

Fun with Frank and Jane: Austen on Detective Fiction

by David H. Bell

My title pays tribute to two great writers of detective novels. In 1998 P. D. James gave a talk to the Jane Austen Society's Annual General Meeting at Chawton entitled "Emma Considered as a Detective Story." In this talk (the text of which is included as an appendix to her delightful autobiographical fragment Time to Be in Earnest) James explains why a book without a murder—or indeed any crime at all except for the robbing of Mrs. Weston's poultry house—can be considered a detective story. The detective story, James explains, "does not require murder; Dorothy Sayers's Gaudy Night is an example. What it does require is a mystery, facts which are hidden from the reader but which he or she should be able to discover by logical deduction from clues inserted in the novel with deceptive cunning but essential fairness" (243-44). Over sixty years earlier Sayers herself made a similar point about the handling of clues in a talk at Oxford engagingly titled "Aristotle on Detective Fiction": "Any fool can tell a lie and any fool can believe it; but the right method is to tell the truth in such a way that the intelligent reader is seduced into telling the lie for himself. That the writer himself should tell a lie is contrary to all the canons of detective art." This doctrine, which Sayers calls "the great modern theory of fair-play to the reader," was embraced by Aristotle "twenty centuries ahead of his time" (186). To this day the Poetics "remains the finest guide to the writing of [detective] fiction that could be put . . . into the hands of an aspiring author" (179).

My title alludes to Sayers's talk as well as James's for a reason: Aristotle's Poetics and Austen's Emma belong together. The Poetics is concerned primarily with the principles of

plot construction, and Emma is arguably literature's most perfectly constructed plot. So convinced am I that Aristotle would have agreed had he read the novel that when I teach the Poetics in my literary criticism class, I use Emma along with Oedipus the King to illustrate his principles. But a comprehensive Aristotelian analysis of Emma is not my purpose here. Let's stick to the matter at hand: Emma as a detective novel, in particular Austen's genius for planting clues with "deceptive cunning but essential fairness" so that, to use Aristotle's words, "events come about as a surprise" but "at the same time they follow as cause and effect" (14).

James rightly points out that "the central truth cunningly concealed at the heart of the novel is, of course, the engagement of Frank Churchill to Jane Fairfax" (245-46), and she devotes several pages to discussing Austen's carefully planted clues. James's analysis is charming and perceptive, but with so many clues spread over so many pages, she is barely able to do more than offer a broad overview. I would like to build on what James has done by briefly discussing Frank's first meeting with Emma and then focusing on just one section of the novel (chapters 8-10 of volume 2, the arrival of the pianoforte), looking closely at how Austen plants clues which the first-time reader shouldn't miss but does.

First some preliminaries. Austen's "deceptive cunning" begins shortly after the novel opens. We learn early on that Frank has never been to Highbury and that he fails to come even after his father's marriage. Instead he writes a "handsome letter" (18) from Weymouth dated September 28th (95-96). His excuse for not coming, according to Mr. Weston, is that "he cannot command his own time. He has those to please who must be pleased . . ." (119-120). "Mrs. Churchill rules at Enscombe . . ." (121). Long before Frank arrives he is linked romantically with Emma: "There were wishes at Randalls respecting Emma's destiny . . ." (41). Emma herself "had a great curiosity to see him, a decided intention of finding him

pleasant, of being liked by him to a certain degree, and a sort of pleasure in the idea of being coupled in their friends' imaginations" (119).

Emma's suspicions about Jane's attachment to Mr. Dixon begin when she learns from Miss Bates that Jane has turned down an invitation to visit the newly married Dixons in Ireland: "At this moment an ingenious and animating suspicion enter[ed] Emma's brain with regard to Jane Fairfax, this charming Mr. Dixon, and the not going to Ireland . . ." and her suspicions deepen when Miss Bates also tells her that he has saved Jane from falling overboard during a sailing party at Weymouth (160). Just as Frank is linked romantically with another woman—Emma--before he arrives, so too is Jane linked romantically (at least in Emma's mind) with another man.

We already know that both Frank and Jane have been to Weymouth. During Emma's first conversation with Jane we learn that they have been there at the same time, but we find this out immediately after Jane's reserve on the subject of Weymouth and the Dixons leads Emma to throw caution away: "Emma saw its artifice and returned to her first surmises. There probably was something more to conceal than her own preference; Mr. Dixon, perhaps, had been very near changing one friend for the other, or been fixed only to Miss Campbell, for the sake of the future twelve thousand pounds" (169). No wonder then that Jane "had never been quite well since the time of [the Dixons'] marriage" in October (165,159). Here Austen slyly seduces us into assuming a causal connection between Jane's illness and her friends' wedding. Notice how bold Austen has been. Notice how much vital information (even significant dates) she has already provided, how many clues she has cunningly planted.

Emma's first meeting with Frank takes place in the parlor at Hartfield. Frank has arrived a day earlier than expected, and Mr. Weston introduces him to Emma and her father the next morning. It is the concluding moments of this visit that are most telling (193-195). As Mr. Weston gets up to leave, he frees Frank from any obligation to accompany him: "He must be going...but he need not hurry anybody else." The next sentence is from Emma's point of view: "His son, too well bred to hear the hint, rose immediately...." Emma attributes to good manners Frank's choosing to leave with his father: a gentleman doesn't stay longer than is proper on a first visit, however attractive the company. It never occurs to Emma that Frank may be impatiently awaiting the visit's end because her company is not the attraction. Pretending not to know the name of the family he intends to call on next ("Barnes, or Bates"), he tells his father, "There is no necessity of my calling this morning...another day would do as well." But his father replies, "Do not defer it. What is right to be done cannot be done to soon." Here in one sentence--the implications of which pass unnoticed by both father and son--Austen exposes the major weakness in Frank's character: pleasure, not duty, motivates him. Not until enticed to Highbury by his passion for Jane could he be bothered doing "what was right to be done"--paying a wedding visit to his father and stepmother.

Ironically, it is Frank's unsettled, pleasure-seeking ways that enable him to purchase the piano-forte without anyone in Highbury taking notice. Frank's sudden trip to London might have aroused suspicion were it not that all who comment on it, especially the usually reliable Mr. Knightley, seem to accept without question that traveling sixteen miles for a haircut is perfectly in keeping with Frank's character. "Hum, just the trifling, silly character I took him for," Knightley grumbles (206), and though others are more charitable in their judgments, no one questions Frank's explanation.

With the arrival of the pianoforte, what should be a suspicious circumstance—that Frank and Jane have spent time together at Weymouth—becomes instead evidence to confirm Emma's suspicions of a very different sort, that Jane and Mr. Dixon are illicitly attached. At the Coles' party--a few days after Frank's trip to London--Emma has the opportunity to speak at length with Frank about the new instrument, which was delivered the previous day (216-19). To a reader coming to this conversation for the first time, it appears as if Emma is in control, charming Frank into accepting the logic of her arguments. But the veteran reader realizes that in fact Frank is in control, leading Emma on, toying with her and amusing himself at her expense. "I smile because you smile, and shall probably suspect whatever I find you suspect . . ." (216). "I told you that your suspicions would guide mine." "And, upon my word, they have a great air of probability" (217). Frank's comments at the end of the conversation are particularly audacious: "Your reasonings carry my judgments along with them entirely. . . .And now I can see [the pianoforte] in no other light than as an offering of love" (219). Indeed it is!

The saga of the pianoforte is far from over. The next day Emma is having misgivings about "betraying her suspicions of Jane Fairfax's feelings to Frank Churchill. It was hardly right, but it had been so strong an idea that it would escape her, and his submission to all that she told was a compliment to her penetration . . ." (231). Later that day, from the door of Fords, she spots Frank and Mrs. Weston "walking into Highbury;--to Hartfield of course. They were stopping, however, in the first place at Mrs. Bates's . . . and had all but knocked when Emma caught their eye" (233). Mrs. Weston explains that she is going to the Bateses to hear the new instrument: "For my companion tells me . . . that I absolutely promised Miss Bates last night, that I would come this morning. I was not aware of it myself. I did not know

that I had fixed a day, but as he says I did, I am going now" (234). Frank immediately asks Emma if he can join her party and wait for Mrs. Weston at Hartfield, but when she protests and Emma too urges him to go, "[h]e could say no more, and with the hope of Hartfield to reward him, returned with Mrs. Weston to Miss Bates's door" (235). Once again, Frank has fooled everyone, including Emma, and Austen has fooled the reader.

Soon voices are heard in the street, and Mrs. Weston and Miss Bates meet Emma as she and Harriet are leaving the shop. We learn from one of Miss Bates's long speeches that when Mrs. Weston told her that Emma was in Ford's, Miss Bates decided to run over and invite her up.

"Aye, pray do," said Mr. Frank Churchill, "Miss Woodhouse's opinion of the instrument will be worth having."—But, said I, I shall be more sure of succeeding if one of you will go with me.-- "Oh!" said he, "wait half-a-minute till I have finished my job."—For, would you believe it Miss Woodhouse, there he is, in the most obliging manner in the world, fastening in the rivet of my mother's spectacles. (236)

Thus Frank manages to get both Miss Bates and Mrs. Weston out of the house, leaving him alone with Jane and the old lady, who is nearly deaf and now, without her spectacles, nearly blind as well.

When Mrs. Weston and Miss Bates return with Emma, "[t]he appearance of the little sitting room . . . was tranquility itself. . . ." Mrs. Bates is asleep by the fire, Frank is at a nearby table working on her spectacles, and Jane is "standing with her back to them, intent on her pianoforté." In the next sentence we begin to hear Emma's voice: "Busy as he was, however, the young man was yet able to shew a most happy countenance on seeing Emma again." Frank then says to her, "This is a pleasure . . . coming at least ten minutes earlier than

I had calculated." Once again Emma misjudges the situation. She assumes that Frank is happy to see her (unaware that she has interrupted a tête-à-tête) and misses the irony in his comment. To Mrs. Weston's remark that it is taking him a long time to mend the spectacles, he replies, "I have not been working uninterruptedly . . . I have been assisting Miss Fairfax in trying to make her instrument stand steadily. . . . You see we have been wedging one leg with paper." He then directs another barbed though seemingly gallant comment to Emma: "This was very kind of you to be persuaded to come. I was almost afraid you would be hurrying home" (240).

But has Frank been attending to the spectacles at all? With Mrs. Bates asleep, he and Jane have had a few rare moments of intimacy as they try to steady the pianoforte, a job requiring them to work in such close proximity that physical contact is surely inevitable! What have Frank and Jane talked about during their precious tête-à-tête? Beside the sweet nothings we can imagine him whispering in her ear, he has—as what follows makes clear—recounted his conversation with Emma the previous evening, acquainting her with Emma's suspicions. These suspicions are obviously still on Emma's mind as she observes Jane preparing to play: "That she was not immediately ready, Emma did suspect to arise from the state of her nerves; she had not yet possessed the instrument long enough to touch it without emotion; she must reason herself into the power of performance; and Emma could not but pity such feelings, whatever their origin, and could not but resolve never to expose them to her neighbour again" (240-41). After hearing the instrument Frank says, smiling at Emma, "Whoever Col. Campbell might employ, . . . the person has not chosen ill. . . . I dare say, Miss Fairfax, that he either gave his friend very minute directions, or wrote to Broadwood himself. Do not you think so?" "It is not fair," Emma whispers to Frank, "mine was a

random guess. Do not distress her" (240-41). But Frank continues to tease Jane—or so Emma thinks. To Jane's comment, "Till I have a letter from Col. Campbell, I can imagine nothing with any confidence. It must be all conjecture," Frank replies, "Conjecture—aye, sometimes one conjectures right and sometimes one conjectures wrong" (241-42).

Frank then returns the mended spectacles to Mrs. Bates, and what follows is a remarkable passage which only an extended quotation can do justice to. The point of view continues to be Emma's.

He was very warmly thanked both by mother and daughter; to escape a little from the latter, he went to the pianoforté, and begged Miss Fairfax, who was still sitting at it, to play something more.

"If you are very kind," said he, "it will be one of the waltzes we danced last night;—let me live them over again. You did not enjoy them as I did; you appeared tired the whole time. I believe you were glad we danced no longer; but I would have given worlds—all the worlds one ever has to give—for another half hour."

She played.

"What felicity it is to hear a tune again which has made one happy!—If I mistake not that was danced at Weymouth."

She looked up at him for a moment, coloured deeply, and played something else. He took some music from a chair near the pianoforté, and turning to Emma, said,

"Here is something quite new to me. Do you know it?—Cramer.—And here are a new set of Irish melodies. That, from such a quarter, one might expect. This was all sent with the instrument. Very thoughtful of Col. Campbell, was not it?—He knew Miss Fairfax could have no music here. I honour that part of the attention particularly;

it shews it to have been so thoroughly from the heart. Nothing hastily done; nothing incomplete. True affection only could have prompted it."

Emma wished he would be less pointed, yet could not help being amused; and when on glancing her eye towards Jane Fairfax she caught the remains of a smile, when she saw that with all the deep blush of consciousness, there had been a smile of secret delight, she had less scruple in the amusement, and much less compunction with respect to her.—This amiable, upright, perfect Jane Fairfax was apparently cherishing very reprehensible feelings. (242-43)

This little scene is a comic masterpiece. Emma assumes that she and Frank are co-conspirators, that Jane does not know that they know about her dirty little secret. They laugh together at Jane's discomfort whenever the name of Campbell is mentioned, Emma clearly enjoying her triumph over Jane. But in fact it is Frank and Jane who are the insiders and Emma who is the butt of Frank's jokes. The "smile of secret delight" that Emma notices appears not because the "amiable, upright, perfect Jane Fairfax"—note the sarcasm—is thinking about Mr. Dixon but because she delights in Frank's playfulness and his exposure of Emma's foolishness.

But there is more. Jane is no doubt also delighted by Frank's declarations of love—made in the very presence of the ostensible object of his affection. Referring to the previous night's dancing, Frank says to Jane, "I believe you were glad we danced no longer; but I would have given worlds—all the worlds one ever has to give—for another half hour." Why? Because as he explained to Emma as she was leaving the Coles' party, "I must have asked Miss Fairfax, and her languid dancing would not have agreed with me, after your's" (230). Even more audacious is his comment about the music that has come with the pianoforte: "I honour

that part of the attention particularly; it shews it to have been so thoroughly from the heart. . . . True affection only could have prompted it." No wonder his fiancée smiles with secret delight. "'You speak too plain,'" Emma whispers to Frank. "'She must understand you.'" "'I hope she does,'" he replies. "'I would have her understand me. I am not in the least ashamed of my meaning'" (243).

Should we be surprised that Emma is a favorite with mystery writers like P. D. James and Reginald Hill (whose Pictures of Perfection is set in Enscombe)? How is it possible to be any more daring than this in planting clues? In Austen's world, a secret engagement is a crime, and Frank and Jane are the culprits. They make love under Emma's nose and she fails to notice. Emma fancies herself a detective, but the crime she uncovers—Jane's illicit love for her best friend's husband—is entirely imaginary. Mr. Knightley is the real detective, but even he does not begin to notice the clues for another hundred pages.

Perhaps the chief pleasure a mystery story offers readers is the chance to play detective themselves, to match wits with the writer. This pleasure is maximized when the writer plays fair, when he or she presents readers with all the evidence necessary to solve the mystery. How does Austen get away with planting so many transparent clues? Why are first-time readers almost always fooled (I certainly was)? One reason is Austen's mastery of what Aristotle calls "telling lies skillfully" (34), which is, according to Dorothy Sayers in praising this passage from the Poetics, "the very core and centre" of the mystery writer's art (185). Aristotle explains what he means in some detail: "The secret of it lies in a fallacy. . . . For assuming that if one thing is or becomes, a second is or becomes, men imagine that, if a second is, the first likewise is or becomes. But this is false inference." Aristotle illustrates with an example from the Odyssey, but let's use Emma instead. Here is how Emma reasons:

If a woman is in love with her best friend's husband, then her guilty feelings will lead her to be cautious and reserved. Since Jane is cautious and reserved, she must be in love with her best friend's husband. Here is another example: If a man is attracted to a woman, then he will flirt with her whenever he can. Since Frank flirts with me whenever he can, he must be in love with me, or nearly so. Note that the "then" clause of each proposition (what logicians call the consequent) is true—Jane is cautious and reserved, Frank does flirt with Emma whenever they are together. Emma falsely infers that the "if" clause (the antecedent) is also true. The evidence is presented fairly, but Emma misconstrues it.

But Austen's greatest accomplishment—what allows her to tell lies with such consummate skill—is her handling of point of view. It is not only Emma who misconstrues the evidence; we readers do as well. Even though we should know better (having come to understand, while reading volume one, just how mistaken Emma's judgments can be), we nevertheless view Frank's and Jane's conduct from Emma's perspective. We see what she sees, and we readily accept her faulty inferences. How humiliating it is to discover later that both she and we are wrong.

P.D. James rereads Emma yearly, no doubt a little enviously, marveling, as we all do, at its brilliance.

Works Cited

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