

“Comfort, Health and Creativity: A Reading of *Emma*”

[This essay examines the central roles of health and comfort in *Emma*, which, John Wiltshire argues, are usually overlooked but constitute “a vital aspect of the novel’s underlying conceptual, or rather emotional and ethical structure.”]

One of the chief challenges in teaching *Emma*, I’ve found, as with all Jane Austen’s novels, is to get students to move on from talking about characters and about the romance plot and to understand something of the novel’s structure and its status as a work of art. This is all the more important in the wake of the recent films, which, for very good reasons, replace Jane Austen’s artistic purposes and designs by their own, and almost inevitably give a greater prominence to sexuality and romance than do the novels. In the past there have been many attempts to read *Emma* by focusing on such moral or pedagogical matters as the “education” or “humiliation” of Emma’s imagination or (more recently) on Emma’s relation to the various manifestations of patriarchal society. In this chapter I suggest an approach that picks up a relatively undernoticed preoccupation of the text, the quotidian but also salient notion of “comfort,” and seek through this to call attention to what I believe is a vital aspect of the novel’s underlying conceptual, or rather emotional and ethical structure.

A way of beginning discussion of *Emma*, especially with students who have read other Austen novels, but also with those who are studying this as an example of her work for the first time, is to call attention to its densely populated textual space. One distinctive feature of *Emma* is the way it embeds its action so convincingly within a small, circumscribed, but nevertheless active and convincingly detailed “Highbury world.” This is achieved by numerous means, but one of the most effective is the passing mention—as if they were already known to the reader—of a number of figures who never actually make an appearance in the novel. The effect of this apparently casual citation of the names of Mrs. Goddard, the Coles and William Larkins, among others, is to persuade the reader that he or she already knows them, and to create a narrator who is a denizen of the world she reports so familiarly upon. One of these figures, the notice of whom serves to populate Highbury and to thicken its description is the apothecary or the local doctor.

Mr. Perry is in fact mentioned in *Emma* every twenty or so pages, in one connection or other, either through Mr. Woodhouse's conversation, or seen passing through the town, or through reports of his medical opinion. His presence is more than incidental to the novel, however. Of course a small town would have its local doctor, just as it would have its local school, and local shopkeepers—many of whom are named, and even briefly characterized in *Emma*—the obsequious Mrs. Ford, at the draper's shop, Mrs. Wallis the baker's wife, who can sometimes give a rude answer (236–7).¹ But (one might ask) isn't Mr. Perry more important, more central to the novel's main interests than these figures, as his close relation (perhaps a friendship) with Emma's father suggests? Perry, a very active figure, often glimpsed on the road, always coming back from somewhere or other, is a familiar reference for the citizens of Highbury, but he's equally important as a pointer to some of the novel's leading interests. His very activity, which is also movement up the social scale, forms a telling contrast with the genteel inertia of his principal patient in the place, Mr. Woodhouse.

The threading of Mr. Perry through the narrative might lead one to think about Austen's interest in health in this novel. Serious illness is rare in *Emma* (the distant Mrs. Churchill's medical emergencies are treated with suspicion) and Highbury's most dramatic bodily event—Mrs. Weston's pregnancy and the birth of little Anna—occurs with only the briefest of facetious mentions. But minor ailments, and imagined illnesses, coughs, colds, biliousness, fever, fainting fits, a putrid sore throat, are common occurrences in the novel, and these are matters of considerable interest to the community Jane Austen depicts. In fact one might say that talk about health is the idiolect—the characteristic mode of human exchange—in Highbury. People fuss over each other, over remedies and rhubarb, over taking cold, over draughts and diets, just as they do everywhere. *Emma* is full of the very ordinariness of such conversations and events, but whilst giving us this rich ordinariness, the novel at the same time infuses them with extraordinary narrative tension and excitement. Gossip and talk about health, highlighted extensively in the great comic dialogue in Chapter 12 in which Isabella and her father dispute the rival virtues of their favorite doctors and health resorts, is more than a source of incidental humor in the novel, one might suggest. It has a larger and more important dimension.

This is because the notion of health asks to be understood in a moral register as well as in a physical one, though the two are

1 [Page references to *Emma* are to Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford UP, 1932).]

interconnected. The focus of this is Emma herself. The reader is introduced to Emma Woodhouse through being privy to her own consciousness, sharing her excitement at the pleasure, the game, that taking up Harriet Smith promises (23). At the same time, through the irony that the technique of free indirect discourse allows, the reader necessarily feels quite severe doubts about Emma's reasoning and motives. This mixed response to Emma's enthusiasm for Harriet is soon taken up and spelt out in the conversation between Mr. Knightley and Mrs. Weston in Chapter 5. One speaks of his reservations about her, the other replies by pointing out how lovely Emma is—that she is “the complete picture of grown-up health” (39). Mrs. Weston's response is superficially illogical, and doesn't meet Mr. Knightley's criticisms, but at a deeper level, it does, because by speaking of Emma as “the picture of health” Mrs. Weston indicates her sense of Emma's fundamental or ontological goodness—that she is not only physically, but also emotionally and morally sound.

It's this principle of health in Emma Woodhouse that is the source of the novel's energy and warmth. For most of the book, “spirited,” capable and active, as she is, she has no difficulty in coping with the dogged timidity and resistances of her father. His ill-health (real or presumed) is also understood in a moral as well as a physical sense. He is frightened of draughts, of even short journeys in the carriage, of anything unpredictable or unforeseen or hasty. “To have any of them sitting down out of doors to eat would inevitably make him ill,” as Mr. Knightley surmises (356). It would be too melodramatic, and out of harmony with the spirit of the novel, to say that he is afraid of life itself, but to put it that way suggests how the stakes in *Emma* are quite high. His invalidism is not difficult to think of as an emotional and characterological constriction or failure—and if “eager” is one of the novel's most frequent characterizing words for its heroine, by confronting that eagerness with its opposite, with invalidism and withdrawal, a profound and central ethical conflict is set up.

Another figure clearly contrasted with Emma in this respect is Jane Fairfax. “Bless me! poor Jane is ill!” is Miss Bates's first exclamation when reading the letter that introduces her into the novel (166). This association of Jane with ill-health always shadows her, although in this instance one might share Emma's suspicion that Jane's cold is no more than a convenient pretext for her return to Highbury. But the theme of Jane's liability to illness is continued when Mr. Knightley steps in to prevent her from singing herself hoarse (229) or when his brother John takes it upon himself to comment on her walking in the rain. These chivalrous interventions however are not all that they seem, for it is as if the motif of Jane's ill-health gathers together

a whole set of anxieties concerned with specifically female vulnerability. Whilst Jane is thus figured as the opposite to that Emma who responds to Mrs. Weston's query "Are you well, my Emma?" with "Oh! perfectly, I am always well, you know" (420), she is also capable of representing something about the limits and conditions of a lady's life. Jane's ill-health or the threat of it, is also a way of defining the cloud that hangs over her, the confinement of her condition, the stresses and constrictions involved in dwelling with her aunt. Miss Fairfax is pale, subject to prolonged nervous tension and anxiety, and at the climax of the novel undergoes a collapse which is clearly more emotional than physical, as Mr. Perry, at this late stage of the book revealing himself as a wise and trustworthy clinician, perceives. His speech is still reported, not direct: "Her present home, he could not but observe, was unfavorable to a nervous disorder: confined always to one room;—he could have wished it otherwise" (389). The victim of repression and anxiety, Jane is cured, as Mrs. Elton archly remarks, by "a young physician from Richmond," Frank Churchill.

In the structure of the novel Frank is homologous with Emma. His difficulties with the erratic and demanding hypochondriac Mrs. Churchill are a distant reflection of hers with Mr. Woodhouse. Mrs. Churchill's influence acts to restrict and frustrate his erotic life in a way that parallels Mr. Woodhouse's effect on Emma, though in a more material and sharper way. Like Emma, Frank is never ill. He is a figure of energy in the text, of a restless (and inevitably sexual) spiritedness that is the more frenetic, erratic, the more reckless, the more it is frustrated. His teasing, ingenuity and contrivance matches Emma's and signals to the reader that her own stratagems may well have a physical underpinning. Initially his energy is diverted into his ingenious schemes to snatch opportunities to be with Jane, partly in his amusement at hoodwinking the delightful, but to him not sexually alluring, Miss Woodhouse. His energy is expressed not only in his physical activity (he rides about the countryside a lot) but also his schemes and plans, like the ball at the Crown Inn. It's very characteristic that when, finally blocked by Jane's apparent resolution in breaking off their engagement at Box Hill, he thinks of more movement, in a wider sphere, of going abroad. His frustration communicates itself to Emma. "The young man's spirits now rose to a pitch almost unpleasant" (374).

Frank Churchill and Mr. Woodhouse meet head on over the plans for the ball at the Crown. Where the preparations for the dance are concerned Mr. Woodhouse is as vocal and determined as he is anywhere in the novel. He is afraid of them all catching colds from the damp rooms inevitably found at an inn, and says so. Frank cannot resist:

"I was going to observe, Sir," said Frank Churchill, "that one of the great recommendations of this change would be the very little danger of any body's catching cold—so much less danger at the Crown than at Randalls! Mr. Perry might regret the alteration, but nobody else could."

"Sir," said Mr. Woodhouse, rather warmly, "you are very much mistaken if you suppose Mr. Perry to be that sort of character. Mr. Perry is extremely concerned when any of us is ill. But I do not understand how the room at the Crown can be safer for you than your father's house."

"From the very circumstance of its being larger, sir. We shall have no occasion to open the windows at all—not once the whole evening; and it is that dreadful habit of opening the windows, letting in cold air upon heated bodies, which (as you well know, sir) does the mischief."

"Open the windows! But surely, Mr. Churchill, nobody would think of opening the windows at Randalls. Nobody could be so imprudent! I never heard of such a thing. Dancing with open windows!—I am sure, neither your father nor Mrs. Weston (poor Miss Taylor that was) would suffer it."

"Ah Sir, but a thoughtless young person will sometimes step behind a window-curtain and throw up a sash, without its being suspected. I have often known it done myself."

"Have you indeed sir—Bless me! I never could have supposed it. But I live out of the world and am often astonished at what I hear." (251–2)

It is comic scenes like this that give *Emma* its distinctive quality. Ostensibly this dialogue is about physical health, but it is not hard to show that it is about much more than that. Frank's teasing is similar to, but more amiable (if more persistent) than Mr. John Knightley's earlier taunting about the dangers of snow on the ground at Randalls. It's at this point that what Frank here stands for—youth, energy, enterprise—is most directly confronted with Mr. Woodhouse's conservatism, once again enlisting Mr. Perry, the hidden center of the novel's circling concern with health.

Moreover at this point a key association link between health, creativity and the materially real "open" or closed environment is suggested. Oliver Sacks has remarked that the defining condition of patienthood is "the contraction in all realms (not least the moral realm)" and pointed conversely to "the spaciousness of health, of full being, of the real world." This association of illness with contracture, of health with spaciousness, is translated in *Emma* into actual settings

and environments. *Emma* is a novel which begins with scenes of confinement within doors that gradually diminish in frequency, as the seasons turn from winter to spring to summer, and the action bells out, the pace heats up, with occasions and expeditions. The symbolic freight or associations of indoor and outdoor settings is hinted too in such characterizing declarations in the novel as “I love an open nature,” and “Oh, if you knew how much I love everything that is decided and open!” (460). Naturally some readers, or a part of every reader, will feel that this talk about opening windows is a rather cruel and irresponsible teasing of the old gentleman, but most, I think, will recognize that our laughter is on Frank’s part—that, for all his delight in mischief, he is speaking for health.

Health in *Emma* then has a spatial or material register too. In many ways, the novel suggests, health may be a more problematic matter for women than for men, for ladies than for gentlemen. Men ride about freely, to London and back in a day, or walk three miles round to pick walnuts. A lady cannot walk across the street to get letters in a light rain without attracting the kindly but interfering attention of her neighbors. The drawing room and the garden is her province. It could be said of course that Jane Austen is here merely reflecting the manners and customs of her time, but there is more to it than that. The novel connects health and energy with activity and the outdoors; indoors is associated with the stifling of energies and enterprise. The novel wants us to make a connection between confinement and ill-health (of the psychosomatic kind), and to suggest how health has some necessary connection with outgoing or openness, in all of its senses. The moments of freedom, when a woman is alone and able to walk at leisure outside, are treasured spaces in the novel: they define some of its highest points. “Oh, Miss Woodhouse, the comfort of being sometimes alone!” Jane Fairfax exclaims when being pushed to extreme and unladylike measures she flees the strawberry party at Donwell. Here “comfort,” associated for so much of the novel with the indoors, becomes transformed into a value that overrides those conditions, paradoxically existing through solitude, freedom, exercise of free will and physical activity. “Quick walking will refresh me,” pleads Jane (363).

This is not by any means the novel’s only use of the word. Running alongside the novel’s focus on health, in fact, is its attention to “comfort.” Emma’s “comfortable home” is mentioned in the very first sentence, and the word, or its cognates, recurs continually, making its unobtrusive contribution to the novel’s special ambience and network of ideas. No doubt it stands for something that Jane Austen herself valued dearly. In a letter soon after she and her mother and

sister had arrived at Chawton cottage in 1809, she used it in quick association with the idea of having a settled domicile at last. "Cassandra's pen," she writes, "will paint our state, / The many comforts that await / Our Chawton home..." All three of the novels written, or completed, at Chawton testify to the importance Austen attached to the notion of home, and to the provision of domestic comfort. The word had acquired its dominant modern senses by the time Austen wrote. In earlier centuries the noun "comfort" meant "assistance or support" and its associated verb took the same coloring: "Be comfortable to my mother, your mistress, and make much of her," are Bertram's parting words to Helena in Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* (c. 1602). In Johnson's *Dictionary* of 1755, comfort is still defined as meaning "consolation, support under calamity or danger." "Comfort" evolved its domestic meaning in the later eighteenth century in tandem with the development of a more leisured society: it is an indisputably middle-class or bourgeois notion, depending as it usually does upon a material substrate, a steady income, for the security, placidity and ease it evolved to denote.

When we look at the dozens of references to comfort in *Emma* we find that the word is sometimes used with this material meaning uppermost, as when Mrs. Weston's "comfortable provision" is mentioned or when Mr. Weston is said to have "fitted up his house so comfortably" (13). But when Emma guiltily reflects that she has failed to add to "the stock of the Bates's scanty comforts" (155), by not visiting them as often as she should, it is clear that the novelist employs the word to cover a far broader range of meaning. If Emma thinks sardonically about Harriet's admiration for "the many comforts and wonders of Abbey Mill farm," she is using the word in one of its oldest senses, meaning, according to the O.E.D., "enjoyment and delight." Frank Churchill, in front of the Eltons' house, comments that if it were to be shared with the woman he loved, the vicarage, though small, must have ample room "for every real comfort" (204). We hear too of Mr. Woodhouse's "comfortable talk with his dear Isabella." Mr. Perry seems to dispense comfort in this sense as well as medicines in his consultations with Mr. Woodhouse (434).

"Comfort" then is clearly a concept with a wide range of suggestiveness. Whilst it points to a key value not only of the community depicted in the novel, but of the novel itself, it also rings alarm bells. Young readers will not need alerting to the idea that a world devoted to comfort, above all, is a world that has turned its back on risk, adventure, excitement. It is a seductive and problematic value. It allows no conceptual space for movement, for enterprise, for the

strong, the heroic, the romantic. If one were to say that *Emma* celebrates the values of comfort one would be acquiescing in a view of Jane Austen not unlike that notoriously expressed by Charlotte Brontë. Yet it is plain that the word does spring to Austen's pen when she seeks to define something important and to be treasured. In one of the novel's more remarkable references Emma thinks of it in salutation of the landscape before her at Donwell Abbey, "It was a sweet view—sweet to the eye and to the mind. English verdure, English culture, English comfort, seen under a sun bright, without being oppressive" (360). It is striking, once again, that Austen uses a word so much colored by associations with the indoors to define her heroine's deepest moment of affiliation with a beloved landscape, as part of temperately phrased but none the less absolute endorsement of her communion with the qualities that landscape bodies forth. (This is three pages before Jane Fairfax is to invoke "the comfort of being alone!") Even so, comfort is a value that might make a modern reader, so to speak, uncomfortable. It is certainly in some ways rather difficult to reconcile with that enhanced sense of health which, as I've been arguing, the novel makes pivotal to its argument.

One primary focus of comfort in *Emma* in fact is on Mr. Woodhouse. "Her father's comfort" is one of the constant preoccupations of even the Emma who with another part of her mind is busily playing imaginative games with Harriet Smith and Mr. Elton and later with Jane Fairfax and Mr. Dixon. "To her he looked for comfort" (127). "Comfort" in Mr. Woodhouse's sense means only habit, familiarity, safety, a reassurance that is premised upon compensation for an unspoken or unacknowledged loss. It is a substitutive value, a consolation or solace, a secondary replacement for a failure, an emptiness, that cannot be defined. The question marks around comfort are prominent in John Knightley's unwillingness ever to leave home ("the folly of not allowing people to be comfortable at home") or when Mrs. Elton pronounces platitudinously "There is nothing like staying at home for real comfort" (274).

The problematic side of this value though emerges most sharply when Emma tells Harriet early in the novel that she will never marry since her nephews and nieces will "supply every sort of sensation that declining life can need" and that such attachments "suit" her "ideas of comfort better than what is warmer and blinder" (86). At this point, it becomes especially clear that the cultivation of comfort (however broad a meaning the word may be made to carry) can be, in no very esoteric sense, self-destroying, shutting down options and denying aspects of the personality that are demonstrated in the character's vigor and decisiveness even as she speaks. Comfort also

suggests a kind of dependency, something that is in strong contrast to that native energy or creative spark that is signaled so strongly when Emma is described and narratively incarnated as “the picture of health.”

But this is far from all the novel has to say about comfort. One of the most interesting moments in which comfort is at issue in *Emma* occurs after Harriet Smith has suddenly come upon the Martins in Mrs. Ford’s shop. Her emotions are as confused as her grammar: “Oh! Miss Woodhouse, I would rather done any thing than have it happen: and yet, you know, there was a sort of satisfaction in seeing him behave so pleasantly and so kindly. And Elizabeth, too, Oh! Miss Woodhouse, do talk to me and make me comfortable again.” Harriet is obviously in one sense asking to be treated as a child, “comforted” in the sense of soothed and cossetted. But the appeal goes deeper than this, as one can see by the confusion of Emma’s response. “Very sincerely did Emma wish to do so; but it was not immediately in her power. She was obliged to stop and think. She was not thoroughly comfortable herself” (179). Emma cannot meet Harriet’s demands fully, cannot respond with the unqualified acceptance of a mother, because she is herself disturbed. The encounter, as Harriet recounts it, stirs up her conscience. So though she “exerts herself; and did try to make her comfortable, by considering all that had passed as a mere trifle, and quite unworthy of being dwelt on,” this tactic is doomed to failure. Brushing both her own and Harriet’s disturbance under the carpet, Emma does not address the deeper sources of Harriet’s unhappiness, and so she is condemned to hear Harriet harp on the same theme for a while yet. She cannot give comfort in the deeper, more august sense that the passage also invokes. In the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott’s phrase, she is “not there to receive the communication”: not “there” because she is distracted by her own needs. She cannot “hold” or “contain” Harriet’s distress and therefore cannot communicate calmness or acceptance to her friend. She cannot give a soothing that is also sustenance.

In contrast is the occasion some time later when Harriet is in a rather similar “flutter of spirits” over Mr. Elton’s wedding (Volume II, Chapter 13). In this case, Emma is very clear about what she thinks, and admits her own part in Harriet’s unhappiness—“Deceived myself, I did very miserably deceive you” she says with characteristic directness (268). She appeals to Harriet’s love for her, and to her own pride; “the violence of grief was comforted away,” and the cure is lasting. Emma here performs the function of the good parent or mother: accepting her friend’s “unhappiness,” and her own guilt, she is able to offer a kind of sustenance that arises out of her own

candor and self-knowledge, a psychological “support,” that is born out of her own inner resilience and health. As these interchanges make clear, the notion of comfort moves beyond the material, and beyond compensatory and suspect “comfort” of the sick. “Comfort” at this point no longer has an uneasy relation to health, but seems to be a consequence of it. So we should not despise Jane Austen’s attention to comfort and the comfortable in this novel.

The novel’s interest in health and illness, in activity and stasis, in the indoors and the outdoors, all of which are linked and melded together, is demonstrated most movingly in the staging of Emma and Mr. Knightley’s final reconciliation in Volume III, Chapter 13 (or 49 in modern editions). When it looks as though Harriet and Mr. Knightley might marry Emma experiences her most melancholy evening, pacing about the drawing room at Hartfield, full of ominous thoughts, an evening during which her father “could only be kept tolerably comfortable by ... exertions which had never cost her half so much before” (422). Emma’s energies are here in danger of being overtaxed, consumed by the domestic affections that whilst they are certainly part of those qualities in her that may be trusted (as Mrs. Weston has put it) are in another sense the very avenues through which her young life’s own project may be stemmed and frustrated. But the next day the weather clears.

With all the eagerness which such a transition gives, Emma resolved to be out of doors as soon as possible. Never had the exquisite sight, smell, sensation of nature, tranquil, warm and brilliant after a storm, been more attractive to her. She longed for the serenity they might gradually introduce; and on Mr. Perry’s coming in soon after dinner, with a disengaged hour to give to her father, she lost no time in hurrying into the shrubbery. (424)

The claims of comfort and health are exquisitely balanced in this climactic scene. With her father indoors, taken care of, comfortably occupied with Mr. Perry, Emma is free to step outdoors, to be creative—to take those courageous and playful conversational initiatives that culminate in the clearing up of mutual misunderstandings, and lead Mr. Knightley towards his declaration of love. Emma’s health is thus understood, as Winnicott understood it, against a background of containing stability. Her creativity flourishes, as did Austen’s as an artist, not despite, but because her “world”—in Austen’s case, cultural tradition, and family loyalty—is there in place reliably to hold and assist her. Winnicott made no bones about the significance of the conception of psychological health he propounds, calling it “the

essential central element of creative originality.” There are many, many, different ways in which the greatness, the humor, the intricacy, the romance, the vigor of *Emma* can be brought out, and what I have suggested here is merely one way of configuring the novel. But there is no way round the fact that if *Emma* is an enduring masterpiece that is because it addresses issues that are at the center of life, and of health, itself.

(2003)