

## I

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## Composition and publication

Jane Austen's *Emma*, now her most admired novel, is also her most experimental. In composing as well as in publishing it, Austen took risks. Her decision to shift from Thomas Egerton, who specialised in military printing, to the eminent John Murray II as publisher for *Emma* is a remarkable move in itself within the literary marketplace of her time, but its daring is echoed also by the professional choices Austen made in composing the novel.

## Composition

First, Austen restricts *Emma* to 'the delight of my life': a focus on '3 or 4 Families in a Country Village' (*Letters*, p. 287). Though this phrase accurately describes *Emma*, it accords with no other Austen novel – even if it is sometimes said to apply to all her works. Her words suggest that Austen may be particularly relishing the depiction of Highbury, after *Mansfield Park* (1814) in which she offered no village at all but daily life in the great house and parsonage at Mansfield (with an excursion to another great house, Sotherton), a small house in Portsmouth and reported events in London. It is as though Austen, in *Emma*, decided to write what pleased and challenged her most: as she says, 'the delight of my life'. But to limit herself to events in a small village like Highbury was a risky choice. A favourable review of *Sense and Sensibility* had acknowledged that 'The story may be thought trifling by the readers of novels, who are insatiable after *something new*', and the admiring reviewer of *Pride and Prejudice* noted none the less that 'The story has no great variety.'<sup>1</sup>

Even more risky was Austen's choice of heroine. Emma's snobbery, vanity and eagerness to manage others make her hard for readers to tolerate. The 'Opinions of *Emma*' that Austen collected from friends, family and connections show strong responses to the heroine, and when she was disliked, as by Austen's niece Fanny Knight, the book was less appreciated (*LM*, p. 235). The choice of heroine was a calculated risk, parallel to the decision to limit

JAN FERGUS

the novel to events in one village. Perhaps most experimental and challenging in the novel, however, is Austen's decision to force readers to share Emma's often misguided consciousness most of the time. Admittedly, this choice is not unprecedented. The consciousness of all Austen's heroines is central to their novels, and is always limited or fallible in some points. But Emma's consciousness is both the most mistaken and the most inescapable, and Austen experiments with new techniques to immerse readers in that consciousness: focalised narration and free indirect discourse are more extensively employed.<sup>2</sup> In this respect as in others, *Emma* is both more confident and more experimental than earlier novels. We should ask, what in Austen's circumstances and in the literary marketplace that she had entered justified all these risks and experiments at this stage of her professional career?

Austen's professional success to date certainly accounts for the remarkable confidence and risk-taking we can detect in *Emma*. When Austen began to compose it, on 21 January 1814 (finishing it on 29 March 1815),<sup>3</sup> the marketplace had been good to her. On 6 July 1813 Austen had informed her brother Francis that she had 'written myself into £250' by the successful publication on commission, that is, at her own risk, of *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and by the sale of the copyright of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) (*Letters*, p. 226). Though Austen wrote for fun and family pleasure in her extreme youth, as an adult she decidedly wished to make as much money as she could from her writing.

Profit was not the sole index of Austen's professional success in January 1814, however. She had received four quite favourable reviews for her first two novels, and *Pride and Prejudice* had apparently become the fashionable novel of spring 1813.<sup>4</sup> Second editions of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* had appeared a few months earlier: they had been advertised on 29 November 1813. Furthermore, *Mansfield Park*, the first novel begun after Austen's move in 1809 to Chawton, had been completed for six months and, according to Austen's usual practice, set aside. Henry Austen wrote in his 'Biographical Notice' that 'though in composition she was equally rapid and correct, yet an invincible distrust of her own judgement induced her to withhold her works from the public, till time and many perusals had satisfied her that the charm of recent composition was dissolved' (*P*, p. 327). In sum, Austen was in January 1814 riding a wave of what was to her probably as much success and publicity as an author who chose to publish anonymously could bear. All this professional achievement certainly authorised the confidence and experimentation that we see in *Emma*.

Austen's professional life during the rest of 1814 and early 1815 as she moved towards completing *Emma* continued to be largely characterised by success and confidence. She took *Mansfield Park* to London on 1 March

### Composition and publication

1814 to offer the fair copy of the novel to her publisher Thomas Egerton, who seems to have settled his accounts in March. By mid March 1814, if not before, then, Austen would have received the £250 that Egerton owed her on her first two novels. It is likely that, whenever presented with *Mansfield Park*, Egerton offered to buy the copyright. He already would have cleared at least £200 more than his expenses on his profitable first edition of *Pride and Prejudice*, including the copyright fee.<sup>5</sup> But it is equally likely that he did not offer enough. Austen was certainly able to calculate by this time that she could make more by publishing *Mansfield Park* for herself than by sale of its copyright to Egerton. After all, she had agreed to the £110 fee for *Pride and Prejudice* in November 1812, some eight months before she would learn, by July 1813, that the sold-out first edition of *Sense and Sensibility* would bring her £140. She had added in that same 1813 letter to her brother Frank that 'I have something in hand [*Mansfield Park*] – which I hope on the credit of P.&P. will sell well, tho' not half so entertaining' (*Letters*, p. 217). Her hope was realised: *Mansfield Park* would appear, published by Egerton on commission, on 9 May 1814. The edition of probably 1,250 copies was exhausted by November 1814, clearing in about six months, faster even than the first edition of *Pride and Prejudice*, and bringing Austen the largest profit she received in her lifetime, at least £310 – more than all her previous earnings together.<sup>6</sup>

Kathryn Sutherland has conjectured, following Louis Hay's categories, that Austen composed as an 'immanent' rather than 'programmatically' writer, not planning meticulously ahead but rather spontaneously developing ideas. Sutherland rightly observes that the changed ending of *Persuasion* 'suggests forcefully that in this instance at least she wrote with no overall structure mapped in advance'.<sup>7</sup> Certainly Austen knew overall how her unfinished stories would proceed: her sister Cassandra's account of what was to come in 'The Watsons' after Austen abandoned it is well known.<sup>8</sup> But the complex, dense development of character, plot and theme in *Emma* suggests an absorption during the writing, a concentration and focus that allow individual incidents, moments, even lines or phrases to become, in Stuart Tave's word, 'luminous' with meaning<sup>9</sup> – because Austen has managed to make them connect and resonate with one another in ways that advance planning could not possibly achieve. Consider for example the deep resonances and ironies of the 'best blessings of existence' – beauty, intelligence and wealth – that Emma 'seemed' to unite in the first sentence of the novel when the phrase returns, after Emma has discovered that she loves Mr Knightley: 'if Harriet were to be the chosen, the first, the dearest, the friend, the wife to whom he looked for all the best blessings of existence; what could be increasing Emma's wretchedness but the reflection never far distant from

JAN FERGUS

her mind, that it had been all her own work?' (p. 460). That is, *Emma*'s dense complexity suggests immanent writing, though there may have been some overall plot sketch, like that for 'The Watsons', apart from determination to present a heroine who would challenge readers' easy responses.

### Publication

One professional setback did befall Austen during 1814 as she was writing *Emma*: *Mansfield Park* was not reviewed at all. Possibly Austen was not very sorry once she learned by 18 November 1814 that all copies had been sold. The first sign of a more serious setback arrived with the triumphant announcement to Fanny Knight of the sell-out. Austen immediately wrote, 'Your Uncle Henry is rather wanting me to come to Town, to settle about a 2<sup>d</sup> Edit: – but as I could not very conveniently leave home now, I have written him my Will & pleasure, & unless he still urges it, shall not go. I am very greedy & want to make the most of it' (*Letters*, p. 293). But her confident 'Will & pleasure' did not suffice for Egerton. Austen went to London a week later, on 25 November, and wrote to Fanny on 30 November that 'it is not settled yet whether I do hazard a 2<sup>d</sup> edition. We are to see Egerton today, when it will probably be determined. – People are more ready to borrow & praise, than to buy – which I cannot wonder at; – but tho' I like praise as well as anybody, I like what Edward calls Pewter too' (*Letters*, pp. 299–300). No second edition of *Mansfield Park* was forthcoming from Egerton as a result of this meeting. We hear nothing at all in subsequent letters of Egerton, though according to her 'Note on Profits' Austen received payments from him in March 1816 and 1817 for the second edition of *Sense and Sensibility*.<sup>10</sup>

The publication of *Emma*, especially Austen's decision to negotiate with John Murray II, the prestigious London publisher of Byron and the *Quarterly Review*, can only be understood by considering what may have happened in this final meeting with Egerton. We can make reasonable suppositions based on what we know of publishing and of Austen's other decisions and negotiations. The sole explanation for Egerton's unwillingness to bring out a second edition of *Mansfield Park* in autumn 1814 must lie in his being unlikely to profit from it. He had probably made less than £72 from the sold-out first edition, assuming 1,250 copies, and he had already a year's experience of bringing out second editions of Austen's works. Having advised that a second edition of *Sense and Sensibility* be issued together with his second of *Pride and Prejudice*, Egerton had probably believed that together each would assist the sale of the other. We can infer a rather slow sale because Egerton did not bring out his third edition of *Pride and*

### Composition and publication

*Prejudice* until 1817; it thus took four years to clear the edition. The 1813 second edition of *Sense and Sensibility*, probably about 750 copies, only became profitable to Austen in 1816. We can calculate that because Egerton would make, proportionally, just a bit more than £43 on a sold-out second edition of 750 copies of *Mansfield Park*, he was unwilling to issue one.

Egerton may have pointed to slow sales of the second editions in the November 1814 conference, or he may have warned that demand for *Mansfield Park* had been decreasing toward the end of its run, if that was the case: 'People are more ready to borrow & praise, than to buy' sounds like a publisher's dictum. Certainly he was not prepared to risk his own money to underwrite a second edition of *Mansfield Park*, and we must conclude that for whatever reason, the Austens were unwilling or unable to venture theirs. Austen could have approached another publisher in November 1814, but it is possible that her dissatisfaction with Egerton made her reluctant to do so immediately. She had learned that Egerton's interests, that any publisher's interests, were not necessarily compatible with hers.

Whatever her attitude to Egerton, we can infer that Austen adopted a reasonable publishing alternative: she would wait to approach a new publisher until she had a new novel to offer. In November 1814, she was ten months into writing *Emma*. She could anticipate that within a year she could offer another more generous publisher both *Emma* and *Mansfield Park* – exactly what she did offer John Murray. Austen might have concluded from Egerton's willingness to issue the second editions of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* together that a dual publication would be more attractive to a publisher than a singleton. These speculations present a narrative that accords with what facts we have and what we know of Austen's increasing professionalism. In any case, Austen continued after November 1814 to work on *Emma*, completing it on 29 March 1815. As was her habit, she set *Emma* aside for some months. We can assume that as usual she went over it during this time and made some corrections, perhaps substantial ones, until she thought it ready for publication. On 8 August 1815, she began to write *Persuasion*. Only at this point, that is, only when she had revised *Emma* to her satisfaction and had begun a new novel, would Austen have started negotiations with Murray.

To understand these negotiations, we must review the normal process of publication during Austen's time. First, there were a number of publishing options available. Authors could sell the copyright of a work, as Austen had sold *Pride and Prejudice* to Egerton; this course was the most prestigious and sometimes the most remunerative. Alternatively, authors could engage in profit-sharing, an option offered to many novelists by the house of Longman: the author and publisher shared equally in risk and in profit,

JAN FERGUS

but not every firm offered this option. Publication by subscription, taking money in advance from readers for a work that would be issued subsequently, was still possible but seldom adopted. Finally, writers could publish on commission, whereby they were responsible for all costs but received all profit once costs were covered; the publisher distributed the work and took only a 10 per cent commission on sales, as Egerton had on *Sense and Sensibility*.<sup>11</sup>

During the labour-intensive hand-press period of book production, a publisher who had examined and agreed to publish a novel (or any other work) would send it to a printer to be 'cast off'. A novel was ordinarily printed in 'duodecimo', that is, made up of sheets or half sheets folded to make twelve leaves or twenty-four pages each. In casting off, the printer would calculate how many twenty-four-page sheets comprised the novel. This calculation told him where to divide the manuscript among compositors (so that several could work simultaneously setting up different sheets); he would also calculate how much paper would be required based on the size of the edition. Paper would then be ordered. After a compositor had finished setting two 'formes' (which contained the pages for both sides of the sheet), a sheet would be worked off the press to be proofread in-house. If the publisher had bought copyright, he could at that point arrange for his own copy-editing as well, or not; otherwise, the author would receive the proof sheets and make corrections, returning them to the printer. Once corrections were incorporated, all the sheets required for the edition would be run off and the compositors would get to work on the rest of the manuscript; the formes already printed would often be broken up and the type redistributed.<sup>12</sup>

In three of the four methods of publication, an author would bear at least part of all costs; only if copyright were sold was the author raised above market considerations. For the other three options, it was to an author's advantage if the cost of paper (much the most expensive item), printing, advertising and all other charges were kept to a minimum. In approaching Murray, who published few novels, Austen was bold, but she was assisted by his great admiration for *Pride and Prejudice*. She must have determined to sell him the copyright of *Emma*. Negotiations began in September, and Austen went to London on 4 October, presumably to complete arrangements, intending to stay only 'a week or two' (*Letters*, p. 303). Indeed, we first learn of these negotiations from Austen's perspective in a letter to Cassandra of 17 October 1815: 'Mr Murray's Letter is come; he is a Rogue of course, but a civil one. He offers £450 – but wants to have the Copyright of MP. & S&S included. It will end in my publishing for myself I dare say. – He sends more praise however than I expected. It is an amusing Letter. You shall see it' (*Letters*, p. 303). We must regret that we cannot see the letter with its praise

### Composition and publication

and with what Henry, in his unsent reply to it, will call Murray's 'Critique', criticisms from which Henry will 'differ occasionally' (*Letters*, p. 306).

Austen was entirely right in her assessment; she did end by publishing for herself, but she clearly had expected to sell the copyright of *Emma* to Murray – and expected a good offer. Her evident surprise at Murray's requiring the copyrights of the two other novels is echoed in Henry Austen's unsent reply, dictated 20 or 21 October 1815, just before a recurrence of his serious illness that kept Jane Austen in London and closed communication with Murray for over two weeks. Henry's letter is full of dismay at 'Terms ... so very inferior to what we had expected'. He adds that Austen had cleared more than the offered £450 by a small edition of *Sense and Sensibility* and a somewhat larger one of *Mansfield Park*. Henry reminds Murray that he had 'expressed astonishment that so small an Edit: of such a work should have been sent into the World' (*Letters*, p. 306). This reminder suggests that at least one meeting or exchange of letters had predated the 15 October offer.

Before any such meeting, however, Austen had supplied Murray with a manuscript. What Murray and his reader William Gifford may have received is somewhat controversial. Kathryn Sutherland has conjectured that Austen simply presented her drafts, not fair copies, to publishers and to printing houses.<sup>13</sup> She argues somewhat surprisingly that printers could readily set type from Austen's drafts. But these drafts were crowded onto small, narrow pages, with narrow margins and many interlineations and crossings out, as the one extant fragment of *Persuasion* testifies. Although Austen's handwriting itself is remarkably legible, facsimiles reveal that the draft of *Persuasion* is far less so.

Sutherland's own more recent work, however, suggests that William Gifford, Murray's reader and also editor of the *Quarterly Review*, encountered a fair copy of *Emma*, not a draft. In the Murray Archive, Sutherland uncovered more revealing communications about *Emma* between Gifford and Murray himself than were published by Samuel Smiles in his 1891 *Memoir* of Murray. Although Smiles's excerpts have been relied on by most scholars, Sutherland demonstrates that they have been variously conflated, condensed or misdated. One of her most important discoveries includes a reader's report by Gifford, dated 21 September, eight days earlier than the one Smiles partially quotes. In it, Gifford writes of *Emma* that

I know not its value, but if you can procure it, it will certainly sell well. It is very carelessly copied, though the hand-writing is excellently plain, & there are many short omissions, which must be inserted. I will readily correct the proof for you, & may do it a little good here & there, though there is not much to do, it must be confessed.<sup>14</sup>



JAN FERGUS

Clearly, Gifford considers that the manuscript has been 'copied'.

Gifford also expects Murray to buy the copyright ('procure it'). This expectation is emphasised when Gifford goes on to indicate that 'If you purchase it, & have no reasons for a particular choice, I should prefer correcting [the printer] Roworth's proofs to others.' This letter apparently did not reach Murray; in the rewritten version that Smiles partly prints, dated 29 September, Gifford's offer to correct the manuscript of *Emma* is less obviously tied to Murray's purchase of copyright, but the content is parallel and seems equally to refer to Gifford's willingness to improve a work whose copyright he expects Murray to buy – which was, after all, Murray's usual practice. Consequently, Gifford writes:

Of Emma I have nothing but good to say. I was sure of the writer before you mentioned her. The m. s. though plainly written has yet some indeed, many little omissions, & an expression may now and then be mended in passing through the press. If you print it which I think you will do (though I can say nothing as to its price) I will readily undertake the revision.

The 'plainly written' manuscript again implies a fair copy. And once more, Gifford asks for Roworth as the printer since another one, Dove, is inferior: 'apt to give one rather too much trouble' in proofreading.<sup>15</sup>

'Revision' in these Gifford letters appears to mean something different from what it means now: dealing with obvious errors in the manuscript and seeing it through the press. But even if it signifies a thorough rewriting, Gifford would undertake it only if Murray purchased the manuscript and if therefore Gifford were to read and correct the proofs. All these remarks make clear, I believe, that Austen delivered to Murray a fair copy of *Emma*, not a draft: 'plainly written' in Austen's 'excellently plain' handwriting although 'carelessly copied'. In turn, Murray passed this copy to Gifford for his opinion. Furthermore, Gifford evidently assumed that Murray would purchase the copyright of *Emma* and that Gifford would oversee publication, making any needed corrections, though in his 21 September account Gifford asserted that 'there is not much to do'.

A further suggestion that any 'revision' of *Emma* by Gifford was contingent on Murray's ownership is supplied by another important correction to Smiles's extracts that Sutherland cites. Gifford writes sarcastically in relation to Frances Burney's *The Wanderer* (1814):

Five hundred pounds seem a good deal for a novel, though M<sup>rs</sup> D'arblay, I believe, got more – but then such exquisite performances as the Wanderer do not often turn up. Cannot you get the third novel thrown in, *Pride and Prejudice*? I have lately read it again – tis very good – wretchedly printed in some places, & so pointed [punctuated] as to be unintelligible.<sup>16</sup>



### Composition and publication

Gifford evidently thinks that Murray should purchase the badly printed *Pride and Prejudice* along with the other two novels; he might even have wished to see a better edition through the press. Sutherland conjectures that Gifford is in fact urging Murray 'to make a better bargain over *Emma*' and succeeds. She concludes that Murray was prepared to offer 'a very respectable £500 for the manuscript of *Emma* alone before Gifford intervened and suggested having other titles thrown in'.<sup>17</sup> But the line 'cannot you get the third novel thrown in' implies that Murray's initial offer comprised two novels already, the copyrights of *Emma* and *Mansfield Park* – the only two Austen novels apart from *Pride and Prejudice* that we know Gifford had read. Either Murray already knew that *Pride and Prejudice* was Egerton's property or he shortly discovered it, and he therefore did not include it in his offer. Murray could have taken Gifford's suggestion, however, and included copyright of a third novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, as part of the bargain, and reduced the price, either because Gifford had hinted that £500 was a bit much or because he had second thoughts himself.

Murray's estimate of the value of Austen's three copyrights at £450 was actually fair. Had she accepted his offer, she and her heirs would have made more money – and received it within a year, not (as it turned out) over a period of seventeen years, including the sale of all five remaining copyrights to the publisher Richard Bentley for £210 in 1832.<sup>18</sup> But Murray had not made the sort of generous offer that he was known for and that Austen and her brother Henry had expected. And it accordingly was not accepted.

This rejection of Murray's offer shows us how highly Austen valued *Emma* and how willing she was to hazard that the public would agree with her. She asked to meet Murray at Henry's house on 3 November, after Henry was out of danger from his illness but not up to conducting business. At this meeting she would have voiced her objections to the offer and Murray, unusually for him, agreed to publish *Emma* on commission. Certainly he announced that *Emma* was in the press in mid November.<sup>19</sup> And even though Austen's choice to publish for herself was wrong – Murray's *Emma* and *Mansfield Park* were both remaindered, and by December 1818 there were still 565 copies of *Emma* unsold of the 2,009 printed<sup>20</sup> – her decision was reasonable enough based on her previous experience. Egerton had profited much more than she did from *Pride and Prejudice*. To date, all of her first editions had sold out. Moreover, Austen was scarcely in the best position to calculate profit and loss after the serious illness and near-death of her brother Henry during negotiations. Her decision to publish on commission meant that she received just £38.18.0 during her lifetime for *Emma* – because losses of £182.8.3

JAN FERGUS

on the second edition of *Mansfield Park*, which had sold only 162 copies by December 1817, were set against *Emma*'s first profits of £221.6.4.<sup>21</sup> Austen would have had to decide to limit the edition of *Emma* to 1,500 copies, not 2,000, and to jettison the second edition of *Mansfield Park* in order to earn about £347 by March 1817. Such timid and pessimistic decisions would have been very unlikely after Austen's four-year record of increasing professional success and profit, and given the evidently high value she placed on *Emma*.

In any case, the manuscript went to the printers promptly after the 3 November meeting. Austen complained to Murray on 23 November that she was 'very much disappointed & vexed by the delays of the Printers' although she had received some sheets by then (*Letters*, p. 310). Modern writers will be amazed by the speed with which manuscript could become print in 1815; now, even when copy is submitted in electronic form, publication generally takes nine months to a year. These fairly short delays by the printers Charles Roworth (volumes one and two) and James Moyes (volume three) were troublesome to Austen, however, because she always proofread while staying in London, and she expected to leave London early in December. She was actually detained until 16 December, although Roworth immediately sent her three sheets with an apology on 23 November and continued to supply her well, at least until 26 November (*Letters*, p. 313). Murray's 'most civil' reply to Austen amused her: 'He is so very polite indeed, that it is quite overcoming. – The Printers have been waiting for Paper – the blame is thrown upon the Stationer – but he gives his word that I shall have no farther cause for dissatisfaction ... In short, I am soothed & complimented into tolerable comfort' (*Letters*, pp. 310–11).

Austen might have been less soothed had she known how expensive the paper was that the stationer Grosvenor supplied: charged at 37 shillings a ream for 176 reams of 'fine demy', it was more expensive than the paper later used for the second edition of *Mansfield Park* and far more than the 26-shilling 'demy' paper Murray employed later for *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*.<sup>22</sup> Had Murray been equally frugal in ordering paper for *Emma*, Austen's initial profits of less than £39 in March 1817 would have been increased by over £96 despite the losses on *Mansfield Park*. But Murray charged 21 shillings retail for *Emma*, at that time more than the usual price for a three-volume novel, and perhaps he thought the reputation of his house required expensive paper – but he ordered it at Austen's expense.

We know from Austen's letter to Cassandra on Sunday 26 November that the sheets that came to her from Moyes had already been proofread there, the usual practice: Austen wrote 'The printers continue to supply me very well, I am advanced in vol. 3 to my arra-root, upon which peculiar style of