The carefully worked, understated artistry of *Emma* has perhaps never been better defined than in a single sentence written by Reginald Farrer some seventy-five years ago: "Only when the story has been thoroughly assimilated, can the infinite delights and subtleties of its workmanship begin to be appreciated, as you realize the manifold complexity of the book’s web, and find that every sentence, almost every epithet, has its definite reference to equally unemphazized points before and after in the development of the plot" (65). The miraculous thing, Farrer suggests, is that the references that together weave the novel’s web are both “definite” and yet “unemphazized”: because they are definite the reader builds up a store of imaginative and emotional connections, but because they are unemphazized these connections may remain unrecognized. Only after reflection, assimilation of the novel’s subtleties, do such connections become conscious. In this essay I would like to give full emphasis to the strand in the web constituted by the word “friend,” which occurs prominently in the novel’s opening pages and many times thereafter, most notably in its two pivotal moments, Mr. Knightley’s rebuke of Emma after Box Hill and in the scene in which he proposes to her. This particular set of connections has not been remarked by critics of the novel, though I am sure its resonances are felt by attentive readers; furthermore, this strand is a prime instance of the way in which the novel raises great issues on its constricted stage, since by the novel’s end Emma has not only discovered that Mr. Knightley is the friend who will fill the gap in her life created by the marriage of Miss Taylor at its outset, but she has also changed her conceptions of friendship, love, and marriage. The anonymous French translator of the novel in 1816 had good reason to entitle it *La Nouvelle Emma*.

The novel’s opening suggests that it will present the story of Emma’s search for a true friend. The discovery of true friendship had been a central subject of eighteenth-century fiction, at least since the time of Sarah Fielding’s popular novel of 1744, *The Adventures of David Simple, Containing an Account of His Travels Through the Cities of London and Westminster in the Search of a Real Friend*. Nothing was more admired in Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1747-48) than its depiction of the tested and true friendship of Clarissa and Anna Howe – a friendship without which the novel would, quite literally, not exist. The idea of friendship became so interconnected with the novel form that when Jane Austen, aged fourteen, brought together in one thirty-page mélange all the clichés of sentimental fiction, she entitled it *Love and Freindship: A Novel in a Series of Letters* and gave it a resounding epigraph: “Deceived in Freindship & Betrayed in Love.” *Emma*, however, reveals Jane Austen giving this conventional subject a dramatic, carefully formulated, and most unconventional treatment.

Friendship is, in fact, the central concern of the novel’s first chapter. It presents Emma’s dilemma for the rest of the novel: who can take Miss Taylor’s place as Emma’s special friend? The chapter also suggests that Emma’s relationship with Miss Taylor has not really been friendship; shows that Emma does have a good friend, though she hardly realizes it, in Mr. Knightley; and uses friendship as a way of defining the split in Emma between her egocentric Woodhouse side and her more kind, rational, and good-hearted Knightley side. By the time the chapter is over, both the course of future events and a conception of friendship that underlies those events are clear.

Let me take up each of these claims in turn. Emma’s past relationship with Miss Taylor is summed up in the novel’s third paragraph:

Sixteen years had Miss Taylor been in Mr. Woodhouse’s family, less as a governess than as a friend, very fond of both daughters, but particularly of Emma. Between them it was more the intimacy of sisters. Even before Miss Taylor had ceased to hold the nominal office of governess, the mildness of her temper had hardly allowed her to impose any restraint; and the shadow of authority being now long passed away, they had been living together as friend and friend, very mutually attached, and Emma doing just what she liked; esteeming Miss Taylor’s judgment, but directed chiefly by her own. (5)

I take these sentences to be our introduction to the novel’s distinctive narrative method, free indirect speech: the narrator shifts slowly and almost imperceptibly from objective narration to an ironic depiction of facts as Emma sees them. The reader of *Emma* soon learns that hidden quotation marks exist within the most straightforward relation of fact; for instance, “The lovers were standing together at one of the windows” (90), in Chapter Ten, really tells us, “The ‘lovers’ – as Emma persisted in thinking of Harriet and Mr. Elton – were standing together at one of the windows.” In the same way, the words “thinking highly of Miss Taylor’s judgment, but directed chiefly by her own” is Emma’s summary of a very satisfactory situation: she has been free to say and do what she likes; Miss Taylor, as a dependent, has had to acquiesce. The passage asserts that the two lived together, not as teacher and student, but as independent equals, “friend and friend very mutually attached”; at the same time it suggests that although the two may have seemed to be and thought of themselves as friend and friend, they were actually independent employer and dependent employee. Mr. Knightley offers the same ironic picture of the relationship in his discussion with Mrs. Weston in Chapter Five: “You might not give Emma such a complete education as your powers would seem to promise; but you were receiving a very good education from her, on the very material matrimonial point of submitting your own will ... ” (38).
Of course, Emma has seen things very differently; on the novel’s second page, she thinks tenderly of “the equal footing and perfect unreserve” in which she lived with Miss Taylor: “It had been a friend and companion such as few possessed, intelligent, well informed, useful, gentle, knowing all the ways of the family, interested in all its concerns, and peculiarly interested in herself, in every scheme of her’s; – one to whom she could speak every thought as it arose, and one who had such an affection for her as could never find fault” (6). If this is what Emma considers an equal footing, no wonder that she will find a replacement for Miss Taylor in the lowly Harriet Smith, who repeatedly addresses Emma as one would a divinity: “Whatever you say is always right …. You understand every thing …. Nobody is equal to you! – I care for nobody as I do for you! … You who can see into everybody’s heart” (74, 76, 268, 404). In fact, the strange location “It had been a friend and companion ….” is echoed when Emma meets Harriet and we hear, “Altogether she was quite convinced of Harriet Smith’s being exactly the young friend she wanted – exactly the something her home required” (26). (As one critic, Darrel Mansell, remarks, this puts Harriet in the same category as Regency mirrors [152].) And, of course, just as Emma claims in Chapter One to have “made” the marriage between Mr. and Mrs. Weston, so she will choose as her friend someone who will allow her to fulfill the managerial task she sets herself at the end of the chapter: finding a wife for Mr. Elton. Emma has something very specific in mind when, immediately after meeting Harriet in the novel’s third chapter, she resolves to “detach her from her bad acquaintance, and introduce her into good society” (23).

Even more ironically, this opening chapter shows that Emma does have a good friend, Mr. Knightley. Ostensibly, he calls on Emma and her father because he has just returned from London “and now walked up to Hartfield to say that all were well in Brunswick-square” (9), but it is clear that he sympathizes with Emma’s feelings of loss and comes to restore her spirits. Late in the novel, when it seems that Mr. Knightley is about to marry Harriet and will make such visits to Hartfield no more, Emma recalls how he came that particular evening and “dissipated every melancholy fancy” (422). Furthermore, Emma and Mr. Knightley really do display an “equal footing and perfect unreserve” in their lively debate here. “We always say what we like to one another” (10), Emma explains to her father, and if Mr. Knightley’s rebukes are stringent – “Your time has been properly and delicately spent, if you have been endeavouring for the last four years to bring about this marriage. A worthy employment for a young lady’s mind!” – Emma’s reply is equally unrestrained, “I pity you – I thought you cleverer ….” (12, 13). At this point, Emma takes this serious and yet bantering relationship for granted; only when she is threatened with its loss will she realize how important Mr. Knightley’s friendship is to her.

Chapter One of the novel also uses the idea of friendship to dramatize the split within Emma herself. Falling into self-pitying loneliness, Emma reflects, “there was some satisfaction in considering with what self-denying, generous friendship she had always wished and promoted the match; but it was a black morning’s work for her” (6). Emma ralilies herself to combat the unmitigated sorrow of her father, who, “from his habits of gentle selfishness and of being never able to suppose that other people could feel differently from himself, … was very much disposed to think that Miss Taylor had done as sad a thing for herself as for them, and would have been a great deal happier if she had spent all the rest of her life at Hartfield” (8). When Mr. Knightley calls, however, Emma takes the plaintive pose again, but now her own generous and rational position is uncompromisingly urged upon her by Mr. Knightley: “Emma … cannot allow herself to feel so much pain as pleasure. Every friend of Miss Taylor’s must be glad to have her so happily married” (11). The notion of friendship has served to crystallize the moral issues: Emma has a Woodhouse self and a Knightley self, a self capable only of “gentle selfishness” and another capable of self-denying generosity. In fact, as the novel will demonstrate, Mr. Knightley embodies Emma’s deepest and best self: the phrasing suggests this at several points – for instance, when we are told, “[Emma] had many a hint from Mr. Knightley, and some from her own heart, as to her deficiency” (i.e., in not calling upon Miss Bates and her mother [155]) – and the patterning of events often makes it even clearer: for instance, Emma in Chapter Fourteen roundly condemns Frank Churchill’s failure to visit his father and his new stepmother, but in her heated argument on the subject with Mr. Knightley four chapters later she “perceived that she was taking the other side of the question from her real opinion, and making use of Mrs. Weston’s arguments against herself” (145). When Emma marries Mr. Knightley at the novel’s end, then the union is also a psychic one: when Emma ceases being Miss Woodhouse and becomes Mrs. Knightley she has become reunited with a part of herself that she had neglected. Neglected, perhaps, but hardly banished: against all of her intentions, the Knightley side of Emma has been responding to him all along – in fact, leading him on. During their arguments, her propositions are often provocations: “Were you, yourself, ever to marry, [Harriet] is the very woman for you ….” There will be but one subject throughout the parishes of Donwell and Highbury; but one interest – one object of curiosity; it will be all Mr. Frank Churchill; we shall think and speak of nobody else” (64, 150). This split within Emma is, I think, what makes the novel so profoundly comic.

The first chapter of Emma has thus presented a rich and humane conception of friendship. Friendship is a mutual exchange of sympathy, emotional sustenance, and esteem; it can only exist between independent equals, since each person must have freedom of speech and action; it entails some degree of sacrifice, of placing the other person’s immediate happiness before one’s own; friendship exists when the two friends are essentially alike – each other’s alter ego. Samuel Johnson’s definition of the word “friendship” in his Dictionary of the English Language (1755) is helpful at this point. Johnson, so much admired by Jane Austen and so well known for his own friendships, distinguishes five shades of meaning in the word “friendship”: 1. The state of minds united by mutual benevolence. 2. Highest degree of intimacy. 3. Favour; personal kindness. 4. Assistance; help. 5. Conformity; affinity; correspondence; aptness to unite.” Johnson gives instances of usage with each sense, and the first instance cited under the first meaning is particularly illuminating; Johnson cites from Francis Bacon’s Essays: “There is little friendship in the world, and least of all between equals, which was wont to be magnified: that that is, is between superior and inferior, whose fortunes may comprehend the one the other.” Bacon intends to shock his reader into thought, as does Johnson in citing him; Bacon asserts that despite the common idealized view that friendship exists between equals, the friendships that we actually find in the world are compacts for mutual advantage between superior and inferior.

Chapter One of the novel has also suggested, even more interestingly, that Emma will find her true friend, not in another woman, but in the man who becomes her husband. This, too, was a common enough idea. The marriage
than what is warmer and blinder” (86).

is why, Emma tells Harriet, her attachments will be limited to her nephews and nieces: “it suits my ideas of comfort better

matters to him or her: Mr. Dixon, or Jane, or probably both of them, will never be the same after that stormy day at sea; Emma believes, is a romantic obsession that overrides all other considerations.

discoveries, she tells Frank Churchill, if she had been on the sailboat when Mr. Dixon rescued Jane Fairfax (218).

such an observer on such a question as herself” (67); others may have seen nothing, but

penitential visit to Miss Bates; her act succeeds in making them “thorough friends” (350) again.

breach with Mr. Knightley.

his good opinion and at having responded to his words “in apparent sullenness” (376).

there, instead of in Harriet Smith, she must, in all probability, have been spared from every pain which pressed on her now.

But Emma’s great discovery is not that she has been no friend to Harriet, nor that she should have befriended Jane, but that Mr. Knightley is, and has always been, the friend she has been seeking. His most “knightly” act in the novel, his rescue of Harriet Smith from humiliation by the Eltons at the Crown Inn, is plainly aimed at rescuing Emma as much as Harriet, as Emma immediately recognizes: “She was all pleasure and gratitude, both for Harriet, and herself” (328). And, paradoxically, the stronger their differences of opinion, the stronger their friendship becomes. When they disagree heatedly over Harriet’s rejection of Robert Martin, Emma “could not quarrel with herself” (69), since she considers herself in the right, but she is very unhappy until she and he agree amicably to disagree: they shake hands cordially and she can feel, with relief, “they were friends again” (98). Mr. Knightley’s unwelcome pronouncements, warnings, and predictions are all offered as acts of friendship. When in the extraordinary chapter – Volume III, Chapter Five – in which we enter his mind and share his discovery that there seems to be a secret relationship between Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill, he decides, “He must – yes, he certainly must, as a friend – an anxious friend – give Emma some hint, ask her some questions. He could not see her in a situation of such danger, without trying to preserve her” (349). Emma, however, laughs off his suspicions, saying that she can answer for Frank Churchill’s feelings (351), and the way is thus prepared for

the novel’s central scene, the expedition to Box Hill, one chapter later.

But Emma is at her worst at Box Hill: Mrs. Elton subsides into a muttering nonentity for once. As everyone prepares to leave, Mr. Knightley finds Emma alone and addresses her with the words, “Emma, I must once more speak to you as I have been used to do”; his ensuing rebuke ends: “This is not pleasant to you, Emma, and it is very far from pleasant to me; but I must, I will, – I will tell you truths while I can, satisfied with proving myself your friend by very faithful counsel, and trusting that you will sometime or other do me greater justice than you can now” (374-75). His words “Once more,” “while I can,” “sometime or other,” and “now” all show that he believes Emma’s head has been turned by Frank and that she is about to become engaged to him.

Genuine friendship would, Emma feels, undermine her supremacy: this is why she shuns Jane Fairfax, who is her equal in so many ways, and not only entertains, but spreads, her spiteful suspicion that “This amiable, upright perfect Jane Fairfax was apparently cherishing very reprehensible feelings” for Mr. Dixon (243). When Emma comes to self-knowledge, “She bitterly regretted not having sought a closer acquaintance with [Jane], and blushed for the envious feelings which had certainly been, in some measure, the cause …. had she endeavoured to find a friend there, instead of in Harriet Smith, she must, in all probability, have been spared from every pain which pressed on her now.

Birth, abilities, and education, had been equally marking the one as an associate for her, to be received with gratitude – and the other – what was she?” (421). Significantly, Jane and Emma are exactly the same age, about to turn twenty-one, while Harriet is only seventeen.

Emma’s divided feelings here point to the book’s culminating irony: the clearer it becomes to Emma that Mr. Knightley is truly her friend, the less conceivable it is to her that he can be her lover. Emma has believed from the start that she is an expert on matters of the heart: Mr. Knightley has not assessed Mr. Elton’s intentions, she tells herself, “with the skill of such an observer on such a question as herself” (67); others may have seen nothing, but she would have made discoveries, she tells Frank Churchill, if she had been on the sailboat when Mr. Dixon rescued Jane Fairfax (218). Love, Emma believes, is a romantic obsession that overrides all other considerations. Once the lover is impruned, nothing else matters to him or her: Mr. Dixon, or Jane, or probably both of them, will never be the same after that stormy day at sea; once Frank Churchill saves Harriet from the gypsies the emotions of each will naturally be fixed on the other (335). That is why, Emma tells Harriet, her attachments will be limited to her nephews and nieces: “it suits my ideas of comfort better than what is warmer and blinder” (86). This is why Frank Churchill quickly decides that it is safe to flirt with Emma:
“Amiable and delightful as Miss Woodhouse is, she never gave me the idea of a young woman likely to be attached” (438), he says in his final letter. He is right; Emma, on her side, repeatedly thinks that she and Frank are no more than friends: “The conclusion of every imaginary declaration on his side was that she refused him. Their affection was always to subside into friendship” (264); at the Crown Inn, when she notices Mr. Knightley “often observing her” while she dances with Frank, she is unworried: “There was nothing like flirtation between her and her partner. They seemed more like cheerful, easy friends, than lovers” (326).

All of Emma’s assumptions about love and friendship come into play at the plot climax. After Harriet confesses her love for Mr. Knightley and her belief that it is returned, Emma makes a whole series of realizations: that she has always stood first with Mr. Knightley; that this relationship is “inexpressibly important” to her; that “he had loved her, and watched over her from a girl, with an endeavour to improve her, and an anxiety for her doing right, which no other creature had at all shared” (415). All the same, she considers, she can have no hope:

Harriet Smith might think herself not unworthy of being peculiarly, exclusively, passionately loved by Mr. Knightley. She could not. She could not flatter herself with any idea of blindness in his attachment to her. She had received a very recent proof of its impartiality. – How shocked had he been at her behaviour to Miss Bates! How directly, how strongly, had he expressed himself on the subject! Not too strongly for the offence – but far, far too strongly to issue from any feeling softer than upright justice and clear-sighted good will. She had no hope, nothing to deserve the name of hope, that he could have that sort of affection for herself which was now in question … (416)

She can hope, however, that Mr. Knightley will at least not marry Harriet: “Let him but continue the same Mr. Knightley to her and her father, … let Donwell and Hartfield lose none of their precious intercourse of friendship and confidence, and her peace would be fully secured” (416). The new, humble Emma, who for the first time underestimates her own claims, still assumes that friendship and love are entirely different: Mr. Knightley’s upright justice and clear-sighted good will will demonstrate his friendship, but also prove that he cannot feel “that sort of affection for herself which was now in question.”

These reflections occur in Chapter Twelve of Volume Three; in the very next chapter Emma’s sentimental education is to be completed. Mr. Knightley and Emma meet in the garden; he proposes marriage, and in so doing gives the word “friend” a dramatic new meaning, but only after the two have performed a dance of comic misunderstanding. Mr. Knightley has come once again “to soothe or to counsel her” (432), believing that she is crushed by the news of Frank Churchill’s secret engagement to Jane Fairfax; Emma, thinking he has come to consult her about his love for Harriet, is also anxious to play a friend’s part: to listen, sympathize, advise. Emma manages to convey the fact that she has been blinded by Frank Churchill and yet “it was my good fortune – in short, I was somehow or other safe from him” (427). At this point Mr. Knightley is eager to raise a new topic; Emma, however, believes him to be within half a sentence of Harriet, and when he says, “Emma, I must tell you what you will not ask, though I may wish it unsaid the next moment,” she abruptly cuts him off with the words, “Oh! then, don’t speak it, don’t speak it … Take a little time, consider, do not commit yourself.” After he thanks her and falls silent, she changes her mind: “Emma could not bear to give him pain. He was wishing to confide in her – perhaps to consult her; cost her what it would, she would listen. She might assist his resolution, or reconcile him to it; she might give just praise to Harriet, or, by representing to him his own independence, relieve him from that state of indecision, which must be more intolerable than any alternative to such a mind as his” (429). Emma has finally achieved the “self-denying, generous friendship” she ascribed to herself in the novel’s opening pages, and, as with her remorse over another all-too-natural speech at Box Hill, she immediately acts upon it.

At this point in the scene Emma takes the initiative. And just as she had invited Mr. Knightley to ask her to dance, just as she had perhaps rather offered her hand to him during their reconciliation, her initiative brings on Mr. Knightley’s proposal. She suggests that they take another turn through the garden and makes a carefully worded speech to him: “I stopped you ungraciously, just now, Mr. Knightley, and, I am afraid, gave you pain. – But if you have any wish to speak openly to me as a friend, or to ask my opinion of any thing you may have in contemplation – as a friend, indeed, you may command me. I will hear whatever you like. I will tell you exactly what I think” (429). Emma’s repeated use of the word “friend,” which signifies her new determination to be selfless, her awakened gratitude for his friendship, is at first, but only for a moment, misunderstood: “As a friend! … Emma, that I fear is a word – No, I have no wish – Stay, yes, why should I hesitate – I have gone too far already for concealment. – Emma, you accept my offer – Extraordinary as it may seem, I accept it and refer myself to you as a friend. – Tell me, then, have I no chance of ever succeeding?” (430). It seems that in the course of the speech Mr. Knightley realizes that in proposing marriage what he wants Emma to become is, simply, his friend – and that realization is only possible because she has, for the first time, acted as his friend. He has often been her friend; she is now his. The notion that Mr. Knightley’s wife will be his friend had been suggested just pages earlier in the novel, when Emma imagines how wretched she will be “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” (423). Now it turns out that it is to Emma that he looks, and that she is as much the chooser as the chosen. The way is clear, if not quite smooth, to the novel’s final sentence, in which we leave the just-married hero and heroine at the centre of a “small band of true friends” (484).

There are many more striking references to friendship in Emma. There is Mrs. Elton’s “friendship” with Jane Fairfax, which parodies Emma’s relationship with Harriet and is only possible because Emma has neglected Jane; there is Emma’s reflection, overtly about Mr. Weston but covertly about Mr. Knightley, that “General benevolence, but not general friendship, made a man what he ought to be. – She could fancy such a man” (320). Enough has been said, however, to establish my point: that Emma’s search for and discovery of a friend constitutes one of those definite but unemphasized networks pointed to by Reginald Farrer.

Emma is such a rich and various novel that Jane Austen’s use of this particular pattern has been largely ignored by her critics. J. F. Burrows, in his monograph on Emma, notes Mr. Knightley’s recurring use of the word “friend,” but considers it to be a mounting irony at Mr. Knightley’s expense: he thinks he is acting simply as Emma’s friend, but we know differently (107). The advent of feminist criticism has led to new interest in the idea of friendship in Jane Austen’s novels. But, as the title of Janet Todd’s 1980 book, Women’s Friendship in Literature, suggests, the assumption has been that friendship
in the novels is a matter of friendship between two women. Janet Todd’s book contains a long and thoughtful analysis of Emma’s friendship with Harriet and of “what could have been the most fulfilling female friendship in all her novels,” Emma’s relationship with Jane Fairfax, but notes, regretfully, “Austen chops off the relationship at its inception … we have the introduction of two friends but not the friendship” (301). The same view is advanced in a provocative essay by Ruth Perry, “Interrupted Friendships in Jane Austen’s Emma” (1986). Perry argues that Jane Austen was forced by the fictional conventions of her day to write narratives of love and marriage – “trapped as an author as her characters were trapped as women” (200) – and that the subtext of Emma consists of a counter-narrative, the story of Emma’s and Jane’s mutual need for friendship. Her conclusion is: “The repeated frustration of women’s friendship in a novel that emphasizes the importance of friendship, and the book’s emotional unsatisfactoriness on this central crux (for Emma never does find a proper friend to ‘replace’ Mrs. Weston) – these ellipses must alert us to suggestions about the limitations of the form itself” (192). This sentence serves to highlight all that I have been arguing: that Emma is “a novel that emphasizes the importance of friendship” and that Emma’s search for a proper friend is the novel’s “central crux.” But, of course, my view is that Emma does find a true friend in Mr. Knightley, and this is what makes the novel emotionally satisfactory.

In fact, I would go one step further. The novel depicts Emma as an everyman-figure in her movement from narcissism to community; I think it also presents her as most women, if not everywoman, in her movement from having a best friend in another young woman to finding that friend in her husband. “An old story, probably – a common case – and no more than has happened to hundreds of my sex before” (427), is Emma’s rueful summary of her career during the proposal scene; her words apply to far more than her flirtation with Frank Churchill. Near the end of the novel, she considers “her wilful intimacy with Harriet Smith” has been “the worst of all her womanly follies” (463); by contrast, her chosen intimacy with Mr. Knightley is her greatest piece of womanly wisdom.

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