the very material matrimonial point of submitting your own will, and doing as you were bid” (E 38). While the strong-willed Emma here is a surrogate husband, claiming submission as marital privilege, elsewhere she comes near to usurping what Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* called the exclusively male “prerogative of choice”:

“Whom are you going to dance with?” asked Mr. Knightley.
[Emma] hesitated a moment, and then replied, “With you, if you will ask me.” (E 331)

It is not necessary to overstate this point. Austen’s Emma Woodhouse is not Hays’s Emma Courtney, who proposes marriage outright. Unlike the latter and other protofeminist characters who occupy novels by Austen’s contemporaries, Emma Woodhouse stops short of transgressing at least one very important gender rule: by the end of the novel, she finds herself in the certifiably orthodox position of having passively to wait to be proposed to. But the ending does not entirely cancel out what has come before, however it may delimit it. The novel basically accepts as attractive and as legitimate Emma’s forcefulness. As Knightley says when comparing Emma’s handwriting to that of others, “Emma’s hand is the strongest” (E 297), and this observation is tinged with fondness rather than censure.

Where this novel is concerned with gender transgression, it is from the masculine, not the feminine side. What “true” masculinity is like—what a “man” is, how a man speaks and behaves, what a man really wants—is the subject of continual debate, even when characters appear to be discussing women. The following sampling is typical of the novel’s tendentiousness on

bands
reads
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the ever-recurrent subject *man*:

“A man of six or seven-and-twenty can take care of himself.” (E 14)

“A man always imagines a woman to be ready for anybody who asks her.” “Nonsense! a man does not imagine any such thing.” (E 60)

“There is one thing, Emma, which a man can always do, if he chuses, and that is, his duty.” (E 146)

“I can allow for the fears of the child but not of the man.” (E 148)

“General benevolence, but not general friendship made a man what he ought to be.” (E 320)

“She has not the open temper which a man would wish for in a wife.” (E 288)

“He is a disgrace to the name of man.” (E 426)

“A man would always wish to give a woman a better home than the one he takes her from.” (E 428)

Emma attaches no opprobrium to the manly Emma, nor does it—unlike a novel such as *Mansfield Park*—dwell on the (contradictory) qualities typifying a truly feminine woman. But it persistently asks how a *man* should behave and what he ought to do. Committing itself to the discussion of true manhood and disparaging men who do not measure up, *Emma* demonstrates that manhood is *not*, as Trilling supposed, “a matter of course . . . a given quality” of a man’s “nature,” any more than manhood can ever be a matter of course of a woman’s nature. This is my point. “Classic” Austenian critics assumed the constancy of feminine norms, and policed Emma’s womanhood accordingly, but they sometimes cast an eye towards errant males too, even if they once again did not imagine that masculinity could be something the novel contests and constructs. Edmund Wilson appears to have been the first to call Mr. Woodhouse a “silly old woman,” and this epithet has proved horribly durable. Mudrick once again follows suit when he declares that Mr. Woodhouse possesses no “masculine trait,” that he is “really an old woman.” Refraining from the grossness of name-calling, others beheld Mr. Woodhouse’s anility with fascination or alarm. For Joseph Duffy, Mr. Woodhouse is “otiose and androgynous” much like Lady Bertram, a judgment echoed by Trilling years later. For Tony Tanner, on the other hand, Mr. Woodhouse is a gender-derelict of dangerous proportions, a “moribund patriarch,” the “type of male who would bring his society—any society—to

a stop," the "weak emasculate voice of definitive negations and terminations." Mr. Woodhouse's transgressions—his "weak emasculate" qualities—would spell doom for all of society, if it weren't for the counterexample of Knightley, whom Tanner calls the "responsible active male."¹¹

The assumption behind these readings is that there is one, continuous mode of manliness against which Mr. Woodhouse is to be judged and found lacking, though the assumption is at odds with their perception that manliness is already multiple and problematic. When Trilling attempted (and chivalrously so) to defend Mr. Woodhouse from Mudrick's attacks by insisting that in the novel he is a "kind-hearted, polite old gentleman," he was right in more ways than one: Mr. Woodhouse is both a kindly old gentleman and an old kind of gentleman.¹² We see his old-fashionedness first in his resistance to change—his desire to keep the family circle unbroken, his wish to retain the hospitable customs of his youth, his "strong habit of regard for every old acquaintance" (E 92); and second in his attitude towards women—as Emma puts it, Mr Woodhouse loves "any thing that pays woman a compliment. He has the tenderest spirit of gallantry towards us all" (E 77). Historically considered, far from being an unusual, deviant, emasculated, or otherwise deficient figure, Mr. Woodhouse represents the ideal of sentimental masculinity described throughout this book. The qualities that typify him—sensitivity, tenderness, "benevolent nerves," allegiance to the good old ways, courtesies to the fair sex, endearing irrationality, and even slowness, frailty, and ineptitude itself—also typify the venerated paternal figures crowding the pages of Burney and Radcliffe, to say nothing of those of Edmund Burke.

During the 1790s, a man's "benevolent nerves" carried a national agenda: they were formed by and guaranteed the continuation of the charm, the beauty, the hospitality, and the goodness of Old England itself, which liked its gallant old ways even if they did not make sense, and which won our love, veneration, and loyalty. In a world where the "age of chivalry" was ebbing, where the courtesies of the old regime were being displaced by the cold economic calculations of the new one, a Woodhousian man of feeling held out for civility; his attachment to the old ways preserved continuity and order, while qualities such as energy, penetration, forcefulness, brusqueness, bluntness, and decision were deemed dangerous, volatile, and cold. The heroically sentimental "man of feeling" presided over his neighborhood and family by virtue of the love he inspired in others, not by virtue of the power he wielded over them; his sensitivity legitimized his authority, enabling him to rule by weakness rather than force. In Burney's *Camilla*, Sir Hugh Tyrold never holds more sway in the minds and hearts of his extended family than when he weeps and takes to his bed—which happens rather often. In Radcliffe's *Udolpho*, St. Aubert flinches when Quesnel plans to hew down "that noble chestnut, which has flourished for centuries, the glory of the estate!"

Mr. Woodhouse
old
gentle
masculinity
+
England

(MU 13); his tears make his injunctions sacred to his daughter, just as his faintness and infirmity consolidate as well as conceal his authority, making him a fitter object of "gallantry" than a woman like Emily. And in Burke's *Reflections*, Englishmen like Mr. Woodhouse are proud members of a "dull sluggish race" (RRF 106), and are celebrated for their instinctive aversion to change, their frankly irrational attachment to prejudices because they are prejudices, and their fond love for their "little platoon," their attachment "to the subdivision" (RRF 97), to diminutive, pathos-driven units of national identity.

Emma is written after the crisis that launched the reemergence of male sentimentality had abated. In it, this tradition of sentimental masculinity is archaic, and it has become somewhat of a joke. Mr. Woodhouse is dearly beloved and fondly indulged, but his sensitivity is not revered. The novel works instead to redefine masculinity. We will miss what is distinctive about Austen's achievement if we assume that masculine self-definitions were givens rather than qualities under reconstruction. Critics commonly agree that Mr. Knightley represents an ideal, but what has *not* been adequately appreciated, I think, is the novelty of that ideal, for by representing a "humane" rather than "gallant" hero, Austen desentimentalizes and deheterosexualizes virtue, and in the process makes it accessible to women as well. Twentieth-century critics assailed Mr. Woodhouse for "effeminacy," and as unpleasant as this charge is in its blend of misogyny and homophobia, there is a good deal in *Emma* that corroborates it, although the novel is careful to spare Mr. Woodhouse the full brunt of such opprobrium and to deflect it onto Mr. Elton and Frank Churchill instead.

Knightley frequently faults men for crossing the masculine/feminine divide. It is Mr. Woodhouse who first refers to Mr. Elton as a "pretty fellow," and coming from Mr. Woodhouse, this is a compliment to Elton's dapperness. From Knightley's viewpoint, however—the viewpoint generally endorsed by the narrator—male prettiness is small, weak, and self-preening. Mr. Knightley finds the company of fellow farmers such as Robert Martin and William Larkins just as absorbing, if not more so, than the society of women; but Mr. Elton disgraces himself in his studied attentions to women. In *Emma*, gallantry—that generous loyalty to rank and sex—rather than representing the acme of manliness, is figured as an effeminating proximity with and submission to women, and as patently absurd. Unlike *Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* is permeated with petticoat government, and heroes here show their mettle not by standing up to men with power and authority, but rather by resisting tyrannical female rule. True: Mr. Knightley impresses Emma by his heroic rescue of Harriet-in-distress; but he also proves himself to be a man by bringing bossy women—like Mrs. Elton—up short. Indeed, when "the great Mrs. Churchill" not only henpecks her husband but also bullies Frank Churchill, Mr. Knightley complains that Frank

lacks the gumption to stand up to her like a man and to do what is right by that man, his father: "If he would say so to her at once, in the tone of decision becoming a man, there would be no opposition made to his going" (E 146). As Emma says, Knightley is "not a gallant man, but he is a very humane one" (E 223), and this means not only that he resists the encroachments of female authority, but also that he does not make a big deal out of sexual difference and the benevolizing sentiments that emerge from it in sentimental culture. Implying a counterdiscourse of "true feeling," *Emma* suggests in a most unBurkean way that "humanity" and gallantry are two different things. The "gallant Mr. Elton" by contrast damns himself when he avows that it is impossible "to contradict a lady" (E 42); when he takes care "that nothing ungentlemanly, nothing that did not breathe a compliment to the sex should pass his lips" (E 70), and when he "sigh[s] and languish[es] and stud[ies] for compliments" (E 49). As presented here, gallantry is intrinsically nonsensical: artificial and disingenuous, taking on the very femininity it courts. No man, as the logic of this novel would have it, talks or believes such rubbish. When Mr. Elton is alone among men, as Mr. Knightley informs us, he makes it clear that he wants to marry into money and that his attentions to the fair sex are only a means to this end, that he is not really a man of feeling at all.

Knightley waxes even more magisterially censorious on the subject of Frank Churchill, rebuking his derelictions from true manliness in highly loaded terms. Before Knightley even meets Frank, he predicts that he will be a "chattering coxcomb" (E 150). Manifestly, the word "coxcomb"—like "puppy," "foppish," and "trifling," which come up later—connotes the shameful insufficiency already lambasted in Mr. Elton. But the epithet "chattering" interests me more here, *chatter* being a word reserved for feminine speech (like Miss Bates's)—excessive, undisciplined, diffuse, frivolous—and applied to a man, it is an insult. I dwell on this because *Emma* pays a lot of attention to the language of true manliness. Privileging gender over class, Austen grants to Robert Martin what Frank Churchill lacks: a manly style of writing, where manly is defined (by Emma herself) as "concise," "vigorous," "decided," and "strong" (E 51)—*strong*, of course, also being the term Knightley uses to describe the manly Emma's hand.¹³ Knightley delivers an emasculating blow to Frank Churchill when he declares of his handwriting, "I do not admire it. It is too small—wants strength. It is like woman's writing" (E 297). But Mr. Knightley casts what his company terms "base aspersions" on more than the mere size of Frank Churchill's handwriting. The related style of Frank's letter also degrades him as being somehow "like a woman." Having already remarked, and more than once, on the prolixity of Frank's final letter, Knightley goes on to censure its hyperbole: "He is a very liberal thinker, with his thousands and tens of thousands." The real man, it is implied here, is a man of few words. Whereas an earlier generation of sen-

timental men had made a spectacle of their affect—of honorable feelings so powerful as to exceed all possibility of control, thus saturating handkerchiefs and liberally bedewing eloquent pages—the manful Mr. Knightley retreats from display, cultivating containment rather than excess, and "burying under a calmness that seemed all but indifference" (E 99) the "real attachment" he feels towards his brother and towards Emma as well. And this new, plain style of manliness is a matter of national import, constituting the *amiable*, "the true English style," as opposed of course, to the *aimable*, the artificial, the courtly, the dissembling, the servile, and (as the tradition goes) the feminized French.¹⁴

It is the work of *Emma* to make Mr. Knightley seem traditional. Combining as it does the patron saint of England with the knight of chivalry, his name itself conduces to his traditional-seeming status. But as I hope I have indicated, he is not a traditional and certainly not a chivalric figure, and far from embodying fixed or at the very least commonly shared notions of masculinity, there is nothing in Scott, Burney, More, Burke, Radcliffe, or Edgeworth remotely like him. On one hand, Knightley is impeccably landed, a magistrate, a gentleman of "untainted" blood and judicious temper, and as such emphatically not the impetuous, combustible masculine type Burke so feared, the mere man of talent who is dangerous precisely because he has nothing to lose. But on the other hand, Knightley avows himself a farmer and a man of business, absorbed in the figures and computations Emma considers so vulgar, a man of energy, vigor, and decision, and as such emphatically not an embodiment of the stasis unto sluggishness Burke commended in country squires. The exemplary love of this "humane" as opposed to "gallant" man is fraternal rather than heterosexual. If Emma has difficulty realizing that Knightley is in love with her, it is not because she is imperceptive, but rather because he is highly unusual in loving a woman in the same manner he loves his brother rather than the other way around: in the ambient light of sentimental hyperbole, such love seems "indifferent." But while Knightley is in some respects a new man, Austen also harkens back to some older ideals in creating him, looking not to the chivalric pseudotraditionalism celebrated by Burke, but instead bypassing the trauma of 1790s sentimentality altogether to recover a native tradition of gentry liberty, which valued its manly independence from tyrannical rule, where that rule is figured as courtly, feminine, and feminizing (as with the absolute monarchy of Louis XIV, for example)—a tradition which the French Revolution made dangerous by fulfilling.

Emma puts pressure not on deviance from femininity, then, but on deviance from masculinity, and it is engaged in the enterprise of purging masculine gender codes from the ostensible "excesses" of sentimental gallantry and "feminized" display, redefining English manhood instead as brisk, energetic, downright, "natural," unaffected, reserved, businesslike, plain-speak-

ing; gentlemanly, to be sure, but not courtly. What does this reconfiguration mean for Emma? For one, it demotes the moral importance of heterosexual feeling for women. The more conventionally feminine women in the novel—one thinks of Harriet, who is willing to marry any man who asks; of Mrs. Elton, with her fulsome little love-names for her husband; or of Isabella, whose wifely devotion verges on sheer stupidity—give heterosexuality a rather revolting appearance, against which Emma's coolness looks sane and enviable. Emma's patience with Emma's gender transgressions and its impatience with Mr. Elton's and Frank Churchill's are related. Emma disdains not only the effeminacy of men, but also the femininity of women. There appears to me as little doubt on Austen's part as there is on Mr. Knightley's that Emma's masculine strength is better than Isabella's "proper," "feminine" weakness, weaknesses that link her to her father. Here, conventional femininity is a degradation to which Emma does not submit. But it is not merely femininity that Emma's portion designedly lacks. It is effeminacy as well, as Emma's rebuke of Frank Churchill's double-dealing and trickery makes clear: "Impropriety! Oh! Mrs. Weston—it is too calm a censure. Much, much beyond impropriety!—It has sunk him, I cannot say how much it has sunk him in my opinion. So unlike what a man should be!—None of that upright integrity, that strict adherence to truth and principle, that disdain of trick and littleness, which a man should display in every transaction of his life!" (E 397).

To the extent that Emma's condemnation here reprises Mr. Knightley's—and even Emma's own—initial gender-based censure of Frank, it indicates that Emma has come back to her basically sound senses at last. But of course, the full import of Emma's censure falls not so much on Frank Churchill at this point as on Emma herself. Every bit as guilty of espionage, trick, littleness, and slack waywardness from truth and principle, Emma is convicting herself not for being unlike what a woman should be, but rather for being "unlike what a man should be!" And as is generally the case under the sentimental dispensation, its claims to love and protect notwithstanding, sentimental effeminacy harms other women. An effeminate man herself, the gallant Emma is gratified by Harriet Smith's infantine sweetness and malleability, just as she is even less generously invested in and fascinated by Jane Fairfax's gothicized debility, by the stalwart yet visibly wavering fortitude she tries to sustain in the face of her "female difficulty." Having magnified rather than alleviated the "wrongs of woman," Emma reproaches herself for transgressing the duty of woman to woman; this momentous duty is better honored when women too are like "what a man should be."¹⁵

When *Emma* was published in 1816, Mary Wollstonecraft had been dead for some twenty years; Ann Radcliffe was still alive but had not published since 1797; and Frances Burney had just published the long-awaited *The Wan-*

derer; or, *Female Difficulties* (1814), which assumed that the concerns of the 1790s were still pressing, only to fall with a thud. Their careers did not survive the decade that inspired them to such magnificence. In light of this silencing, Austen's achievement in *Emma* impresses me as an act of homage; in the second decade of the nineteenth century, she is still thinking about them, still working through the problems their fiction represented, albeit in a necessarily different social context. Chivalric sentimentality was an incitement to the forces of reaction and reconsolidation, and once its success was assured, sentimentality was refeminized, and the dignity more readily accorded to women's affectivity would go on to authorize their activity in charity work, education, nursing, reform societies, and the like. But *Emma* does not look forward to Victorian visions of feminine puissance, but harkens backwards still to the norms of manly independence which Burke's paean to Marie-Antoinette interrupted.

Emma's coolness
bad female heterosexual obsession

An intrigues as not a true man.

But E's own ruses re Elton/Harriet
= entail trickery

essay title

still make their appearance at intervals, as our courts of justice too plainly testify" (p. 579).

13. For a discussion of the degrading and sexually ambiguating properties of stage acting as these were understood throughout the eighteenth century, see Kristina Straub, *Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 3-23.

14. For Katharine M. Rogers, this passage exposes the tendencies of 1790s radicals—especially radicals like Wollstonecraft and Hays—to declare themselves rationalists only to be controlled by their passions. See *Frances Burney: The World of "Female Difficulties"* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), pp. 162-65.

15. Doody, *Frances Burney*, p. 350.

16. *Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney (Madame D'Arblay)*, 12 vols., eds. Joyce Hemlow and Edward A. Bloom (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972-84), vol. I, p. 22.

Afterword

1. For the most recent full-scale assertion of janeism, see Roger Gard, *Jane Austen's Novels: The Art of Clarity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

2. Lionel Trilling, "Emma and the Legend of Jane Austen," in *Jane Austen's Emma: A Casebook*, ed. David Lodge (London: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 130, 124. Trilling's essay was originally published as an introduction to the Riverside Edition of *Emma* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1957).

3. Sedgwick notes the virulent response to her paper in the expanded article version, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991), pp. 818-37.

4. Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham, *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), p. 143.

5. Edmund Wilson, "A Long Talk about Jane Austen," in *Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties* (New York: Farrar & Strauss, 1950), pp. 201-3.

6. Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952), p. 203.

7. Mark Schorer, "The Humiliation of Emma Woodhouse," *Literary Review* 2 (1959), pp. 547-63; rpt. in *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Ian Watt (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 107. Helen Corsa also notes the "homosexual components" of Emma's relations with Miss Taylor and Harriet, but nevertheless concludes with Schorer that Emma's narcissism withholds her from the fullness of sexual feeling; in "A Fair But Frozen Maid," *Literature and Psychology* 19 (1969), p. 107.

8. Wayne Booth, *A Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago

Press, 1961), pp. 243-66; rpt. in Lodge (ed.), *Casebook*, pp. 137-56.

9. Charlotte Smith, *Montalbert* (London, 1795), p. 118.

10. The "humiliation" school of *Emma* criticism is almost too populous to give an accounting for. Along with discussions by Booth and Schorer cited above, other notable celebrations of Emma's humiliation include C. S. Lewis, "A Note on Jane Austen," *Essays in Criticism* 4 (1954), rpt. in Watt (ed.), *Jane Austen*, pp. 25-34; Bernard Paris, *Character and Conflict in Jane Austen's Novels: A Psychological Approach* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978); and Jane Nardin, *Those Elegant Decorums: The Concept of Propriety in Jane Austen's Novels* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1973). Eve Sedgwick's critique of the "Girl Being Taught a Lesson" mode of Austenian criticism ought, in my view, to be required reading for everyone interested in writing and reading about Austen; in Watt (ed.), *Jane Austen*, pp. 833-34.

11. Wilson, "A Long Talk about Jane Austen," in *Classics and Commercials*, p. 201; Mudrick, *Jane Austen*, pp. 192-93; Joseph M. Duffy, "Emma: The Awakening from Innocence," *ELH* 21 (1954), p. 42; Lionel Trilling, in Lodge (ed.), *Casebook*, p. 130; Tanner, *Jane Austen* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 180.

12. Lionel Trilling, in Lodge (ed.), *Casebook*, p. 134.

13. Nancy Armstrong illuminates Emma's respect for the manliness of Robert Martin's style; see *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 146-50.

14. For an excellent discussion of the opposition of the "impure, dishonest, dissembling, imitative, servile" French to the "moral sobriety, individual independence, and collective fellowship" of the English, see Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History 1740-1830* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), pp. 230, 231ff. My discussion of the anti-French elements of *Emma* has also been informed by Stella Cottrell, "The Devil on Two Sticks: Franco-Phobia in 1803," in *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge, 1989); and Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

15. For a compelling study of Emma's reproduction with Harriet of the same heterosexual protocols Wollstonecraft lambastes in *Rights of Woman*, see Allison Sulloway, "Emma Woodhouse and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*," *Wordsworth Circle* 7 (1976), pp. 320-32. Ruth Perry also reads *Emma* as a plea for the enlargement of female friendship; see "Interrupted Friendships in Jane Austen's *Emma*," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 5 (1986), pp. 185-202.