

“Divided between Distress and Diversion”:
A Study of Some Comic Male Characters
in Jane Austen¹

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If we overlook the humour in Austen’s novels, be it farcical, ironical or satirical, we will undoubtedly fail to appreciate a significant part of her achievement. It is in fact the intricate interplay between the humorous events or characters and the serious underlying theme of “the process of growing into maturity,”—a theme which is ingeniously cast in the form of romance—that attracts readers to this day.

In this paper I plan to analyse in detail some of Austen’s comic male characters in relation to her heroines who, through a process of either refusing the marriage proposals of or rejecting the values represented by these characters, prove themselves in the end to be mature social beings, worthy to marry the novels’ heroes. First, I will discuss *Northanger Abbey* and the interaction between the relevant characters, arguing that we find here a pattern prevalent in Austen’s five novels; I say “five” as I am excluding *Mansfield Park*, a novel with little humour, from my analysis. Then I will focus my attention on two major comic male characters, Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* and Mr. Woodhouse in *Emma*, regarding them as representing respectively Austen’s earlier and later periods.

Let me begin with *Northanger Abbey*, which was most probably completed by 1803,² though it was published posthumously. You will recall that the comic figure, John Thorpe, is first introduced to us as he drives his gig into Bath at a violent speed. It is surely symbolic that this wild unruly

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fool³ arrives in the company of the heroine’s brother, James Morland, and that their gig obstructs the heroine from crossing the street. For, it is essentially to thwart Catherine Morland and her path to love that the two are made to appear in the novel.

John proves to be a braggart, boastful of his gig and horse, shamelessly exaggerating and fabricating lies. Catherine, harassed from this point on by his obtrusive presence and by his insistence on driving about with her in his gig, is more than once alarmed lest he should ruin her cherished plans to dance with or to take a walk with her hero, Henry Tilney.

In point of vanity and greed, John is like his sister, Isabella, who flirts with and pursues men, and men of fortune in particular. John, on his part, having misunderstood Catherine to be the daughter of a wealthy clergyman, offers to marry her. But he is so swaggering and circuitous, and uses such odd and wild language in declaring his intentions, that the heroine herself hardly comprehends him. When Isabella, urged by her brother, tries to promote his suit, Catherine is firm in her refusals. If she is naively taken in by Isabella’s promises of friendship, she is not fooled by her brother’s “declaration of love” which is indeed scarcely intelligible to her.

John’s courtship is, in essence, another form of temptation. In alliance with James and Isabella, he attempts to subvert Catherine’s sense of propriety: in spite of her prior engagement with Henry’s sister, Eleanor, for example, he nearly inveigles her into breaking it and joining them in a wild gig-party to Clifton. The allies are united in their pursuit of pleasure and this reveals their threatening nature. In the course of events, however, the heroine learns to judge her brother’s partiality for Isabella, and to decipher the ambition which lies behind her confidante’s sentimental avowals, attaining in the end a discriminating and independent mind of her own, even as her lover, Henry, comes to defy his despotic father, General Tilney, and, in his own humble terms, asks her to marry him.

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Northanger Abbey parodies, as is generally known, the popular Gothic novels of the 1790's. It also satirizes, among other things, insincerity in speech, and such corrupted uses of language as sentimental jargon, fibs, evasion and highfaluting speech. In this context, it is highly significant that the General is misled by John's love of the grandiose into believing Catherine to be an heiress. The General, coveting her imaginary fortune for his son, assumes the fool's role from this point on, while his secretive and tyrannical manners leave a strong impression on Catherine. Having avidly read such a sensational Gothic novel as *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, the heroine is exceedingly sensitive to the possibility of a Montoni-like despotism; she even suspects the General of having committed some act of atrocity towards his late wife. Ironically, her suspicion proves to be partly correct, though the victim implicated is not the late Mrs. Tilney but her very self. If Catherine's excessive fear leads her to the right conclusion to that extent, however, her sense of propriety, inherently sound and wholesome, delivers her unscathed from the highfaluting John who, we must conclude, is a comical trickster to match the viciously avaricious, machinating patriarch.

When we turn our attention from *Northanger Abbey* to *Sense and Sensibility*, we realise that, with a slight variation, the characters keep the same respective roles. The comic male character, John Dashwood, is a married man and a half-brother of the two heroines, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. We should note that the fool is brought a step closer to the heroines; he is no longer their brother's friend but their own kin.

Like the braggart, John Thorpe, in *Northanger Abbey*, John Dashwood tries to thwart the heroines' pursuit of love, notably that of Elinor. But he fails, in spite of his two formidable allies: his shrewd wife, Fanny, and his wealthy dictatorial mother-in-law, Mrs. Ferrars. And if, in *Northanger Abbey*, John Thorpe is circuitous in insinuating his matrimonial intentions, in *Sense and Sensibility* John Dashwood is grotesquely articulate,

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even to mathematical exactness, in expressing his concerns about his sister’s matrimonial prospects.

John, disappointed with Marianne who, at the age of seventeen, has already lost her personal beauty, questions, “whether she *now*, will marry a man worth more than five or six hundred a-year, at the utmost.” (SS 227)⁴ Having mistaken Colonel Brandon, on the other hand, to be an admirer of Elinor, a man of property with a fortune of two thousand pounds a year, John readily congratulates her and “working himself up to the pitch of enthusiastic generosity, he add[s], ‘Elinor, I wish, with all my heart, [the fortune] were *twice* as much, for your sake.’” (SS 223) With great alacrity John evaluates his sisters’ future husbands in terms of pounds and pennies.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, a novel more structurally complicated than *Sense and Sensibility*, the comic male character, William Collins, is a clergyman and a cousin of the heroine, Elizabeth Bennet. He is, furthermore, next in the entail of her father’s estate due to the fact that Mr. Bennet has no son of his own. Legally speaking, Mr. Collins thus assumes the role of the heroine’s brother.

You will recall the scene of the Netherfield ball, when Elizabeth is mortified to witness the exposure of her family’s vulgar manners—those of her parents, sisters and cousin alike. Mr. Collins, having learned, to his great excitement, that Mr. Darcy, a nephew of his patroness, is present at the assembly, turns a deaf ear to Elizabeth and boldly walks up to Mr. Darcy to introduce himself. For all her remonstrances, she cannot convince him of the impropriety of so doing:

he left her to attack Mr. Darcy, whose reception of his advances she eagerly watched, and whose astonishment at being so addressed was very evident. Her cousin prefaced his speech with a solemn bow, and though she could not hear a word of it, she felt as if hearing it all, and saw in the motion of his lips the words “apology,” “Hunsford,” and

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“Lady Catherine de Bourgh.” (*PP* 97-98)

Elizabeth cannot help but wince: reading in Mr. Darcy’s face a sign of wonderment mingled with disapproval and lip-reading her cousin’s speech, she virtually hears each of the sycophant’s self-debasing words. She is embarrassed. Keenly conscious of Mr. Darcy’s critical eyes, a man thoroughly accustomed to refined society, the heroine is perplexed, recognizing in the fool a part of her own family’s blemish.

In Austen’s three early novels, *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, the main comic male figures are, thus, the heroine’s brother’s friend, John Thorpe, the heroines’ half-brother, John Dashwood, and, as has been just explained, the heroine’s cousin/surrogate brother, William Collins. However, in Austen’s later novels this main comic male character, interestingly enough, shifts from being a brother-figure to that of the father of the heroine. Mr. Woodhouse, for example, is the valetudinarian father of Emma Woodhouse in *Emma* and Sir Walter Elliot is the arrogant baronetcy-conscious father of Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*. What does this shift imply? In what way does it affect the heroines, or the interactions between the characters? Does it in any manner change the tone of the novels? These are the questions we will attempt to answer as we make a closer comparative study of Mr. Collins and Mr. Woodhouse, two of the major comic male characters in Austen’s novels.

In *Northanger Abbey* John Thorpe proposes to marry the heroine, while in *Sense and Sensibility* John Dashwood tries to sever the heroine from her lover. In *Pride and Prejudice* William Collins undertakes to do both: in his marriage proposal to Elizabeth, he has the ardent support of her mother, Mrs. Bennet; whereas it is in conspiracy with his aristocratic patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, that he writes a sinister letter to Mr. Bennet, attempting to obstruct his daughter’s marrying the man of her choice.

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Mr. Collins, in making a marriage proposal to Elizabeth, is deferentially formal yet in effect grossly impertinent.⁵ He enumerates his own merits and then elucidates her economic deficiencies. Having reminded Elizabeth that she has only the paltry dowry of “one thousand pounds in the 4 per cents, which will not be [hers] till after [her] mother’s decease,” he pompously assures her that upon this subject “no ungenerous reproach shall ever pass [his] lips when [they] are married.” He twice alludes to Mr. Bennet’s death when her family will lose the Longbourn estate and immediately adds his hopes that this “may not be for several years.” (*PP* 106) With supreme dexterity, Mr. Collins blights every compliment or courtesy he pays and remains self-assured of his proposal being highly acceptable.

Mr. Collins’ address, if reprehensible in the manner of speech, offers diverse information. He lays bare not only the economic insecurity of the heroine, but also the character of Lady Catherine who, having presented him to the Hunsford living, remains the benefactress he most profoundly reveres. Eager to explain to Elizabeth that this aristocratic lady herself advised him to marry, Mr. Collins gets carried away by his enthusiasm:

“Twice has she condescended to give me her opinion (unasked too!) on this subject; and it was but the very Saturday night before I left Hunsford—between our pools at quadrille, while Mrs. Jenkinson was arranging Miss de Bourgh’s foot-stool, that she said, ‘Mr. Collins, you must marry. A clergyman like you must marry, —Chuse properly, chuse a gentlewoman for *my* sake; and for your *own*, let her be an active, useful sort of person, not brought up high, but able to make a small income go a good way.... Find such a woman as soon as you can, bring her to Hunsford, and I will visit her.’” (*PP* 105-06)

Mr. Collins’ exultant word-by-word reiteration of Lady Catherine’s advice, together with his minute description of the scene, is full of deflating

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antitheses: such a menial trifle as a foot-stool juxtaposed with the serious subject of marriage; the Lady arrogantly insisting that she only associates with gentlewomen versus the clergyman being reminded of the need to economize; the officious advice twice given and twice received in prostrate gratitude. Mr. Collins’ eloquence, in praise of his patroness, paradoxically exposes her haughtiness and his obsequious servility, culminating in the summary of Elizabeth as “an active, useful sort of person, not brought up high, but able to make a small income go a good way.” His solicitation of Elizabeth’s hand, with all his loquacity, attests to his monstrous insolence and imbecility.

If in *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland little comprehends the awkward address of John Thorpe, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet fully grasps the purport of Mr. Collins’ speech. But she hears it in detachment as if it were a comical theatrical performance; “divided between distress and diversion,” (*PP* 105) she finds it difficult not to laugh at his absurdity. Her attitude is notably different from the evening at Netherfield ball when she is nettled by his folly. It is not until Mr. Collins repeatedly interprets her refusals as signs of encouragement that she starts to protest “in some warmth,” (*PP* 108) and finally leaves in silence, determined to ask for her father’s intervention if necessary. The heroine, in no way tempted to sacrifice her own feelings for the economic stability which Mr. Collins offers, remains otherwise undisturbed. Unlike Mrs. Bennet, who explodes when she hears of her daughter’s refusals, Elizabeth throughout this episode maintains an observer’s position, regarding Mr. Collins as a “pure fool,” as Marvin Mudrick calls him, to be laughed at by her and by the readers.⁶

Towards the end of the novel, Mr. Collins sends a vengeful letter to Mr. Bennet, trying to thwart Elizabeth’s marriage with Mr. Darcy. His ally, Lady Catherine, however, having visited Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy in great fury to forbid such an infamous union, ironically helps in the end to

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precipitate her nephew’s second marriage proposal to the heroine. Before this, Mr. Collins’ letter produces a complicated emotional reaction on the part of Elizabeth. Neither Mr. Collins nor Lady Catherine effectually threatens her, but her father whose acute insight she values, by laughing at Mr. Collins’ misgivings on the assurance of Mr. Darcy’s “perfect indifference” (*PP* 364) to her, becomes in a manner her enemy.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen makes a dexterous use of Mr. Collins’ two principal letters, one at the beginning and the other towards the end of the novel, illuminating the critical change which the heroine’s relationship with her father undergoes. Mr. Collins’ first self-introductory letter displays such a mixture of self-importance and servility that both Elizabeth and her father make it a butt of ridicule. On the other hand, Mr. Collins’ threatening letter, towards the end of the novel, uncovers the gap between the two: the father once again ridicules what he considers Mr. Collins’ folly; yet the daughter cannot join in his mirth as he inadvertently strikes at the most sensitive part of her heart. Elizabeth is mortified, swayed between her confidence in Mr. Darcy’s love for her and the anxiety caused by her father’s remarks on Mr. Darcy’s decisive indifference. Elizabeth, Mr. Bennet’s favourite, is no longer united in thought with him as she was at the beginning of the novel.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Collins, in relation with the heroine, has thus manifold tasks to perform. In the presence of Mr. Darcy, he is a threat to Elizabeth as his folly may reflect on her. In his marriage proposal, however, Mr. Collins is a “pure fool” whom Elizabeth may observe in detachment. His threatening letter to Mr. Bennet, again disturbs the heroine, as it lays bare the gap between Elizabeth and her father: Mr. Bennet is warned against something he has no knowledge of; while Elizabeth, uncertain of Mr. Darcy’s heart, finds herself agitated by her father’s cynical remarks.

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The heroine, we note, fluctuates in her attitude both towards the fool and towards the father. But if Elizabeth momentarily identifies herself with her cousin under the critical eyes of Mr. Darcy, she is otherwise free to laugh at him. Mr. Bennet, on the other hand, presents a complicated problem. She is primarily an ally in her father's mirth, although at times irritated by his lack of insight, but, more significantly, she cannot be blind to his moral flaw, his neglect of his responsibility as the head of a family towards her mother and her younger sisters.

As I have already pointed out, in Austen's later novels the main comic male character shifts from being a brother-figure to that of the father of the heroine. From what we have observed of Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, we may presume that a father's folly, far more than that of a brother, puts a heroine in a morally precarious position. One's emotional involvement with her/his father is necessarily complex, a parent being in blood the nearest relation. And in *Emma*, the novel to be discussed next, it is precisely this “defective father Mr. Bennet,” not the “surrogate brother Mr. Collins,” who places obstacles in the heroine's way to love.⁷

According to Austen's own memorandum, *Emma* was begun in January 1814 and was completed on March 29 of the following year.⁸ Written nearly two decades after her first attempt at the novel form,⁹ *Emma* is a work of a mature and confident artist, superb in detailed description while compact in structure and ambitious in scheme.

Mr. Henry Woodhouse, the father of the heroine, Emma Woodhouse, presents by no means a powerful figure as a patriarch. He is a nervous man, fond of gossip about trivial matters and effeminately preoccupied with his health and that of his neighbours. Neither are his coterie ladies of any social distinction, but are of inferior status such as the impoverished wife of the former vicar, Mrs. Bates, her talkative middle-aged daughter, Miss Bates, and the old school mistress, Mrs. Goddard. Yet he is, in a manner, the king

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in the society of Highbury, where he is the wealthiest inhabitant, receiving as a matter of course the care and respect of everybody.

In this somewhat perverted court, matrimony is objected to as the origin of irksome change. For Mr. Woodhouse scorns any change or novelty, while he adheres to routines down to the smallest details, from the fifteen-minute winter walk in the garden, namely the three turns in the shrubbery, to the regular four o'clock dinner and the card-table afterwards. Having little imaginative power, he believes that everybody shares his viewpoints and pities Emma's former governess, Miss Taylor, for having had to marry and leave his home Hartfield; he never reconciles himself to calling her by her married name, Mrs. Weston.

Mr. Woodhouse's petty egotism clearly asserts itself when his eldest daughter, Isabella, or Mrs. John Knightley, visits him with her family for Christmas. In Mr. Woodhouse's much awaited tête-a-tête with Isabella on the first evening, Emma occasionally joins in, while she does not neglect the other guest, Mr. George Knightley, who sits on the other side of her, hard in conversation with his brother, John.

The dialogue between Mr. Woodhouse and his eldest daughter thrives on trivial topics, especially on someone else's ailments: the sore throat of Isabella's little daughter, Bella; the bilious state of Mr. Woodhouse's physician, Mr. Perry; and the bad cold from which Mrs. Bates suffered a month ago. While these topics are discussed, Mr. Woodhouse fondly shows his concerns over Isabella, yet keeps on opposing her views, for at heart he nurses a grudge against her family for having gone in the autumn to the seaside of South End, instead of coming to Hartfield as usual. He pronounces doubts as to the sea air being beneficial to health, shows uneasiness about Isabella's residence in the stuffy city of London and tries to recommend Mr. Perry's embrocation for Bella's throat as better than that of Isabella's physician Mr. Wingfield. Isabella, on her part, tenaciously

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defends herself, quoting Mr. Wingfield for support. Whenever there appears a sign of discord, however, Emma manages to change the topic just in time so they come back once again to friendly ground. Yet, when, upon eating the gruel, Isabella plaintively recalls the cook at South End who could never make a basin of “nice smooth gruel, thin, but not too thin,” Emma sees her father sink into a dangerous meditation:

“Ah!” said Mr. Woodhouse, shaking his head and fixing his eyes on [Isabella] with tender concern. The ejaculation in Emma’s ear expressed “Ah! there is no end of the sad consequences of your going to South End. It does not bear talking of.” And for a little while she hoped he would not talk of it, and that a silent rumination might suffice to restore him to the relish of his own smooth gruel. (*E* 105)

Well aware of her father’s agitation, Emma closely follows the train of his inner monologue. Against her hopes, however, Mr. Woodhouse, on opening his mouth, hits upon the topic uppermost in his mind. Attributing much of his complaint to the medical advice given by Mr. Perry, he declares Isabella’s having taken her family to South End a “very ill-judged measure,” (*E* 106) and, if they had to go to the seaside on account of Bella’s health, they should not have spared expense and, instead of South End 40 miles away from London, they certainly should have chosen Cromer, 130 miles away, with far better air. This, however, is too much a personal affront to be borne by his son-in-law, John Knightley, who makes such a thorough denunciation of Mr. Perry’s officious interference that it finally shatters Mr. Woodhouse to numbness.

Mr. Woodhouse’s battle, unreasonable in its claim yet persistent in effort, is two-fold: he asserts his power over his eldest daughter, trying to restore the past when she was still in his dominion as a child; as a result, he comes to confront his son-in-law, who on his part exercises his sovereignty as the present head of the Knightley family. If Isabella hardly guesses what

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ails her father, she shows tender care, while John is nearly hostile, being a competitor with Mr. Woodhouse for his wife.

Significantly enough, seated between Mr. Woodhouse and John Knightley, Emma is on neutral ground. On the one hand, she is critical of her brother-in-law, who frequently fails to hide his impatience with her father. Her father, in this respect, is her alter ego, so closely united are her loving cares with his personal interests. Though daughter to Mr. Woodhouse, Emma clearly shows a maternal care, protecting him as if he were a vulnerable child. Emma, on the other hand, is perceptive and objective enough to admit the exorbitance of her father’s demand over the issue of South End versus Cromer and readily condones John’s final outbreak.

Emma does not realise, however, that Mr. Woodhouse’s power is pressing upon her as well, acting as a hindrance to her marriage, which, we may say, is the other side of the coin of Emma’s own self-delusion. She is complacent in her present position as a commanding mistress, just as her father considers her perfect in the way she arranges his daily life at Hartfield. Emma and her father are, in a manner, married to each other.

The scene at Box Hill is like a negative print of the family reunion scene at Hartfield above analysed. Emma is dexterous in arranging her father’s comfort on the occasion of Isabella’s homecoming, but at the picnic she bitterly offends Miss Bates. She only reaches some self-knowledge when she comprehends the injury done to Miss Bates, the social counterpart of her father. For, if Mr. Woodhouse is a fool-king sacred to the community of Highbury, Miss Bates, who together with her elderly mother lives on the charity of the various families in the village, is no less sacred and protected.¹⁰ A garrulous woman with a cheerful disposition, Miss Bates brings blessings in every direction in return for the material support she receives. On learning to serve the beggar as well as the king, Emma is endowed with the right to marry, to be considered a mature and fully-recognized member of

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society. Her father then leaves the throne which is to be given to Mr. George Knightley, Emma’s husband-to-be.

We started this discussion of the fool with John Thorpe of *Northanger Abbey*, a friend of the heroine’s brother, moving onto William Collins of *Pride and Prejudice*, the heroine’s surrogate brother, and then to Mr. Woodhouse of *Emma*, the heroine’s own father, and saw that Mr. Woodhouse is so closely related to Emma that the heroine nearly misses her chance for self-recognition, so intertwined are her thoughts and actions with those of her father. We note that, in parallel, in the three novels the heroines’ awareness of the relationship with their lovers becomes more difficult to acquire accordingly. If Catherine Morland willingly accepts Henry Tilney’s tutelage from the first time she meets him at the beginning of the novel, Elizabeth Bennet has to wait till she receives the shockingly revealing letter from Mr. Darcy, in the middle of the novel, to be able to see him without prejudice, and Emma till practically the end of the novel, to realise her own love for Mr. Knightley in comparison with Harriet Smith’s, a girl she pampers as if she were her own plaything. The fool, Mr. Woodhouse, is so much a part of Emma, that she does not recognize her own ridiculous qualities till the last moment. Austen indeed risks her readers’ sympathy by creating the character, Emma, who reminds us not so much of the naiveté of the heroine, Catherine Morland, as the arrogance of such allies of the fools as Mrs. Ferrars and Lady Catherine, who unabashedly abuse others and manipulate the destinies of those around them to serve their egotistic purposes.

If we change our viewpoint a little here, we may say that Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* is a heroine so keenly aware of the defect of her father, Sir Walter Elliot, that she hardly identifies herself with him at all. And, as if to show her critical standpoint symbolically, in the first half of the novel she is made to live apart from him at Uppercross and in the end departs from

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Kellynch, the family seat for many generations, to live with a sailor, who does not even possess land of his own.

This brings up the subject I would like to examine last in my discussion—the places where the heroines decide to live at the end of each novel. Emma Woodhouse, even after her marriage with Mr. Knightley, continues to live at Hartfield with her father. The village of Highbury, together with Mr. Knightley’s property, Donwell Abbey, constitute as it were the whole world in the novel, and Emma’s growth into maturity is closely linked with her learning to live within this particular community. On the other hand, in *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot moves from one society to another, searching for an appropriate place to live, among the modernized landed gentry of Uppercross, the professional naval officers at Lyme and the miscellaneous groups of people in Bath. It is evident, in connection with this, that Austen’s later novels deal with the theme of “regeneration”: in *Emma*, the heroine succeeds in coaxing the fool-king to hand the sceptre to the next generation, dethroning the weakened, and replacing him with the powerful real sovereign¹¹ who will be able to maintain the order of the community; in *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot abandons the declining aristocracy and joins the rising professional class who will be capable as well as faithful enough to the duty of protecting the nation.

We may say that, in summary, Austen’s three earlier novels, *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, display a central interest in the interactions between the heroines and the comic male characters whose marriage proposals or values they reject; in her later novels, however, this interest is artistically integrated with the theme of “regeneration” or the revitalization of society as a whole, and hence the fool takes the form of a father-figure. This even includes *Mansfield Park*, a novel in which father figures, both the heroine’s natural father, Mr. Price, and her foster father, Sir Thomas Bertram, are the butt of a bitter sarcasm, a humour

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turned sour. Perhaps we may conclude that Austen’s theme comes to a better focus in her later period. In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland is certainly entranced by romantic ideas, sharing the problem of self-delusion with the fool, John Thorpe. But in *Emma*, Emma Woodhouse is a character as comical and defective as her father, Mr. Woodhouse; the heroine herself takes the role of a fool. What matters, nonetheless, is accepting the fact that you are the fool, however late the revelation comes. Austen’s comic male character hence overlaps with the heroine till the last moment in *Emma*, thus challenging us readers who identify ourselves with the heroine. In the case of Austen’s earlier novels, such as *Northanger Abbey* and *Pride and Prejudice*, we stand back and laugh at either the bragging John Thorpe or the pompous William Collins, but in her later novels, such as *Emma*, we not only laugh at Mr. Woodhouse and Emma but, through these characters, we actually find ourselves laughing at ourselves.

NOTES

- 1 This article was originally presented as a conference paper to the Jane Austen Society of North America on 12 October 1996 at Richmond, Virginia.
- 2 A. Walton Litz, “Chronology of Composition” in *The Jane Austen Companion*. ed. J. David Grey (New York: Macmillan, 1986), p. 50.
- 3 Enid Welsford, in *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (London: Faber, 1935), defines a Fool as “a man who falls below the average human standard, but whose defects have been transformed into a source of delight, a mainspring of comedy,” (p. xi)—a definition which can be readily applied to Austen’s comic male characters. Welsford, furthermore, categorizes four orders of fools: “there are those who get slapped, there are those who are none the worse for their slapping, there are those who adroitly change places with the slappers, and occasionally there are those who enquire, ‘What do slaps matter to the man whose body is of indiarubber, and whose mind is of quicksilver, and who can even—greatest triumph of all—persuade you for the moment that such indeed is your case?’” (pp. 319-320) My discussion will show that Austen’s earlier novels deal with the first three kinds of fools, while she attempts the fourth in *Emma*.

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- 4 All references to Austen’s novels are to R. W. Chapman’s edition of *The Novels of Jane Austen*, third edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1934, 1982 reprint).
- 5 There are various analyses, worthy of note, of Mr. Collins’ proposal scene. See, for example, Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 130-132 and Jocelyn Harris, *Jane Austen’s Art of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 112-16.
- 6 Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 101.
- 7 We should not overlook the fact that in *Emma* a conceited young clergyman, Mr. Elton, plays the role of a farcical suitor in a manner similar to Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*. But after Mr. Elton fails in his audacious marriage proposal to Emma, he disappears, as it were, from the foreground of the novel, whereas Emma’s father, Mr. Woodhouse, towards whom she has ambivalent feelings, remains a consequential figure throughout the narrative.
- 8 Litz, p. 52.
- 9 According to Cassandra Austen’s Memorandum, *Pride and Prejudice*, then called *First Impressions*, was begun in October 1796. Litz, p. 51.
- 10 Lionel Trilling explains that “in the community of Highbury, Miss Bates and Mr. Woodhouse are sacred. They are fools, to be sure, as everyone knows. But they are fools of a special and transcendent kind. They are innocents—of such is the kingdom of heaven. They are children, who have learned nothing of the guile of the world.” *Emma: A Selection of Critical Essays*, ed. David Lodge. (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 162.
- 11 cf. Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*. (London: Macmillan, 1990), Part III: *The Dying God*.