



1-1-2015

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Koziar, Frances (2015) "Manners, Mobility, Class, and Connection in Austen's *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol8/iss1/7>

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Manners, Mobility, Class, and Connection in Austen's *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*

Frances Koziar

During the Romantic period in England, manners meant more than just please and thank you; in the modern sense of the word, they referred to one's *manner* rather than politeness, relating to how people conducted themselves, their character, air, and sincerity of address. In the late Romantic period, this notion of character and self-presentation was at the heart of social interactions and was key to issues of rank and breeding. Toward the end of the period, the concepts of good breeding and gentility were broadening to include those born to lower social strata, and *gentility* was no longer synonymous with *gentleman*. Jane Austen engages with these changes and the importance of manners, and collectively, “[her] novels are a fascinating repository of the manners of ‘polite’ society” (Byrne 299). In Austen’s time, manners were increasingly a set of attributes that could be learned—and were learned—by

lower classes, creating tension with the upper classes who saw this learning of manners as pretentious and wished to maintain class distinctions. However, because manners could be learned, they could also be lacked. In *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, Austen explores how the lack of manners, or the possession of false manners (lacking sincerity and putting manners on for show) in the place of true, good breeding and gentility could cost upper class people the full deference due their position. Rank and class were still the most important criteria for demanding respectful treatment, and regardless of their level of sincerity or kindness, upper class people were still seen as the leaders of society. But Austen also shows how possessing sincere manners could distinguish such societal leaders and earn them more than grudging civility. This sincerity was key to the manners of both the lower classes and the upper since sincere manners were something that could be learned by upper class people or by lower class people hoping to move up in the social ranks. However, good manners still had a particular relationship with the upper classes because good manners were both an expectation and a quality that increased their social position. In *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen shows the increasing class tensions of the time by demonstrating how anyone can learn or lack manners, and she explores the idea that sincerity is the key to true manners, which was a quality of particular importance for the upper classes in maintaining their social distinction.

Though social hierarchy was still upheld, the boundaries between classes began to blur in Austen's time, causing both the concern of the upper classes and an increase in the importance of manners as a means for maintaining the social order. Hitherto, the social and financial situation to which a person was born determined their prospects for life. Keymer explains, "Rank placed primary emphasis on lineage, implying that social status was more or less inalienably conferred by birth and descent" (387). However, this idea was beginning to change in Austen's time. The Romantic period was a time of revolutions and nationalism and the challenging of social, religious, and political orders, and the end of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth was a time of increasing social mobility. There were still strongly demarcated classes, however, and this social mobility only increased the snobbishness of the middle and upper classes and the outcry against lower-class people coming into money and having the audacity to move upward (White 58). Margetson writes that the "leading aristocratic families . . . were born to rule and lead" (10), while the lower classes were born to follow, and the upper and middle classes struggled to maintain this hierarchy. Manners suddenly became more important in relation

to this hierarchy: they both maintained and thwarted class structures. Manners maintained class distinctions through “downward condescension” (Keymer 394), or the refusal of the upper classes to mix with the lower class, but they also thwarted the hierarchy because of lower class people with “upward ambition” (Keymer 394) who learned manners to achieve higher social status. This “upward ambition” can be seen with the changing concept of gentleman: the classic “country gentleman” of the late Romantic Period was defined in part by his manners and good breeding (White 51). This was a change from earlier times when birth and class were the only factors for defining a gentleman. This shift was the beginning of a fundamental change that only passed fully in the Victorian period—the notion that a man of any birth could make himself, be educated, learn manners, and achieve the title of gentleman, as Charles Dickens illustrates in *Great Expectations* (Umunc 13). In Austen’s works, the stigma toward such men with “upward ambition,” who made their fortunes through trade or business without owning land, was still very much present in the upper and middle classes, but it would decrease over the coming decades (Umunc 12; White 54). With these changes in social mobility and the potential to move upwards, manners became increasingly important to the upper classes as a way of maintaining their distinction. Margetson describes how “gentlemen aspired to an ideal type of manhood—serious, conscientious and morally impeccable . . . it was necessary to . . . uphold the honour of a gentleman . . . [for] only thus could the ruling aristocracy survive the rising tide of democracy,” despite how “these virtues [were] so rigorously imitated by the middle classes” (90). With the title of gentleman and the adjective *genteel* beginning to be used more loosely, and with the manners and virtues of the upper class being imitated by the lower ones, it was crucial for an upper class person to maintain class distinctions through morality, sentiment, and manners, or else have their position threatened by the rising tide of the lower classes trying to imitate them.

With so much imitation by the lower stratum and an increasing importance put on maintaining classes, an increasing distinction was drawn between real and fake manners, and the very definition of manners began to change. In the late 1700s, manners could refer to “character of mind and general way of life; morals; habits to ceremonious behaviour; [or] studied civility” (Byrne 297). Increasingly, manners referred to quality of character and address rather than adherence to formalities, and good breeding and manners were nearly synonymous terms. Moore muses that manners were “characteristic of good breeding,

a very necessary knowledge,” because “one of inferior parts, with the behaviour of a gentleman, [was] frequently better received than a man of sense, with the address and manners of a clown” (18). Writing in the late 1700s, Moore shows that in Austen’s time, (a) manners and superiority by rank did not necessarily go together, (b) manners were required to be received with the respect due an upper class person, and (c) manners were a sign of good breeding and of being educated properly. Austen’s portrayal of Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, an arrogant and wealthy man with connections to the aristocracy, illustrates these ideas well. Because he is rude, Mr. Darcy loses the respect he otherwise would be granted because of his high social status; his poor manners undermine his social status because good manners are required for him to fully come into that status. Through Mr. Bingley, Mr. Darcy’s less wealthy but friendlier companion, Austen shows how someone with lower birth could be treated with more respect because of a difference in manners. Mr. Darcy’s character alone also demonstrates this because he changes his manners, which shows that manners could be learned, resulting in increased respect from Elizabeth and the Gardeners.

Reflecting the changing times, Mr. Darcy’s transition from ill mannered to well mannered demonstrates how manners were learnable. Byrne argues that, though politeness was a part of “a code of behaviour definitive of gentility, [it was] a code that could be learned . . . It was not predetermined by one’s status at birth” (303). Darcy’s status at birth, his looks, and his wealth are enough to grant him the initial respect of the people at the ball where he is first introduced. Initially, he “drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features . . . and the report . . . of his having ten thousand a year . . . and he was looked at with great admiration . . . till his manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity” (Austen, *Pride* 7). After this turn in popularity, it is to Mr. Bingley that people turn with admiration, despite his inferior fortune. After Elizabeth forms a strong negative opinion of Mr. Darcy at the ball, and after she calls him out on his lack of gentlemanly manners when he proposes to her and complains of the “inferiority of her connections” (Austen, *Pride* 165), Elizabeth is amazed when Mr. Darcy does learn good manners. Unaware of the personal struggle Mr. Darcy went through following her reprimands and the shame he experienced when she pointed out his lack of manners, she thinks, “his behaviour, so strikingly altered,—what could it mean? . . . Never in her life had she seen his manners so little dignified, never had he spoken with such gentleness” (Austen, *Pride* 214). Elizabeth sees clear changes in him, a new humility

in the place of pride, gentleness in the place of rudeness. Though she does not understand the reason behind the change, it is evident to the reader that Mr. Darcy has changed for her, thus demonstrating that learning manners is possible, even by someone as ill mannered as Mr. Darcy.

Since manners could be learned, it followed that even a lower class person could also learn to be genteel, but Austen illustrates how the upper classes were reluctant to acknowledge this truth and the increasing social mobility through the character of Robert Martin in *Emma*. Mr. Knightley, Emma's friend and a well-respected gentleman in the neighbourhood, sees Robert Martin as possessing "manners [with] sense, sincerity, and good-humour," and a mind with some "true gentility" (Austen, *Emma* 41), despite Robert Martin being only a yeoman farmer. Emma, the spoiled and headstrong though well-meaning heroine, rejects this view of Robert Martin, seeing in him only the coarseness and vulgarity she expects to see in a farmer. She tells Harriet, "I did not expect much; but I had no idea that he could be so very clownish, so totally without air. I had imagined him, I confess, a degree or two nearer gentility" (Austen, *Emma* 19). Emma is deliberately harsh because she envisions Harriet as a nobleman's daughter and wants her to marry into that rank, but she reveals a conflict of mind in her speech. She says she did not expect much, and she did not—without giving him a chance she had labelled Robert Martin as beneath both her own and Harriet's notice. But in saying she had hoped to find him closer to gentility, Emma suggests that even she acknowledges gentility as something that can be neared, if not obtained, by a farmer. She suggests that a person like Robert Martin can achieve a state of *not* seeming clownish and exhibit a certain air and degree of manner. Though she acknowledges that someone of a lower class could approach gentility, she does not allow herself to see any of the gentility that Mr. Knightley observes in Robert Martin because of Martin's rank. With this downward condescension, Emma upholds a system of social immobility and reflects the same fear of the rising lower class that English gentry felt in Austen's time. In contrast to Mr. Knightley, who over the course of the novel is cast as a picture of the ideal gentleman and an expert in manners, Emma is reluctant to acknowledge virtue in the lower class, making an exception only for her pet Harriet. Keymer explains that Emma "has no time for Knightley's unsettling idea" (393) that Robert Martin might possess gentility because she does not want to face the unpleasant truth that the gap between herself and those below her is shrinking.

With this unsettling new ability of the lower classes to reach a state near gentility, the difference between true and false manners became more important in the late Romantic period. Formality and real manners, and good breeding and *true* good breeding, are set apart by sincerity. Austen shows this through characters who conceal cold or ambitious hearts with seemingly good manners and through upper class characters who lack good manners, despite their official good breeding.

Mr. Elton from *Emma* is a clear demonstration of how manners can be put on for show and be completely lacking in sincerity. Like Mr. Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*, whose “manners recommended him to everybody” (Austen, *Pride* 71) but who then nearly leads the Bennets and the Darcys into disgrace, Mr. Elton also faces a loss in regard when his seemingly good manners are revealed to be superficial. At the ball at the Crown, Mrs. Weston asks him, “Do you not dance, Mr. Elton?” to which his prompt reply was, ‘Most readily, Mrs. Weston, if you will dance with me’” (Austen, *Emma* 213). It is thus a shock to everyone when in response to Mrs. Weston suggesting Harriet as his dance partner he replies hypocritically, “Miss Smith!—oh! . . . You are extremely obliging . . . but my dancing days are over” (Austen, *Emma* 213). His feigned surprise and his refusal to dance with Harriet is an extreme insult to her, with no better motivation than pride and spite. Mr. Elton was willing to dance with Mrs. Weston, his social superior, but not someone below his status, and especially not Harriet. His manners are merely a tool he uses to gain social status, to consort with higher-class individuals, and (in the case of Emma) to court them.

In the reverse situation, Lady Catherine, Mr. Darcy, and Miss Bingley are all portrayed as lacking manners despite their high social position. Miss Bingley, the haughty sister of Mr. Bingley who pursues Mr. Darcy, is repeatedly rude to Elizabeth and insults her openly to Darcy. When she meets Elizabeth again at Pemberley, she and Mrs. Hurst acknowledge her “only by a curtsy” (Austen, *Pride* 227). Austen provides an important character foil from Miss Bingley when she describes how the awkward pause that follows this introduction was “broken by Mrs. Annesley, a genteel, agreeable-looking woman, whose [endeavor] to introduce some kind of discourse proved her to be more truly well-bred than either of the others” (Austen, *Pride* 227). Mrs. Annesley’s friendliness and genteel manner are described as reflecting a better breeding than Miss Bingley or Mrs. Hurst, despite that the simple description of “genteel” suggests that she was not in fact a noblewoman herself, but only possessing the manners of one. *Truly* well-bred suggests that the other two were only *officially* better

bred—born to a better class with better education. In contrast to the noblewomen, Mrs. Annesley's expression of welcome is a sign of true good breeding. Her sincere welcome demonstrates that she cares that a visitor be properly included into a company, and her concern over the awkward pause demonstrates compassion.

Like Miss Bingley, Lady Catherine is often impertinent despite her title and education; in contrast to her nephew Darcy who is reprimanded by Elizabeth, her poor manners go entirely unchecked. When Lady Catherine announces loudly to Darcy that she had repeatedly told Elizabeth that she should practice on her piano-forte in the servants' room, "Mr. Darcy looked a little ashamed of his aunt's ill-breeding and made no answer" (Austen, *Pride* 149). Because they belong to the same family, and because manners are a reflection of status and are thus tied to family, Mr. Darcy is embarrassed because of his aunt in the same way that Lydia's transgressions of behaviour affect the Bennets' very "importance [and] respectability in the world" (Austen, *Pride* 198). That the same embarrassment can be felt by Elizabeth and Darcy because of their family members, and that someone as insignificant as Mrs. Annesley can be better bred than Miss Bingley, shows that "true good breeding comes not from birth, station or social nuance, but from the heart" (Byrne 304). Austen expresses this idea in her novels, and characters who act from the heart like Mr. Bingley and Mr. Martin are rewarded with good fortune in the end.

Though someone of a lower class could be more truly well-bred than someone of a higher class, upper-class characters like Lady Catherine that are still respected despite their rudeness demonstrate how rank and birth were still primarily important for garnering respect. The transition and flexibility of the definition of gentleman was still underway for Austen, and both manners and rank were required to truly be a gentleman or gentlewoman. In Highbury, Emma feels that the Coles, who "were a very good sort of people . . . [and] were very respectable in their way" (Austen, *Emma* 134), were nonetheless displaying arrogance by not inviting Emma's family to their party since the Woodhouses were of a superior rank. Despite their manners and growing wealth, the Coles are only respectable in their own way, and are not of the superior families in the neighbourhood. They are still subject to the whims and the social rules laid down by the families with older lineages, older money, and more land. So while manners can elevate the Coles to be near the superior families, and while Robert Martin can be seen as respectable despite his status and Mrs. Annesley as better bred than her higher born companions, manners still had a unique

significance to those of the upper classes of society, despite the blurring boundaries of the time.

In these novels, Austen portrays manners as both a responsibility of the gentry and as something that is necessary for the upper class to fully realize the positions they were born to. When Emma makes fun of Miss Bates at Box Hill, Mr. Knightley reprimands her severely and impresses on her the importance of being kind to the less fortunate. He speaks of it as a responsibility of hers as a leading social figure. Mr. Knightley explains,

were she your equal—but, Emma . . . she is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to . . . Her situation should secure your compassion . . . to have you now, in thoughtless spirits, and the pride of the moment, laugh at her, humble her . . . and before others, many of whom . . . would be entirely guided by *your* treatment of her. (Austen, *Emma* 246)

Emma is privileged by wealth and family name, and therefore she is one of the leading social figures in Highbury. Mr. Knightley tells her that with this superiority comes a responsibility toward those less fortunate. He reprimands Emma just as harshly as Elizabeth reprimands Mr. Darcy, but he presents Emma's poor manners as a responsibility and is hard on her for her lack of compassion. It is because Miss Bates is not Emma's equal that Mr. Knightley sees the insult as so cruel: Miss Bates has lost what she once had and already must suffer. In a way, pity is a luxury of the fortunate, and here, it is Emma's responsibility to have pity because she is a leading social figure and because her actions guide how the others act. Instead, Emma acts in pride and thoughtlessness: her security in her own position causes her to dismiss the hardship of Miss Bates. Mr. Knightley tries to make Emma feel with the sincerity and compassion that are required for true good breeding.

As Lady Catherine and the Coles demonstrate, socio-economic status was the most important factor for social status, and thus it was not necessary for an upper class person like Emma to ever check her rudeness because she would be deferred to anyway. However, to be genuinely respected and to fully realize their high status, sincere manners were necessary for the upper classes. Though Emma was publicly rude to Miss Bates, it is only the similarly ranked Mr. Knightley who is able to criticize her and explain to her the importance of good manners because the others must defer to her as a superior personage regardless of her actions. The importance of sincere manners in the realization of social status is demonstrated through the commonly disliked Mrs. Elton.

Despite Mrs. Elton's wealth, she is not well received in Highbury because of her impertinence and informality with the respected families. Emma describes her indignantly as "a little upstart, vulgar being" (Austen, *Emma* 181): vulgar for her lack of manners that deny her the full realization of a position she might have held in that society. In contrast, Emma's friend Mr. Weston is seen as respectable, despite the fact that, like Mrs. Elton's, his family was a newly wealthy one and could easily have been seen as belonging to those with pretentious "upward ambition." Mr. Weston's sincerity and his "warm heart and sweet temper" (Austen, *Emma* 8) allow him to realize the position that Mrs. Elton is unable to achieve. Moore writes that "a certain dignity of manners is absolutely necessary, to make even the most valuable character either respected or respectable in the world" (149). Without those manners, though someone like Mrs. Elton might be respected by those below her because of her money, there is little genuine feeling behind the acknowledgement.

A similar scenario plays out at the ball where Mr. Darcy is first introduced. Before his bad manners are revealed, Mr. Darcy is treated with more admiration than Mr. Bingley, showing that Mr. Darcy had the *potential* for higher respect by the people at the dance and that it was his rudeness and pride that stopped him from fulfilling that potential. When Mr. Darcy later proposes to Elizabeth, again lacking manners while doing so, she tells him that his mode of address did not inspire her refusal, it only "spared [her] the concern which [she] might have felt in refusing [him], had [he] behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner" (Austen, *Pride* 165). Mr. Darcy's lack of gentlemanlike manners, though he is a gentleman in the economic sense, causes a lack of concern in Elizabeth; it is an exchange of a lack of compassion for a lack of compassion. In the reverse circumstance, after Darcy's manners improve and he then meets the Gardiners, his sincerity of manner inspires genuine respect in them rather than mere deference. Mr. Gardiner exclaims that Darcy's manner and way of treating them "was more than civil" (Austen, *Pride* 219), surpassing mere politeness. Mr. Darcy never *needed* to learn better manners, but Mr. Knightley would have told him that he had a *responsibility* to learn them. Margetson writes that "The English upper classes . . . had a strong sense of duty towards those less fortunate than themselves, and it was this that enabled them to survive and prosper and to earn the respect of the common people" (10). This duty, this responsibility, was both reciprocal and kind: kind to those less fortunate, and reciprocal because, by taking the time to be well-mannered, the upper classes received the sincerity

that they gave and earned the true respect of the commoners, solidifying their positions as societal leaders.

Through *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen paints a portrait of the manners and class concerns of the late Romantic period, but she uses the qualities of compassion and sincerity to do so. It is the possession or lack of sincerity that accompanies displays of courtesy that either brings Austen's characters together or tears them apart. In these works, Darcy's improvement shows the affection that can be inspired by good manners, including Elizabeth's own, and that manners could be taught and learned; Robert Martin shows that even a farmer can become respectable through genuine courtesy, and anyone can rise nearer to gentility through their manners; Emma's tale demonstrates the responsibility that comes with being socially superior and the option to take part in the unspoken deal of sincerity for sincerity. Manners could make those of the lower classes respectable and allow them to mingle with those above them at a time of blurring social boundaries, but for the upper classes manners held a greater ethical weight: they were markers of gentility of mind and compassion toward the less fortunate and were something that the lower classes could recognize, appreciate, and follow. A lack of sincere manners is what divided characters like Elizabeth and Darcy initially and is what caused Mrs. Elton to be seen as an upstart while Mr. Weston was welcomed. It is the presence of true good will beneath spoken words that led to the social recommendation of well-loved characters like Mr. Bingley, Mr. Knightley, and later, Mr. Darcy. Though she wrote in a time when wealth and lineage were still very important, Austen's works demonstrate a lesson that is yet being learned today: that integrity of character, virtue of mind, openness of heart, and sincerity in everyday courtesies are what bridge distances between people and create an equality of spirit.

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