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### Creativity and oedipal fantasy in Austen's *Emma*: 'An ingenious and animating suspicion'

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Austen's *Emma* is one of the great novels of the Western tradition. In this paper the author explores the meaning of Emma's 'ingenious and animating suspicion' that Jane Fairfax seduced her best friend's husband, Mr Dixon. The interpretation that a psychoanalytic understanding makes possible shows how this suspicion represents an oedipal fantasy projected on to Miss Fairfax. Further exploration demonstrates how the fantasy is linked both to Emma's systematic unkindness to Jane Fairfax and to Emma's famous insult to Jane's aunt, Miss Bates. Emma's suspicion projects an oedipal fantasy with its incestuous impulses on to her rival and satisfies an envious aggression at the same time. The author's purpose in this paper is to bring to light through psychoanalytic understanding Austen's dramatisation of the complexity and creativity of the oedipal situation. In addition to the regression in oedipal fantasy, the primary process also functions with a progressive quality that expands and enriches the ego, a double movement described in Keats's 'negative capability', which has been elaborated by Bion. The primal-scene fantasies are often brought alive in the analytic transference. These situations and painful emotions are dramatically portrayed through Austen's genius as vehicles for change. A sudden integration follows a phase of disorganization: 'It darted through her with the speed of an arrow. Mr Knightley must marry no-one but herself'. Emma, who is Austen's 'imaginist', moves from the projected fantasy of the sad love triangle through envy aggression and the narcissistic blows of self-doubt and loss of love to moments of illumination and connection.

#### Introduction: Emma, the 'imaginist'

The fact that certain themes of human experience and conflict are recurrent wherever men live or where, at least, certain cultural conditions prevail—the fact that from Sophocles to Proust the struggle against incestuous impulses, dependency, guilt, and aggression, has remained a topic of Western literature—seems after almost half a century, as well established as any thesis in the social sciences (Kris, 1942, p. 17).

Austen's *Emma* (1816[1957]) is universally acknowledged to be one of the greatest novels in the Western tradition. But is Austen's gentle world, her '3 or 4 Families in a Country Village', the scene of a struggle against incestuous impulses, dependency, guilt and aggression? A close study of one oedipal/primal-scene fantasy and its use in the novel illuminates how this struggle, transformed into a creative process, is precisely Austen's topic.

This paper will explore the meaning of Emma's 'ingenious and animating suspicion' that her childhood rival, Jane Fairfax, seduced her best friend's husband, Mr Dixon. The interpretation that a psychoanalytic understanding makes possible shows how this suspicion represents an oedipal fantasy projected on to Miss Fairfax. Further exploration demonstrates how the fantasy is linked both to Emma's systematic unkindness to Jane Fairfax and to Emma's famous insult to Jane's aunt, Miss Bates. Emma's 'ingenious and animating suspicion' projects an oedipal fantasy

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with its incestuous impulses on to her rival and satisfies an envious aggression at the same time (I am good; you are bad). The interpretation presented here suggests that Emma's cruelty to Miss Bates arises in relation to the accumulation of clues in Miss Bates's free associative monologues, which reveal Frank Churchill's attachment to the envied Jane Fairfax. And so Miss Bates's implicit revelation of the secret sexual love between Frank and Jane stirs up Emma's aggression and leads to her otherwise inexplicable brutality. However, the elaboration of the oedipal/primal-scene fantasy has a contradictory motivation for, as well as seeking satisfaction of, old pleasures, which bring about conflict, the expression of the fantasy is a necessary step for Emma to find an opportunity for its partial resolution.

My purpose in this paper is to bring to light through psychoanalytic understanding Austen's dramatization of the complexity of the oedipal situation with its inevitable defensive and regressive, as well as progressive, aspects. Emma is the most aggressive, richest and most active of Austen's heroines, but also a heroine who has lost her mother at 5 and who begins by announcing that she will never marry. The aggression in Austen's characterization of Emma, shown especially in her attempts to control couples around her, also permits the emergence of the fantasy of the primal-scene couple via the projection. The representation of the oedipal situation, as Austen develops it in the novel, is not a static theme but a process. Emma's fantasy of the 'improper' love triangle projected on to her rival, Jane Fairfax, reveals why Austen calls Emma an 'imaginist'. Austen signals a creative process in Emma's psyche, making reference with this attribute of 'imaginist' to contemporary theories of the imagination.

In the theories of Austen's time, the imagination comprehended a movement through disruptive forces of the associative process to a new organization. The imagination

reveals itself in the reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities; of sameness with difference; of the general with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual with the representative; ... a more than usual state of emotion with more

than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement (Coleridge, 1817).

In Austen's *Emma*, creative transformations take place through Emma's allowing the elaboration of primary-process fantasy and associated impulse; creative transformations take place first in the breaking up and breaking open of old defensive positions, and then with reflection:

The creative idea usually appears as a sudden 'illumination': like an evolution corresponding to integration—by a sudden precipitating intuition of a series of apparently incoherent and unconnected phenomena, which acquire coherence at that moment, through an idea that surfaces in the mind 'unexpectedly and as a whole' (Bion, 1967 quoted in Grinberg, 1990, p. 274).

Emma's ingenious suspicion appears to her as such an 'illumination'. Austen has incorporated an idea of creative process into her language about Emma's fantasy, for she has linked Emma's 'suspicion' with the creative notions of 'ingenious and animating'. Emma's communication of her 'ingenious suspicion' to Frank Churchill engages her in an animated flirtation, which, despite its aggressive and sadistic aspects toward Jane Fairfax, plays a key role in thawing Emma's narcissism and in stirring up a desire for her own love attachment.

A review of the criticism on Austen's *Emma* reveals that the critics have systematically ignored the content of Emma's Dixon fantasy, in so far as it involves the 'seduction of a best friend's husband'. Emma's fantasy presents near incest, even on the surface, in that Jane Fairfax is virtually the adopted sister of her friend Mrs Dixon. (Jane had been orphaned and raised by her friend's parents since the age of 8.) Emma's fantasies, which I will explore in this paper, can thus be hypothetically considered as the projected image of exclusion from the oedipal primal scene, oscillating with a projected fantasy of the seduction of the father.

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Primal Scene: A universal childhood recollection or fantasy of a couple, usually father and mother, engaging in sexual intercourse. Whether the observing child has actually observed or only imagined this scene, it ... may shape his fantasies ... In the course of psychoanalytic therapy, the patient usually focuses attention at some point on associations related to the primal scene (Moore and Fine, 1990, p. 148).

Austen's plot does not present a static theme but a process, for Emma's oedipal fantasies comprehend a motive force for the action, imagination and changes that follow.

## The plot and the place of the Jane Fairfax/Mr Dixon fantasy

Honan summarizes the plot of *Emma* in a way that highlights the aggression and narcissism of Austen's heroine.

In general the three volumes broadly suggest three movements blending ordinary events in Highbury with the funny motif of Emma's match-making and mistakes. Volume one shows her at twenty in her glory and full mastery as Highbury's queen, indulged by her former governess as well as by her father ... An 'imaginist' she fulfills herself by creating the future. Although her friend Harriet loves Robert Martin of Abbey Farm, Emma 'matches' her with ... Mr. Elton, who makes ... love to Emma herself after the Westerns' Christmas Eve party.

Volume two is richer with hidden problems and elusive characters, so that her mistakes multiply. She finds Jane Fairfax only cool, and far from sensing that Frank Churchill is attached to Jane, she imagines a dark alliance between the latter and Mr. Dixon ... Missing clues at the Coles', she thinks that Jane's pianoforte was sent by the married Dixon. She feels she loves Frank, dismisses that thought only to imagine Frank loves her, then [refutes Mrs Weston's idea] that Knightley loves Jane Fairfax (1987, pp. 361-2).

From the opening of volume two and throughout the rest of the novel, Emma's groundless fantasy about Jane Fairfax having seduced Mr Dixon has a crucial function in Austen's plot. Worried about the disapproval of his rich, adoptive parents, Frank Churchill arrives in town ready to use a flirtation with Emma to keep his engagement with the dowerless Jane Fairfax a secret. All Highbury thinks that Frank Churchill would be a suitable match for Emma Woodhouse. But, even before he arrives, with only her envy of Jane Fairfax as the 'really accomplished girl she always wished to be thought', Emma imagines Miss Fairfax as having seduced her best friend Mrs Dixon's new husband: 'At this moment, an ingenious and animating suspicion [entered] Emma's brain with regard to Jane Fairfax, this charming Mr. Dixon, and the not going to Ireland ...' (Austen, 1816[1957], p. 121). Emma next believes that Jane is engaged in a hopeless, one-sided love for Mr Dixon (later going back to her idea that Jane has seduced Mr Dixon away from her friend).

Emma ... was very willing now to acquit her of having seduced Mr. Dixon's affections from his wife, or of any thing mischievous which her imagination had suggested at first. If it were love, it might be simple, single, successful love on her side alone. She might have been unconsciously sucking in the sad poison, while a sharer of his conversation with her friend (p. 128).

Thus, Emma derogates her childhood rival alternatively, as seducing or rejected, creating a fantasy of a woman with a guilt-spoiled or hopeless love, infused with a classic image of oral paranoia.

The second volume of *Emma* thus opens with Emma's hostility to the envied Jane Fairfax, her imagination and projection of the fantasy of a ruined marriage or tragic love. Austen now can use every passing reference to Mr Dixon as a motif to bring into the reader's mind not only Emma's animated interest in seduction, but also her hostile imagination about Jane Fairfax. Even at the time, Emma worries that 'betraying her suspicions' of Jane to Frank Churchill is a 'transgression' of 'the duty of woman by woman' (p. 178). The references to this Fairfax/Dixon

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fantasy and its use are woven through Austen's text right to the end, woven through the worst of her heroine's unkindness to her rival and through the hard-won transformations of her character.

Emma's fantasy about Jane Fairfax has a shape that is familiar to psychoanalysts. She imagines that Jane is miserable with guilt, having fallen in love with, and seduced, Mr Dixon, thereby spoiling the marriage of the friend to whom she is so deeply indebted. This idea corresponds to an unconscious fantasy of oedipal victory. Or Emma imagines that Jane Fairfax has fallen deeply in love with Mr Dixon and is pining with a love not returned, having 'sucked in the sad poison' as the friends in this imagined love triangle spent time together during the courtship months. This picture portrays someone stuck in the position of pining over an oedipal loss which evokes an image of oral loss and endless suffering (Green, 1980; Britton, 1989). Meanwhile, another pattern familiar to psychoanalysts is created in the detection of the secondary love plot. Austen portrays Emma as blind to all clues concerning the sexual attachment between Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill, denying the sexual couple. While Mr Knightley sees the clues of Jane and Frank's attachment, Emma denies them vigorously. The secret to be discovered gives Austen's plot a place in the origins of the detective fiction genre (Harding, 1940).

The psychoanalytic theories concerning the child's perception, or denial, of the parental sexual couple can help to interpret the detailed specificity of Austen's creation of this fantasy in Emma, its defensive function to deny the secret love of the sexual couple, and its creative function in engaging Emma's desires. But before exploring the psychoanalytic theory, I will take a closer look at Austen's portrayal of Emma's aggressive narcissism and her wish to control the couples around her along with the problems this creates for her reality testing. Emma's blunders are comic, but also crucial for the emotionally charged insights that precede change.

### Narcissistic defenses and disturbances in reality testing

All critical approaches to the novel take up Emma's 'blindness' about couples as the central expression of her narcissism and her aggression. In this paper I am adding the psychoanalytic hypothesis that the disturbances of Emma's conscious experience result from the pressures of unconscious fantasy (Arlow, 1969; Shengold, 1995). Emma imagines that she has had an important role in the marriage of her beloved governess/mother, Miss Taylor, to Mr Weston when she has only superficially promoted their courtship (Halperin, 1975). She imagines that Mr Elton is falling in love with her 'little friend', Harriet Smith, when he is aspiring to Emma's own hand and to her wealth. Emma is persuaded that Jane Fairfax has seduced the affections of her own best friend's husband when she is in love with Frank Churchill. Emma believes that she has almost 'heard' Harriet Smith say she was in love with Frank Churchill when Harriet was aspiring to Mr Knightley. And, finally, Emma believes Mr Knightley is in love with Harriet when he is, in fact, in love with Emma.

Austen presents her theme of narcissism in the opening sentence of *Emma*:

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her ... (1816[1957], p. 1).

The passage concludes with a reference to Emma's 'doing just what she liked; highly esteeming Miss Taylor's judgement, but directed chiefly by her own' (p. 1). In Emma we see the denial of any exclusion, by the fantasy of being first with every important object. About her governess, Miss Taylor, who was her mother-substitute from the age of 5, Emma thinks,

It had been a friend and companion such as few possessed, intelligent, well-informed, useful, gentle ... and peculiarly interested in herself, in every pleasure, every scheme of hers—one to

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whom she could speak every thought as it arose, and who had such affection for her as could never find fault (p. 2).

(Austen's use of 'it' for Miss Taylor, in Emma's thoughts, almost passes unnoticed.) The replacement of Miss Taylor's companionship with Harriet's goes further in the direction of shoring up Emma's narcissism for, as Mr Knightley says, 'she is a flatterer in all her ways'. When Harriet asks Emma if she is worried about being an old maid like Miss Bates if she chooses not to marry, her reply portrays a childhood narcissism, with its denial of oedipal difference, as the internal situation she inhabits:

I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry ... Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want; I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house, as I am of Hartfield; and never never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always right and always first in any man's eyes as I am in my father's (p. 65).

Emma's initial defenses against oedipal conflicts, and the disruptive affects that are stirred up by them, are most marked in her narcissistic complacency and false sense of control of the couples around her. Mr Woodhouse dislikes marriage and says to Emma, 'pray do not make any more matches, they are silly things, and break up one's family circle grievously' (p. 8).

Emma's way of using Harriet, possessing her, idealizing her, nurturing her idolatry, manipulating her affections, making decisions for her and minimizing her, is remarkably aggressive and self-centered in its extent. In the narcissism of her attachment to Harriet, she had created another derivative of an oedipal fantasy, that is, a family romance fantasy (Freud, 1909), imagining that Harriet is the natural daughter of a noble father.

The child entertains the notion that he or she is the offspring of ... persons of noble or exalted rank, from whom the child

has been separated in infancy ... The family romance may ... serve to mitigate oedipal guilt by denying the incestuous quality of libidinal feelings toward the true parents (Moore and Fine, 1990, p. 74).

The family romance fantasy that restores a lost narcissism attached to the idealized parents indicates Austen's characterization of Emma's imagination as disturbing her sense of reality.

When, after all Emma's inducements to Harriet to raise her aspirations concerning a husband, Harriet tells Emma that she has an idea of Mr Knightley's returning her affections, Emma realizes what has been hidden from her all along. Emma has another intuition, becoming 'acquainted with her own heart': 'It darted through her with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no-one but herself!' (Austen, 1816[1957], p. 320). Emma becomes aggressive in her jealousy and wishes she had never laid eyes on Harriet: 'Oh God! that I had never seen her!' (p. 323). She is later appalled by her misperceptions of and misconduct toward Harriet: 'How improperly had she been acting by Harriet! How inconsiderate, how indelicate, how irrational, how unfeeling had been her conduct. What blindness, what madness had led her on!' (p. 320). But despite change and growth, Emma remains mistress of her father's house when she marries Mr Knightley. The final arrangement of her married life around her father's needs presents a clear picture of what remains static in Emma's world.

The critics have debated whether Emma, in her self-absorption, can tolerate the vicissitudes of sexual love. One critic asks, is Emma 'asexual, uncommitted or interested chiefly in women' (Mudrick, 1952), being so certain at 20 that she does not wish to marry?

Others wonder whether she is waiting for the right time to choose her husband, and to choose him eagerly (see Gorer, 1941; Trilling, 1957; Chandler, 1975). Emma, at first, seems to be the 'frozen maid' of the limerick quoted repeatedly by her father. Frank Churchill comments on Emma's sexual neutrality when he writes, in extenuation of his flirtation with Emma, 'Amiable

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and delightful as Miss Woodhouse is, she never gave me the idea of a young woman likely to be attached' (Austen, 1816[1957], p. 344). She herself remarks to Harriet that she does not think it in her nature to fall in love: 'I never have been in love; it is not my way or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall' (p. 65).

Austen portrays Emma's dilemma: she is deeply attached to a hypochondriac, indulgent father with whom she is first and favorite, while possessing the unconditional loving admiration of a mother-substitute (below the child in rank and not married to the father). This situation allows Emma to escape the usual vicissitudes of the child in the triangle. The creation of the Dixon fantasy can be interpreted both as a 'negative', as Emma denies her exclusion from the parental sexual couple in a distortion of reality, and also as a 'capability', a vicarious working through of feelings of sadness and guilt first attributed to Jane Fairfax and then suffered in herself.

## Oedipal/primal-scene fantasy

Austen has Emma create a fantasy that portrays Jane Fairfax in the position of pining over a lost love, a fantasy that includes an image of oral suffering. In *Beyond the pleasure principle*, Freud represents the young child as capable of perceiving and feeling the narcissistic wound of oedipal exclusion. He reflects poetically on the 'most painful feelings' and 'distressing circumstances' that arise as the 'wishes' of infantile sexual life are discovered to be 'incompatible with reality':

The tie of affection which as a rule binds the child to the parent of the opposite sex, succumbs to disappointment, to a vain expectation of satisfaction or to jealousy over the birth of a new baby—unmistakable proof of the infidelity of the object of the child's affections. His own attempt to make a baby himself, carried out with tragic seriousness, fails shamefully. Patients repeat all of these unwanted situations and painful emotions in the transference and revive them with the greatest ingenuity (1920).

Freud's rich depiction of the small child excluded from the parental couple's sexual life does not fully illuminate Emma's projected fantasy about Jane Fairfax and Mr Dixon ('If it were love, it might be single simple successful love on her side alone. She might have been sucking in the sad poison while a sharer of his conversation with her friend' (Austen, 1816[1957], p. 128)). Emma imagines not herself but Jane Fairfax as sad and excluded and as suffering an oral trauma, as if both displacement and regression are at work. Emma imagines the pain of the oedipal/primal-scene fantasy situation but, in projecting the fantasy on to Jane Fairfax, she shows that she cannot yet tolerate the narcissistic blow of being excluded from the parental sexual couple. Austen's imagery also indicates some complication from an oral loss and a process of working through by projective imagination, rather than with the full and immediate experience of the narcissistic wound.

Freud's depiction of the oedipal child set in the context of his paper on traumatic repetition seems, in retrospect, both optimistic and pessimistic, with the child able to make contact with the 'most distressing feelings' but moving toward a traumatic repetition. Yet, the acceptance of the parents as a sexual couple can be an instigation to think more realistically (McDougall, 1972; Greenacre, 1973; Blum, 1979; Green, 1980, 1999; Dahl, 1982; Ikonen and Rechart, 1984; Britton, 1989; Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1991; Segal, 1991). The theory of therapeutic action through oedipal/primal-scene elaboration permits a specifically psychoanalytic interpretation of Austen's portrayal of character change in *Emma*.

Further developing Freud's work on vicissitudes of the Oedipus complex, Green proposed that, if an exclusion reawakens a loss from the oral stage, the child may then dis-invest the fantasy of the parental sexual couple,

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to the advantage of intense intellectual activity ... where the quest for meaning ... stimulates an extensive intellectual activity, which re-establishes the wounded narcissistic omnipotence by sacrificing libidinal satisfaction. Another solution is artistic creation ... with the same search for meaning (1980, p. 160).

Austen indicates that her heroine has unconsciously adopted this kind of solution. Emma has set herself up for 'understanding', and not for falling in love. She hides a wounded narcissistic omnipotence. She is ready to sacrifice libidinal satisfaction ('I have never been in love; it is not my way or my nature') and begins to control couples in an enactment.

Emma, in Austen's account, lost her mother at 5. The 'unreliable narrator' (Wallace, 1995), who is usually close to Emma's sensibility, minimizes the loss of the mother, which may represent an unconscious restriction of oedipal fantasy consistent with the denial of loss and failed mourning, implied by the narrator's point of view:

She was the youngest of the two daughters of a most affectionate, indulgent father and had in consequence of her sister's marriage, been mistress of his house from a very early period. Her mother had died too long ago for her to have more than an indistinct remembrance of her caresses (Austen, 1816[1957], p. 1).

In the novel's world, Jane Fairfax lost her mother at 3, Frank Churchill lost his mother at 2 and Emma lost her mother at 5. These dead mothers can be looked on as variations on the theme of the 'dead mother' of early psychological loss. Austen has linked the implicit disavowal of the emotional importance of the loss of the mother with Emma's denial of the representatives of the parental sexual couple (Green, 1980).

After the tea party and the Dixon letter game, Mr Knightley asks Emma about Frank and Jane:

'Have you never at any time had reason to think that he admired her, or that she admired him?'

'Never, never!'—she cried with a most open eagerness—'Never, for the twentieth part of a moment, did such an idea occur to me. And how could it possibly come into your head?'

'I have lately imagined that I saw symptoms of attachment between them—certain expressive looks, which I did not believe meant to be public'

'Oh! You amuse me excessively ... but indeed it will not do ... they are as far from any attachment or admiration for one another, as any two beings in the world can be. That is, I *presume* it to be so on her side, and I can *answer* for its being so on his' ... She spoke with a confidence which staggered, and with a satisfaction which silenced Mr. Knightley (Austen, 1816[1957], p. 274).

Emma's perception of reality falters badly at this juncture. Her 'conspiracy' with Frank Churchill to tease Jane Fairfax has blinded her to their attachment and admiration. No child of oedipal age could deny the sexual attachment of the parents better than Emma does with Jane and Frank, in this 'never, never! ... never for the twentieth part of a moment' repudiation of the attachment of the couple.

The narcissistic blow involved in the 'infidelity of the object', in circumstances of maternal loss, can be linked to exclusion from the parental sexual couple. The blow can result in an intensification of projection, denial, sadism or masochism, acting defensively against the direct experience of the narcissistic wound initially preventing a working through of psychic pain in the way depicted in Freud's passage (1920). However, Emma's imagination carries her further in a regressive enactment and eventually to an investment in love.

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## Sado-masochism and the struggle of the critics

Sadistic and masochistic responses to representations of exclusion from the parental sexual relationship can lead to inhibition in sexual development and to excessive use of primitive defenses, such as Emma's denial by fantasy of the perception of reality (Freud, 1919; Lauffer and Lauffer, 1984; Novick and Novick, 1987; Glenn and Berenstein, 1991). Austen uses a language and imagery of 'blush' and of 'excess' through which she conveys sado-masochistic forces at work in her characters. But few of Austen's critics have found a way to comprehend the interconnectedness of Emma's cruelty and her development through imagination.

These critics have failed to pay close attention to the details of Emma's fantasy, especially to the detail which must have struck them (given the omission) as the peculiarly disloyal seduction of the 'husband of the best friend' to whom Jane was so extraordinarily indebted (Mrs Dixon had been a sister, whose parents had supported and educated Jane). This blind spot in the criticism asks for psychoanalytic understanding (Hanly, 1992). The critics' dilemmas concerning Emma's sadism toward Jane Fairfax may suggest a general disavowal of female sadism to women. Many critics have been able to tolerate the idea of Austen's depiction of aggression but not her knowledge and depiction of hatred (see Harding, 1940; Pewitt-Brown, 1979; Watt, 1981).

One critic, in a landmark essay, believed that Austen, for all her genius, had in this instance 'forced conduct beyond nature':

The heroine's suspicions about the relations between Miss Fairfax and Mr Dixon may be natural; but her decision in believing without proof what she suspected, and her open and public reproaches to the lady, are violently opposed to the notions of feminine grace and good-nature which the character is intended to embody (Simpson, 1870, quoted in Southam, 1987).

Another critic wrote about Austen's Emma that it took 'supreme courage to portray a girl, meant to win and keep the reader's liking, with such characteristics frankly ascribed to her' (Howells 1919, quoted in Southam, 1987). Trilling, in his essay on *Emma* as an idyll, draws out the healthy aspects of Emma's narcissism. He emphasizes that Emma is the first feminine heroine whose inner life and struggles with conscience the reader overhears. Emma is capable, despite all her faults, of remorse and reparation. 'Snobbery is the grossest fault that arises from Emma's self-love' (1957). But, he continues, we must also take account of 'her capacity for unkindness' which can be

'impulsive and brutal in the witticism directed to Miss Bates' or 'extended and systematic, as in her conspiracy with Frank Churchill to quiz Jane Fairfax' (p. xiv). Why, then, should anyone be kind to Emma? Because, as Trilling points out, Emma is the first heroine who, in the midst of pangs of conscience, expresses the hope that she will become 'more acquainted with herself' (p. xvi). Other critics focus on the negative aspects of Emma's narcissism and see her imagination of evil in Jane Fairfax as cold, self-serving and unredeemed.

Emma is moved to play God, but without tenderness or social caution (or the artist's awareness) she falls into every conceivable mistake and misjudgement. She must feel herself to be central and centripetal, the confidante and advisor of all. Without tenderness or caution she makes the worst of every possible situation: imagines evil where there is good—because Jane Fairfax is disgustingly reserved ... (Mudrick, 1952, p. 194).

A psychoanalytic point of view permits an interpretation of *Emma* which can reconcile the disparate views of the critics with respect to Emma's aggression in the attacks on Jane Fairfax and her aunt. Emma's aggression includes sadistic behavior to Jane Fairfax, which can be viewed as powerfully motivated given the dilemmas created by a failed mourning of an early loss of the mother, and the subsequent repeated denial of the oedipal sexual couple.

The degree of pain Emma inflicts on Jane Fairfax has been underestimated in many

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critical commentaries, except where Emma is found to be almost entirely bad. In the Dixon letter game episode at Emma's tea table, Austen focuses the reader with a gathering momentum and lucidity on the 'poignant sting' Emma inflicts on her rival. Mr Knightley begins to suspect Frank Churchill of double-dealing with Jane and Emma as he observes them around the tea table at Hartfield, playing the word game with scrabble letters. Mr Knightley witnesses Frank as he first gives the letters for 'blunder' to Jane, and next teases Emma saying that he will give the letters for 'Dixon' to Jane (to confront her with the supposed seduction of Mr Dixon), 'and as clearly heard Emma opposing it with eager laughing warmth. "No, no you must not; you shall not indeed"' (Austen, 1816[1957], p. 272). Jane looks at the letters and, 'seeing herself watched, blushed more deeply than he had ever perceived her' (p. 273). Frank's game is complicated. He has placed himself as an insider with Emma, excluding and insulting Jane, but he is really an insider with Jane, in an engagement to her that entirely excludes Emma. Mr Knightley, observing the hidden meaning, speaks to Emma afterwards:

'Pray Emma,' said he, 'may I ask in what lay the great amusement, the poignant sting of the last word given to you and Miss Fairfax? I saw the word and am curious to know how it could be so very entertaining to the one and so very distressing to the other.' ... Emma was extremely confused ... she was really ashamed (p. 273).

The poignant sting was felt by Jane Fairfax and 'great amusement' was felt by Emma Woodhouse, both women blushing and keenly aroused by Frank's play, which was a 'vehicle for gallantry and trick'. The 'poignant sting' is Mr Knightley's phrase for the sexually excited aggression or sadomasochism portrayed in Austen's work, which has been largely ignored by the critics. Emma's engagement in Frank's sadomasochistic game is a central instance of negative capability—the primary process at play in the word game, which prepares the way for a new integration of libido. This complex dynamic has been difficult for critics to describe.

In the end, Emma recognizes the pain she must have been causing at every moment to Jane Fairfax in communicating such completely unfounded fantasies to Frank:

[Emma] 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 ... in knowing her as she ought, and as she might, she must have been preserved from the abominable suspicions of an improper attachment to Mr. Dixon, which she had not only so foolishly fashioned and harboured herself, but had so unpardonably imparted; an idea which she greatly feared had been made a subject of material distress to the delicacy of Jane's feelings, by the levity or carelessness of Frank Churchill's ... They never could have been all three together, without her having stabbed Jane Fairfax's peace in a thousand instances; and on Box Hill perhaps, it had been the agony of a mind that would bear no more (pp. 330-1).

Jane Fairfax, at times the excluded one in the triangle, had her 'peace' 'stabbed in a thousand instances' (an image of a violent scene with phallic aggression). Jane's 'agony' of mind is comprehended by Emma as she wanders through Hartfield, guilty and worrying about 'loss of love and failure' (Freud, 1920). Mr Knightley had once said, 'I should like to see Emma in love, and in some doubt of a return; it would do her good' (Austen, 1816[1957], p. 29). There is a positive function in the instinctual vicissitudes, primary-process activity and suffering, which are on the route to triangulation (Britton, 1989; Hanly, 2001), and it has been hard for critics to see Emma's cruel play with her fantasy as part of the process of growth.

One critic concerned with social history and the fate of women in the literature of Austen's time sheds light on Austen's place in the 'war of ideas' in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Butler, 1975). In the moral and aesthetic debates of Austen's time, a new psychology asserting the subjective, affective roots of human thought and behavior was countered by

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conservative moral realists. The tide of sentimentalism then turned. The radicals, like Godwin, sharing the values of the French Revolution, rejected 'the view ... implicit in Hartley and Hume that man's inner life is primarily instinctive' (Butler, 1975 p. 40). The political revolutionaries believed that the emphasis placed by the associationist psychologists 'on the irrational makes man the tool of processes over which he has no control' (Butler, 1975, p. 36), a position they wished to refute. The conservatives (such as Jane Austen's Oxford-trained father and brothers) refuted both the political radical and the sentimental or associationist positions. The author of *The war*

of ideas (Butler, 1975) faults Jane Austen for what she sees as her too-conservative position on the fate of women, and the lack of a politically radical vision. Yet, Austen's understanding of all three traditions allows her to render complex psychological compromises in action. Austen's heroines are instinctive and associationist, as in the psychology of Hume, drawing on primary-process images, affects and impulses. Yet, the struggles of her characters are organized by a conservative sense of moral consequence and social realism. The emergence of sado-masochistic instincts in Emma in the breaking up of strong narcissistic defenses, followed by remorse and reparation, reveals precisely this psychological complexity and subtlety. Imagination and action that are 'instinctive', 'irrational' and not 'in control' drive, with the help of love, moral concern and realism, a deeper organization in *Emma*, a process of change not as fully explored by other female authors of the time.

## Sado-masochism and the characterization of Jane Fairfax

The structure of great art contains variations on themes (Kris, 1952). In Austen's *Emma*, the characterization of Jane Fairfax involves a variation on the theme of early maternal loss, which is also worked out in the characterizations of Emma and Frank Churchill. The opening up of complex instinctive vicissitudes, such as sado-masochism from the earlier maternal period in which loss has been suffered, is not surprising in a writer of Austen's capacity for observation.

Orphaned at 3, her father having died at war and her mother in a lingering illness, Jane Fairfax was in the care of her aunt and grandmother until she was 8 when friends of her father's, the Campbells, took over her care in an affectionate and sophisticated life in London. Now 20, Jane must either marry or become a governess. Austen depicts the darkest psychological suffering in the novel, in Jane Fairfax, caused by her jealousy of Emma, by her fear at one stage that she has lost Frank, and by her guilt about the secret engagement. Austen portrays the dynamic of masochism in Jane Fairfax through the language of mortification and unrelenting guilt. Without a husband, she must put herself out to 'Offices for the sale—not quite of human flesh' (1816[1957], p. 233) but to seek the place of governess, where 'mortification' must be suffered. Having lost both parents at 3, Jane must fend for herself and, given the times, the secret engagement leaves her acutely vulnerable to Frank, excluded from the 'strict rule' of society.

Jane Fairfax becomes ill in the misery caused by Frank Churchill's flirtation with Emma, and his carelessness about keeping the secret and failure to respond to a letter, which leads Jane to break off the engagement. Jane's misery is increased by Emma's hostile fantasies that Jane seduced her best friend's husband, fantasies imagined and imparted. Jane's inability to eat is the sign, according to some critics, of her hysteria (Lane, 1995). The reports back to Emma concerning Jane's health in the period of her perceived loss of her object are that she has a fever, is starving, her health entirely deranged. Later, Emma realized,

In Jane's eyes she had been a rival; and well might anything she could offer of assistance or regard be repulsed. An airing in the Hartfield carriage would have been the rack, and arrow-root from the Hartfield storeroom must have been poison (Austen, 1816[1957], p. 316).

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The dark elements of an agonizing jealousy and oral paranoia (the rack and the poison) belong to Emma's imagination of Jane's suffering (Klein, 1945; Brenman, 1952). Jane expresses the guilt of a masochistic character structure.

'The consequence,' said she, [of the secret engagement] 'has been a state of perpetual suffering to me; and so it ought. But after all the punishment misconduct can bring, it is still not less misconduct. Pain is no expiation. I can never be blameless' (Austen, 1816[1957], p. 329).

Emma's imaginings about Jane Fairfax and Jane's experience of guilt are variations on the perilous aspects of the child's 'painful circumstances' as the self-destructive impulses threaten to overwhelm the creative processes, in renegotiating the right to be part of a new sexual couple.

## Emma's cruelty to Miss Bates and the revelations of the monologues

Miss Bates's associative monologues have sufficient clues, taken together with Frank's frequent stops in Highbury, that Emma might have gained an idea of his being in love with Jane Fairfax. Miss Bates was perceptive; she had noticed that Mr Elton had aspired to Emma's hand, and she may (in the light of the sequence of her associations) have guessed at Emma's attempt to get him to marry Miss Smith (p. 134). But what Miss Bates audibly puzzles over in her free associations is Frank Churchill's behavior at home with her mother and with Jane: '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—the rivet came out you know this morning—so very obliging' (p. 182). The sexual imagery of the rivet may not have been conscious for Austen, but her fashioning of Miss Bates's associations is an instance of preconscious synthesis, and of Austen's art at its most remarkable. (This is a text in which projection is nicely defined, and in which a fake dream is recognized as such, and so Austen's observations on these matters were not negligible.) After a detour into a praise of 'baked apples', the need for a 'chimney cleaning' and the reputed incivility of a neighbor, Miss Bates gets back to her main topic:

So very obliging of Mr Frank Churchill! 'Oh', said he, 'I do think I can fasten the rivet; I like a job of this sort excessively.'—Which you know shewed him to be so very ... Indeed I must say that, much as I had heard of him before and much as I had expected, he far exceeds anything ... I do congratulate you Mrs. Weston, most warmly. He seems everything the fondest parent could ... 'Oh', said he, 'I can fasten the rivet. I like a job of that sort excessively.' I shall never forget his manner (p. 183).

At a conscious level Emma misses and misconstrues everything that pertains to Frank Churchill's love of Jane Fairfax. But Miss Bates is registering, and communicating, the extraordinary nature of Frank's behavior to old Mrs Bates. She repeats his somewhat inexplicable

but suggestive comment, 'I like a job of that sort excessively', and she (who will have the place of a parent when Frank and Jane marry) congratulates Mrs Weston on 'everything a fond parent could', and stops. She has clearly picked up that old Mrs Bates is receiving the devoted attention a man would accord his beloved's grandmother and not a virtual stranger. We also hear from Miss Bates's associations at the Crown ball that Frank Churchill is helping Jane with her shawl, leading her to the best place at the table. Miss Bates communicates all this and, after a few weeks, Emma attacks her brutally and precisely over how much she talks.

Emma's blush during the letter game at tea seems to signify both her sadistic excitement shared with Frank and her shame at hurting Jane Fairfax. When the revelation of Jane's engagement to Frank is made, Emma blushes once again: "'The Campbells, the Dixons, did none of them know of the engagement?'" Emma could not speak the name of Dixon without a little blush' (p. 313). Miss Bates had repeated Frank's comment on fixing the rivet: 'I like a job of

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that sort excessively', and then says that his praise of the baked apples was so 'excessively ...', and leaves her sentence unfinished. When Emma denies the possibility of there being any attachment between Frank and Jane, she says that she is 'excessively amused' at Mr Knightley's idea, unconsciously repeating Miss Bates's revelation of Frank's 'excessive' attention, warmth and praise to Jane's family. Austen is quite precise in using this language of 'excess' for the idea of an unaccountable quantity and kind of affect. Like the character in a detective story who reveals too much (about Frank's excessive warmth to Jane's relatives), Miss Bates gets attacked.

The famous Box Hill episode, the scene of Emma's cruelty to Miss Bates (over which there has been so much critical debate), can be understood as an attack on one who reminds the narcissistic child, not sufficiently separated internally from the mother who had died, of the parents' sexual love for each other. We hear Emma struggling against her aggression after her attack on Miss Bates at Box Hill, and after Mr Knightley intervenes again: 'How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates? How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age, and situation?—Emma, I had not thought it possible'. Emma responds internally, recognizing her fault:

Never had she felt so agitated, mortified, grieved, at any circumstance in her life. She was most forcibly struck. The truth of his representation there was no denying. She felt it in her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates! ... time did not compose her. As she reflected more, she seemed but to feel it more. She had never been so depressed (p. 295).

Emma was 'so brutal, so cruel' to the messenger who imparted the bad news of Frank's sexual love for Jane. Thus, Austen explores the language of excitation, agitation, excess and blush, depicting the penetration of infantile sexuality into Emma's childhood narcissism, which had been previously unable to contain such disruption. Austen reveals the progression of feeling and moral conscience in Emma who, having been cruel, feels 'agitated, mortified, grieved' and then 'depressed'. The complex psychological feelings and positions of the depressive phase and the oedipal phase are at work.

## Discussion: Oedipal/primal-scene fantasy in *Emma*

Emma the 'imaginist' works through her own incestuous longings as they are bound in the projected but ingenious fantasy. In the last chapters of the novel, Austen portrays Emma improved, showing greater realism about her wish for Mr Knightley's good opinion and love, her guilt and her aggression. As Emma wanders about Hartfield in painful worry that Mr Knightley loves Harriet, she sees a 'cold stormy rain set in' and is beset by the 'cruel sights' of the wind 'despoiling the shrubs'. Emma's language indicates a 'left-over' infantile rage at exclusion projected on to nature's 'cruel ... despoiling' of the shrubs. But Emma also thinks sadly and realistically of being shut out:

The child to be born at Randalls must be a tie there even dearer than herself ... Miss Fairfax ... would be married ... and if Harriet were to be chosen the first, the dearest, the friend, the wife [of Mr Knightley] ... what could be increasing Emma's wretchedness but that it had been all her own work? (pp. 331-2).

The recognition of a fertile conception of the parental sexual relationship (the baby to be born at Randalls) and the imagination of being not 'first' nor 'dearest' is articulated at the moment Emma begins to really want a marriage with Mr Knightley. And yet, typical of Austen's ambiguity and realism, despite her new emotional tolerances, Emma imagines that all these painful situations are 'her own work'; she imagines control. And in the end, she is first both with her father and her husband. Both limited change and stasis are depicted in *Emma*. Freud wrote,

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The artist is originally a man who turns away from reality ... and who allows his erotic and ambitious wishes full play in the life of phantasy. He finds his way back to reality however, from this world of phantasy, by making use of special gifts to mould his phantasies into truths of a new kind, which are valued by men as precious reflections of reality (1908).

Austen names Emma an 'imaginist' for good reason, suggesting a symbolizing (Blum, 1990) capability in her personality even in its darker moments.

## Conclusion

'From Sophocles to Proust the struggle against incestuous impulses, dependency, guilt and aggression, has remained a topic of Western literature' (Kris, 1942). What we are tracking in Austen's novel is the dynamic and creative aspect of the struggle she portrays.

The creative act is the final link in a series of stages (process), characterized by fluctuations generally unconscious and



transitory, between reality and phantasy, states of 'disorganization' and reorganization, hallucinatory phantasies and objective perceptions, abstractions and concretizations (Grinberg, 1990, p. 274).

With the deceptive simplicity of the great artist, Austen represents such a series of stages in Emma's struggle against incestuous impulses and aggression. Fluctuations between reality and phantasy, and between states of disorganization and reorganization, comprise the process we have traced in Austen's novel. Emma begins with a hyperbolic and static situation: 'never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important, so always right and always first in any man's eyes as I am in my father's' (1816[1957], p. 65). She then produces the ingenious and animating fantasy that Jane Fairfax 'seduced Mr. Dixon's affections' or, alternately, 'sucked in the sad poison' of a 'successless love' for a married man (pp. 121, 128). Emma goes on to negate Mr Knightley's objective perceptions of the real sexual attachment between the man Emma flirts with and her rival. 'Never, never! ... they are as far from any attachment to one another as any two beings in the world can be' (p. 274). But Emma's narcissism breaks open into a disorganized state; she is 'brutal' to Miss Bates and she attacks Jane Fairfax, producing a 'poignant sting' (p. 273). Then, Emma's remorse and realism take a greater hold: 'never had she felt so agitated, mortified, grieved, at any circumstance in her life ... The truth of his representation there was no denying. She had never been more depressed' (p. 295). At last, in an 'evolution corresponding to integration', there is an idea that surfaces in Emma's mind 'unexpectedly and whole' (Bion, 1967). In the style of Emma's inimitable personality, it comes to her: 'Mr. Knightley must marry no-one but herself' (1816[1957], p. 320).

In so far as the creative process gives rise to a situation of change, it inevitably implies a reaction of mourning for the loss of the old structures and aspects of the self and objects (with the corresponding link between them), which are necessarily replaced by new structures and links contained in the creative process ... The fertilizing sexual relationship of the internal parents, the primal scene, has an influence on the creative fantasies that are experienced like the conception of a child (Grinberg, 1990, p. 283).

The movement of Austen's plot, language and characterization in *Emma* can be viewed through the lens of an important theory of therapeutic process in psychoanalysis. With the elaboration of oedipal fantasies, specifically fantasies of the parents' sexual relationship, a greater tolerance for reality develops. Freud's (1920) passage dramatically conveys the humiliation felt when the child experiences the 'infidelity' of the beloved parent, referred to by later authors as the oedipal/primal-scene fantasy. Works of art do not confirm or disconfirm psychoanalytic theory (Kris, 1952). However, Austen's dramatic portrait does illuminate the creative process of triangulation (Bion, 1959; Britton, 1989; Hanly, 2001).

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The initial recognition of the parental sexual relationship involves relinquishing the idea of sole and permanent possession of the mother and leads to a profound sense of loss, which, if not tolerated may become a sense of persecution ... The acknowledgement by the child of the parents' relationship to each other unites his psychic world ... it creates a triangular space ... the possibility of being a participant in a relationship and observed by a third person as well as being an observer of a relationship between two people (Britton, 1989, pp. 84, 86).

The parental-couple fantasies (more cruel or more generative) and the child's relations to the fantasy couple (more included or more excluded) are often brought alive in the analytic transference. 'Patients repeat all of these unwanted situations and painful emotions in the transference and revive them with the greatest ingenuity' (Freud, 1920). These situations and painful emotions are dramatically portrayed through Austen's genius, as the vehicles for change. Emma's projected fantasy of the Dixon love triangle, so disregarded by the critics in its details, engages Emma in a process that shows the 'negative capability' (Keats, 1817) of the re-elaboration of the oedipal fantasy. Jane Austen has portrayed 'something much greater than any one person, a quintessential essence of humanity, a generalization made incarnate and personal by genius' (Southam, 1967).

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