

“*Emma*, Slavery, and Cultures of Captivity”

[This essay examines the theme of captivity in *Emma* in reference to British domestic settings as well as to the global slave trade. The many coded representations of slavery in *Emma*, Catherine Ingrassia argues, show readers the widespread impact of the Regency era’s “culture of captivity” and of “human commodification,” particularly its impact on women.]

In July 1813, Jane Austen wrote her brother Francis inquiring whether he “happened to see M^r Blackall’s marriage in the Papers last Jan^{ry}. We did,” she continues. “He was married at Clifton to a Miss Lewis, whose Father had been late of Antigua. I should very much like to know what sort of a Woman she is” (3–6 July 1813). Austen’s speculations about the nature of Miss Lewis stem in part from her previous acquaintance with the Reverend Samuel Blackall (sometimes mentioned as a potential suitor following his 1798 visit to Steventon). Yet the specific note of Miss Lewis’s West Indian connections (father “late of Antigua”) and her wedding near Bristol (details that anticipate Mrs. Elton) reveal something more. That comment, like other passages in the letters and in *Emma*, represents what might be considered a “culture of captivity” in which Austen lived and wrote. Historian Linda Colley uses the term “culture of captivity” to characterize the period when widespread patriotic pride in British colonial success, albeit one built upon the captivity of others, existed alongside a persistent anxiety about individual subjects’ risk for captivity at the hands of others (for example, as a Barbary captive). Yet, that cultural anxiety isn’t directed toward only global possibilities for British captivity. It also marks an awareness of the many authorized (often institutionalized) forms of what can be considered domestic captivity that shaped Regency culture. The domestic configurations of captivity that appear in Austen’s novels and letters always co-exist with a knowledge of more removed forms of captivity that result, in part, from Britain’s global reach and its involvement in the slave trade.

Published less than a decade after the 1807 Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, *Emma* appears at a time when the trade of enslaved persons was newly illegal. The abolition of the slave trade, however, did nothing to dismantle the existing extensive financial investments in enslaved labor (or, of course, to emancipate the enslaved). Numerous

individuals with whom Austen associated—from family members to acquaintances—had some measure of financial interest in slavery in the British Atlantic, as we’ve known for some time. New scholarship on British slave ownership demonstrates that financial involvement in the slave-based economy in the British Atlantic—though often invisible—extended to a much wider, more diverse range of the population than ever previously recognized. The careful analysis of the records of the Slave Compensation Commission—which paid out more than £20 million compensating individuals who claimed a financial loss with the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833—provides the opportunity to “to identify every owner in Britain holding ‘slave property’ in the colonies at the time the slave system ended” (Draper 18). The results explode the conception of British slave ownership as limited to a small number of owners of very large estates (the Sir Thomas Bertram model). Rather, slave ownership cut across class, gender, age, and geographic lines, creating “continuities ... in the mainstream of British life” (Hall 2). Notably, at the time of abolition, forty percent of those with financial interests in slavery were women. Individuals who owned slaves, in fact, ranged from members of the gentry and aristocracy to those of the middling classes, such as rectors and widows.

In addition to representing a wide-spread economic investment, the slave economy also represented a considerable psychological investment in terms of the cultural imagination. As historian Emma Rothschild observes, “the multiplier effects of empire” existed, “in which individuals at home were connected by information and expectations to events” in the colonies (2). For Austen, such information and expectations were immediate and personal. With two naval brothers serving in the British Atlantic and a host of connections who lived or had lived in the West Indies, Austen, as her letters reveal, could imagine the world of empire with great specificity. Further, she lived in a domestic culture filled with material reminders of British imperial power and slave ownership—from the sugar with which she sweetened her tea to her Uncle Leigh-Perrot’s black servant, Frank.

Austen also saw domestic forms of what can be considered “captivity.” Indentured service, transportation to Australia, imprisonment—among other things—were a potential reality for many non-elite or impecunious Britons. Austen certainly knew of such institutionalized and largely naturalized forms of captivity. For example, in 1798 she shares with Cassandra the news that family friend Earle Harwood “has got the appointment to a Prison ship at Portsmouth, which he has been for some time desirous of having; & he & his wife are to live on board for the future” (18–19 December 1798). A prison ship

was a decommissioned naval vessel converted into a floating prison. Austen's own aunt, Jane Leigh-Perrot, wife of her maternal uncle, was imprisoned for seven months before going to trial on a charge of shoplifting. Austen also possessed a keen attentiveness to the particular forms of captivity to which dependent women could be subject. As she remarked to Fanny Knight, "Single Women have a dreadful propensity for being poor," a lack of means constituting its own form of confinement. While Austen goes on to suggest that being poor "is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony" (13 March 1817), she well knew that marriage, like the position of governess or domestic servant (no matter how elevated), originates in some form of commodification and results in some form of confinement. Situated within a culture of captivity, with its many facets, real and symbolic, visible and invisible, *Emma* reveals how profoundly slavery and slave ownership in the British Atlantic shape the dynamics of the text. Austen's intricate web of strategically deployed surnames, place names, and literary references alerts the attentive reader to the consequences of a culture of captivity and human commodification and to its specific effects on women.

Austen's relationships with people who had a connection to the West Indies arguably shaped her thinking about the colonial enterprise. Cassandra's fiancé, Thomas Fowle, was part of Lord Craven's mission to re-enslave Haiti following the French loss of the colony after the slave rebellion that began in 1793. In an early letter to Cassandra of 14–15 January 1796, Austen imagines where in the West Indies Tom might be. "The *last* letter that I received from him was dated on friday the 8th," writes Austen, "and he told me that if the wind should be favourable on Sunday, which it proved to be, they were to sail from Falmouth on that Day. By this time therefore they are at Barbadoes I suppose." Her familiarity with the geography of the British Atlantic and the time of a transatlantic crossing bespeaks the connection between England and her colonies. Her two cousins William and George Walter settled in Jamaica. Her father was the trustee to the Antigua estate of close family friend James Langford Nibbs, whom he likely tutored at Oxford and whose portrait hung in the Steventon home. Her aunt Jane Leigh-Perrot was the heiress to a Barbados estate. Her sister-in-law Fanny was daughter to a commander in the West Indies and met Austen's brother Charles during his service there. When Austen's brothers Francis and Charles served in the British Atlantic after 1807, their responsibility was to enforce the abolition of the slave trade, which resulted in regular encounters with illegal slaving vessels. News of these interventions definitely reached home.

Austen also had a deep engagement with texts by abolitionist authors. In addition to the poetry of William Cowper (on 25 November 1798 Austen notes “the purchase of Cowper’s works” and mentions listening when his work was read aloud), Austen also writes that she was “much in love . . . with Clarkson,” a reference to abolitionist Thomas Clarkson (1760–1846) and his 1808 *The History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (24 January 1813). That text provided a detailed account of the material reality of enslavement in terms of both the colonial enslaved and the domestic workers who enabled the enterprise. Clarkson’s writings, particularly about Bristol, deeply inform the details of Mrs. Elton’s life.

Readers of *Emma* are familiar with Emma’s initial thinking about Augusta Hawkins, the future Mrs. Elton; its significance lies in references to a world very separate from Highbury:

Miss Hawkins was the youngest of the two daughters of a Bristol—merchant, of course, he must be called; but, as the whole of the profits of his mercantile life appeared so very moderate, it was not unfair to guess the dignity of his line of trade had been very moderate also. Part of every winter she had been used to spend in Bath; but Bristol was her home, the very heart of Bristol; for though the father and mother had died some years ago, an uncle remained—in the law line—nothing more distinctly honourable was hazarded of him, than that he was in the law line; and with him the daughter had lived. Emma guessed him to be the drudge of some attorney, and too stupid to rise. And all the grandeur of the connection seemed dependent on the elder sister, who was *very well married*, to a gentleman in a *great way*, near Bristol, who kept two carriages! That was the wind-up of the history; that was the glory of Miss Hawkins. (196–97)

Austen codes Hawkins’s involvement with colonial slavery and capitalizes on a complicated cultural perception of Bristol, a city Austen would have known through her visits there, her reading of Bristol newspapers, and, most powerfully, Clarkson’s detailed presentation of Bristol in *The History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*. Austen’s references to Bristol particularly as well as enslavement generally are keener, more specific, and more pointed than has been previously acknowledged and, accordingly, deepen the characterization of Mrs. Elton. They might also complicate the motivation for Emma’s dismissive description of Mr. Elton’s bride, who “brought no name, no blood, no alliance” (196). While Emma’s tone reinforces our

perception of her snobbery, that snobbery might simultaneously veil the real evils Emma understands Bristol and Miss Hawkins to represent.

Bristol's role in the slave trade was well-known. As Madge Dresser details, in the 1720s Bristol was "the nation's number one slaving port," breaking London's dominance of the slave trade (8). "For the century as a whole it stood second only to Liverpool in volume of slave ventures," as James Rawley notes (164). Even individuals "who did not specialize in slaving nevertheless made investments in slaving voyages"; slave trading played a wide role "in the city's economic life" (28–29). Slave voyages continued to leave from Bristol until 1803. Bristol was so central to the trade that Clarkson, working closely with William Wilberforce (1759–1833) in service of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, drew heavily on Bristol in his investigation of the moral and physical dangers of the slave trade. Presenting interviews with Bristol men involved in the trade as captains, merchants, or sailors, and detailing the brutal treatment of seamen and enslaved Africans, Clarkson revealed that while Bristol's involvement may have diminished over the century, the cultural legacy remained very much in place. Clarkson characterizes the people of Bristol as being strikingly unreflective about the trade in which they are involved. "I found that people talked very openly on the subject of the Slave-trade," writes Clarkson. "They seemed to be well acquainted with the various circumstances belonging to it. There were facts, in short, in every body's mouth, concerning it; ... though no one thought of its abolition" (History 296). Further, Bristolians describe a fundamental immorality and pervasive abuse of power common among those serving on slaving vessels. "If I were to make a point of taking up the cause of those whom I found complaining of hard usage in this trade," writes Clarkson, "I must take up that of nearly all who sailed in it." His sources knew only "of one captain from the port in the Slave-trade who did not deserve long ago to be hanged" (317–18).

Bristol's dominance in the trade of enslaved Africans was matched by its role in the sugar industry. *The Bristol and Hotwell Guide* (1789) accurately claims, "there is more sugar imported into Bristol from the West Indian islands, in proportion, than there is even into London" (18). Bristol merchants often filled functions of both merchant and planter, and the "overlap among personnel in the sugar and slave trades at Bristol" (Morgan 203) was pervasive. Sugar, as many scholars have discussed, is considered a "slave commodity," resulting from the physical excretions of the enslaved—"tears and sweat," as Charlotte Sussman writes (53). Abolitionist rhetoric of the period

advances “the equation between the slave’s body and the sugar it produces” (55) as vividly evidenced in William Fox’s pamphlet on *The Propriety of Refraining from the Use of West Indian Sugar* (1791), which successfully motivated strategic boycotts of sugar.

In addition to its association with the trade in enslaved Africans and its dominance in the sugar industry, Bristol was also a “major exit point” for white transportees, including indentured servants and convicts, and a “number of prominent Bristol merchants gained lucrative contracts shipping” whites to the West Indies (Dresser 12). Had Austen’s aunt Jane Leigh-Perrot been convicted of shoplifting and transported, it’s quite possible that she would have left out of the port of Bristol. Of the 50,000 convicts shipped out of England during the eighteenth century, 10,000 departed from Bristol. Merchants transporting goods typically filled out their ships with three kinds of “human cargo”: enslaved Africans, imprisoned convicts, or individuals forced into indentured service. Such haunting images are the categories of people who populate Bristol’s material world and cultural imagination, contributing to a culture of captivity.

In addition to persistent associations with human commodification and captivity, Bristol had a reputation for coercion and intimidation as well as associations with the fierce suppression of its own people. During the Bristol Bridge Riot of 1793, for example, the militia shot into a crowd of unarmed civilians gathered on the Bristol Bridge, killing eleven and injuring forty-five men, women, and children. Second only to the Gordon Riots in the number of resulting casualties, the event received extensive coverage in both London and Bristol newspapers and was the subject of a widely published poem by Jane Cave Winscom. With her marked interest in newspapers (and poetry), Austen may have known of the Bristol Bridge Riot; at the very least, her avid reading of Clarkson familiarized her with Bristol’s specific associations with the slave trade and coerced service, violence, and oppression.

Bristol’s defining characteristics at the time of *Emma* include an unreflective tradition of domination, deception, captivity, subjection, violence, and human commodification. These associations would have been familiar to Austen and her readers, and those associations enrich our understanding of the previously quoted first description of Augusta Hawkins, a paragraph in which Bristol is named four times. To describe “the very heart of Bristol” as Augusta’s home clearly marks some connection with the slave trade. Further, the social geography of the “heart of Bristol” includes locations specifically associated with the trade. Queen Square, a genteel residential area completed in 1727 at the height of Bristol’s involvement in

the slave trade, housed, by 1775, seven African merchants, one West Indian merchant, and a firm of Virginia tobacco merchants. Additionally, the Custom House, which oversaw the trade, taxes, and revenues from the port of Bristol, occupied a specially built house in Queen Square. Just north of Queen Square sits Corn Street, where the Corn Exchange, banks, insurance offices, and coffee houses were situated: it was the center of the financial administration of the trade in enslaved Africans and in commodities produced by the enslaved. The “heart of Bristol” also contained more than three dozen pubs along the notorious Marsh Street, where Bristol slave masters picked up their crews. Bristol was notorious for “crimping,” or entrapping, men into service. As Clarkson details, “there are certain landlords, who make a practice of crimping seamen for the slave trade. They suffer them to run into debt from a prospect of the advance money that will be given them, and then consign them to vessels” (*Substance* 66–67). This geographic space exists in service of the “psychic” space of the slave trade specifically and the culture of captivity at large.

Characterizing Miss Hawkins as the daughter of “a Bristol—*merchant*, of course he must be called” also bears notice (emphasis mine). Some scholars suggest “merchant” indicates Hawkins’s modest mercantile associations, marking her fortune as just barely £10,000. Yet the term “merchant” (a word that appears only once in the entire novel) points specifically to the dominant Bristol civic organization, Bristol’s Society of Merchant Venturers, the “corporate body at Bristol” to which Clarkson refers (*History* 316). The Merchant Venturers, as they were called, was the city’s dominant civic group, working assiduously to preserve Bristol’s economic investments in the West Indies. Translating “economic interests into political influence,” the Merchant Venturers’ “most important single issue” was preservation of the slave trade in general and the position of the port of Bristol in particular (41). The Venturers’ House itself was located right off of Queen Square and was also in “the very heart of Bristol.” As he discusses in *The History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, Thomas Clarkson used the muster rolls found in the Merchant Venturers’ records to demonstrate that the mortality rates of Bristol slave-ship crews were particularly high, placing the association of that organization, like Bristol itself, squarely in Austen’s frame of reference. The description of Miss Hawkins’s uncle “in the law line” should also be placed within this context. Given the contractual complexities of ownership, colonial estates often had one individual to whom the property was registered, but then a host of additional investors, trustees, agents, and—of course—attorneys.

This more nuanced information reminds us how deeply dependent Bristol's economy was on the slave trade. Miss Hawkins's father and uncle may not have bought or sold slaves themselves; yet they would have had knowledge of and dealings with those who did. No merchant or attorney, of any rank, would likely escape involvement with some element of the trade.

In addition to her association with Bristol, Mrs. Elton's name bears a particular resonance. Janine Barchas reminds us of the "persistent historicist impulse behind [Austen's] choices of names and settings" (257), aided by her meticulous use of local documents, newspapers, and histories. The careful use of surnames constructs a kind of "mimetic realism" (256) that intensifies the qualities of characters. The surname Hawkins, which appears nineteen times in the text, is one Augusta shares with Sir John Hawkins (1532–1595), the first English slave trader. Clarkson describes Hawkins as someone who deceived Elizabeth I, after she "expressed her concern lest any of the Africans should be carried off without their free consent." Hawkins "promised to comply. ... But he did not keep his word; for when he went to Africa again, he seized many of the inhabitants and carried them off as slaves." Clarkson makes particular note that Hawkins and his ilk took considerable pains "to keep [Elizabeth] ignorant of the truth" about what Clarkson describes as "the horrid practice of forcing the Africans into slavery, an injustice and barbarity" (*History* 37). Thus associations with Hawkins—both John and Augusta—are of deception and enslavement.

With this enriched, more nuanced understanding of Mrs. Elton, the exchange between her and Jane Fairfax assumes added complexity.

"When I am quite determined as to the time, I am not at all afraid of being long unemployed. There are places in town, offices, where inquiry would soon produce something—Offices for the sale—not quite of human flesh—but of human intellect."

"Oh! my dear, human flesh! You quite shock me; if you mean a fling at the slave-trade, I assure you Mr. Suckling was always rather a friend to the abolition."

"I did not mean, I was not thinking of the slave-trade," replied Jane; "governess-trade, I assure you, was all that I had in view; 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. But I only mean to say that there are advertising offices, and that by applying to them I should have no doubt of very soon meeting with something that would do." (325)

Jane Fairfax's situation—dependent, subordinate, impoverished—forces her to confront the need to commodify herself for a specific marketplace (something, in subsequent paragraphs, Mrs. Elton is all too happy to help her do). Even before her long-planned move to governess, “her bread to earn” (176), Jane is characterized in terms that mark her as dependent—even captive. She “belonged to High-bury,” “became the property” of her grandmother and aunt, and then “had belonged to Colonel Campbell’s family” (174–75). She returns home “to spend her last months of perfect liberty” with the Bateses (177). Even that is a situation of confinement. The Bateses are always described in terms of their “‘confined’” circumstances (184), in terms of both their limited financial means and the very space they inhabit: Jane is “confined always to one room” (424). This impoverished group of women, largely dependent on the largesse of the community, represents an extreme example of confinement, but one that echoes other moments in the text. For example, Emma resists the idea that, upon marriage to Robert Martin, Harriet might be “banished to Abbey Mill Farm!—*You* confined to the society of the illiterate and vulgar” (56). Following the adventure of Harriet and the gipsies Emma promises her father “never to go beyond the shrubbery again” (363), although the confinement is short-lived.

Jane’s distinction between the sale of human flesh and the sale of human intellect summons the distinction made by Cowper in “The Negro’s Complaint” (1788). The enslaved speaker, whose body and labor are bound to another, affirms that “Minds are never to be sold,” although Jane Fairfax feels forced to sell even that. From her perspective, the governess trade does not differ from the slave trade. She asserts that she does “not know where” “the greater misery of the victims” “lies.” One could argue her observation creates a false equivalency in suggesting that the misery of an educated but impoverished gentlewoman consigned to a life as a governess exceeds that of an enslaved African laboring on a sugar plantation. Nevertheless, her comment highlights the structural similarities of the two situations and clarifies the culture of captivity in which she exists. Jane’s limited options, as Ruth Perry reminds us, underscore “the dependent status of women, their reliance on heterosexual marriage, a theme explored further ... in the situation of Miss Bates, Mrs. Weston, and Harriet Smith” (30–31). Much literary and non-literary writing in the eighteenth century—from Mary Astell and Lady Mary Chudleigh to Mary Wollstonecraft—consistently compares the condition of being a wife to the condition of enslavement. As Lady Mary Wortley Montagu writes, “A wounded slave regains his liberty. / For wives ill

used no remedy remains, /To daily racks condemned, and to eternal chains.” Austen herself, reflecting on the potential marriage of her niece Fanny, points out marriage’s inevitable effects: “Oh! what a loss it will be, when you are married,” she writes. “I shall hate you when your delicious play of Mind is all settled down into conjugal & maternal affections” (20–21 February 1817). Marriage means a form of confinement, restriction, a “settling down.”

Mrs. Elton’s Bristol origins prompt her to immediately interpret Jane’s reference to “human flesh” as “a fling at the slave-trade.” But, given the setting of this novel—1813–1814—the reference to the “slave trade,” an illegal trade since 1807, reveals Mrs. Elton’s persistent investment in (and presumably profit from) that form of commerce. Just as Bristol can’t shake its associations with the trade, she can’t shed her dominant frame of reference. Her defensive assertion that her brother-in-law, Mr. Suckling, “was always rather a friend to the abolition” is itself qualified. Not a friend, but “rather a friend.” The description of his estate of Maple Grove as “an immense plantation” (332) underscores those persistent associations. Mrs. Elton’s treatment of Jane Fairfax in the ensuing conversation—atomizing her potentially saleable talents, positioning her within the competitive marketplace, articulating the hierarchy of positions—fully reveals her indifference to the sentiments of the commodified and puts her coercive, domineering tendencies on full display.

Ironically, it is Mrs. Elton who hints at the psychological effects of “transplanting” individuals from their home. Comparing the similarities between Hartfield and Maple Grove, Mrs. Elton claims that her fascination with Hartfield’s spaces stems from her desire for the familiar, but her choice of words is telling. “Whenever you are transplanted, like me, Miss Woodhouse, you will understand how very delightful it is to meet with any thing at all like what one has left behind. I always say this is quite one of the evils of matrimony” (294). The word “transplanted,” appearing only once in the novel, necessarily summons the image of other individuals more forcibly transplanted (from their own continent), who provide the labor that results in the financial support necessary for an estate as magnificent as Maple Grove. The word “transplanted” appears in Clarkson’s *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1786), when he describes the enslaved as having been “transplanted” from Africa (202). While the exchange reminds Emma of her own unmarried status, it also serves to reinforce, however subtly, the comparison of “matrimony”—the “evils” to which Mrs. Elton refers—and captivity.

Austen's novel reflects the culture of captivity, global and domestic. With specific markers from British culture (e.g., Bristol and specific surnames) recognizable to her audience, Austen reminds readers that forms of captivity exist on a spectrum—from the enslavement of Africans forced to work in British plantations in the West Indies to the limited agency and confinement of impoverished women. Austen's subtle though precise references very much construct the “invisible world” Bharat Tandon describes as shaping the visible world in the text. Such references demand that readers acknowledge their presence to more fully appreciate the arguably darker elements of the world beyond Highbury.

Scholars want to precisely situate Austen in connection with slavery: from the moment twenty-three years ago when Edward Said famously wrote that the “casualness” of references indicated that Austen seemed “only vaguely aware of the details” of enslavement (89), to more recent work by scholars, like Gabrielle White, who position her more actively within an abolitionist context. The Regency culture in which Austen lived naturalized the financial, military, and political interests of the West Indies, and it is that dangerous process of naturalization that Austen depicts and, at times, critiques. Austen's knowledge and awareness of forms of global captivity certainly existed, augmented by her reading and tales from her brothers and others. Within *Emma*, Austen's strategic use of Cowper and Clarkson suggests her sympathies to “the abolition.” As a single woman of constricted financial means, however, one with beloved brothers who advanced the British imperial mission through their naval service, she operated within the limits of her own situation and its accompanying ideological pressures. She reminds us in her fiction of the moral peril a committed engagement with the slave trade represents, and she uses it as a platform to consider the dependent state of women. Jane Austen herself might be said to share the understanding of confinement and constraint articulated by her characters like Mrs. Bates or Jane Fairfax. Just as the legacies of slave ownership are often hidden or invisible, so too Austen's often coded representation of slavery forces us to read carefully but reminds us that she was acutely aware of the culture of captivity in which she lived.

(2016)

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