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Dramatic Publishing

EMMA

Adapted for the Stage

by

SANDRA FENICHEL ASHER

Based on the Novel

by

JANE AUSTEN



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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SANDRA FENICHEL ASHER

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JANE AUSTEN

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For Gayle Sergel—
with gratitude and affection,
and, of course,
for “Mr. Knightley”

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EMMA

A play in two acts
For 8 Women and 6 Men; extras, if desired

CHARACTERS

JANE AUSTEN late 30s; fond of her characters,
amused by their story

EMMA WOODHOUSE . . . 20; bright, attractive, imaginative
and willful; in love with George Knightley
but doesn't know it

HENRY WOODHOUSE Emma's elderly father;
goodnatured, fragile, afraid of change and illness

MR. KNIGHTLEY (George) late 30s; kind, rational,
attractive, and well-to-do; unaware at first that
he is in love with Emma and jealous of Frank

HARRIET SMITH 17; a pretty, naive schoolgirl
befriended by Emma

MR. ELTON mid-20s; the eligible, overly gallant,
social-climbing rector of Highbury

MRS. WESTON late 20s; Emma's devoted friend and
former governess

MR. WESTON . . . late 40s; cheerful, outgoing and optimistic

FRANK CHURCHILL early 20s; Mr. Weston's son by his first wife, charming, handsome; secretly engaged to Jane Fairfax and enjoying the game of deception

MISS BATES a kindly, talkative neighbor; lives in genteel poverty; vulnerable

JANE FAIRFAX. . . 20; Miss Bates' orphaned niece, elegant, accomplished, reserved; secretly engaged to Frank, oppressed by the burden of deceiving others

MRS. ELTON 20s; becomes Mr. Elton's bride, overdressed and overbearing

SERVANTS (one male and one female)
also play the following roles:

MRS. BATES Miss Bates' elderly mother

ROBERT MARTIN a sensible young farmer in love with Harriet Smith

OTHERS, if desired, to play additional servants, and the Westons' party and ball guests.

TIME: Autumn to summer, perhaps 1813-1814.

SETTING: Highbury, an isolated village in Surrey, England.

ACT ONE

AT RISE: Music. AUSTEN is seen in silhouette, putting the last touches on a letter she has just written.

NOTE: While EMMA's thoughts are often spoken aloud, she and the other characters observe the convention of the fourth wall. Only AUSTEN speaks directly to the audience. AUSTEN is fully aware of everyone on stage; they do not see her—except for the SERVANTS, whom she directs and helps in arranging scenes as she narrates, often placing key props or costume pieces herself. While she does stay on stage for a few brief scenes, it is never her intention to intrude between her characters and the audience.

AUSTEN (reading, as music fades and lights come up on her). "My dear Sir: You are very, very kind in your hints as to the sort of composition which might recommend me at present, and I am fully sensible that an historical romance might be much more to the purpose of profit or popularity than such pictures of domestic life as I deal in. But I could not write a serious romance under any other motive than to save my own life, and if it were indispensable for me to make the attempt, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first chapter. Your very much obliged and very sincere friend, Jane Austen." (A

pause as she gives a last thought to the suggestion she has just turned down; then, with determination, to audience.) No. I must keep to my own style and go my own way. Three or four families in a country village is the very thing to work on, getting them into exactly such a spot as is the delight of my life.

(Lights come up on Emma's parlor, where MR. WOODHOUSE dozes off while playing backgammon with EMMA. AUSTEN acknowledges their presence with delight, then tells their story to audience.)

AUSTEN. Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to vex her. She was the youngest daughter of a most 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 long ago and her place had been supplied by Miss Taylor, an excellent woman as governess, who had fallen little short of a mother in affection.

(EMMA rises, puts aside backgammon board, tucks a blanket about her father, then comes forward as if looking out of a window, and sighs deeply.)

AUSTEN. Sorrow came when Miss Taylor married. *(AUSTEN listens to the following exchange for a moment, then exits.)*

MR. WOODHOUSE *(waking)*. Poor Miss Taylor! What a pity it is that Mr. Weston ever thought of her!

EMMA. Mr. Weston is such a good-humored man, Papa, and you would not have had Miss Taylor live with us forever when she might have a house of her own. We must pay our wedding visit very soon.

MR. WOODHOUSE. My dear Emma! Randalls is such a distance. I could not walk half so far.

EMMA (*laughing at him, indulgently*). Nobody thought of your walking, Papa. We must go in the carriage, to be sure.

(MR. KNIGHTLEY enters. Their relationship is marked by the affectionate bantering of old friends.)

EMMA. Ah, but here is Mr. Knightley. (*To MR. KNIGHTLEY.*) It is very kind of you to come out at this late hour to call upon us.

MR. WOODHOUSE. You must have found it very damp and dirty. I wish you may not catch cold.

MR. KNIGHTLEY (*amused by and very indulgent with MR. WOODHOUSE*). Dirty, sir! Look at my shoes. Not a speck on them.

MR. WOODHOUSE. Well, that is quite surprising, for we have had a vast deal of rain here. I wanted them to put off the wedding. Poor Miss Taylor! 'Tis a sad business.

MR. KNIGHTLEY. Poor Mr. and Miss Woodhouse, perhaps, but I cannot say "poor Miss Taylor." It must be better for the new Mrs. Weston to have only one to please than two.

EMMA (*playfully*). Especially when one of those two is such a fanciful, troublesome creature! That is what you would say if my father were not by.

MR. WOODHOUSE. It is very true, my dear. I am sometimes very fanciful and troublesome.

EMMA. My dearest Papa! I meant only myself. Mr. Knightley loves to find fault with me, you know—in a joke—it is all a joke. We always say what we like to one another.

MR. KNIGHTLEY. Emma knows I never flatter her, but I meant no reflection on anybody. Mrs. Weston used to have two persons to please; she will now have but one. (*A pause.*) But what of Mr. Weston's son? Has he been here on this occasion?

EMMA. Mr. Frank Weston Churchill has not been here yet. There was a strong expectation of his coming, but it ended in nothing. (*Aside to MR. KNIGHTLEY, who reacts with something less than complete approval.*) I am persuaded that Mr. and Mrs. Weston think Frank Churchill is the very person to suit me, and so, I have a great curiosity to see him. (*Louder, to include her father.*) His arrival, I fear, depends entirely upon his aunt's temper.

MR. KNIGHTLEY. Ah, yes, the great Mrs. Churchill.

EMMA. Everybody knows Mrs. Churchill. She is so very unreasonable, and everything must bend to her wishes. She has given her nephew a superior name and the promise of her fortune but kept him from his father's wedding.

MR. KNIGHTLEY. I hope, in spite of that, it went tolerably well. How did you all behave? Who cried most?

EMMA. We all behaved charmingly, with hardly a tear to be seen.

MR. WOODHOUSE. Dear Emma bears everything so well, Mr. Knightley, but she is really very sorry to lose poor Miss Taylor.

EMMA (*determined to be cheerful*). You have forgotten one matter of joy to me—that I made the match myself.

MR. KNIGHTLEY. *You made the match?*

EMMA. I did, four years ago. And to be proved right, when so many people said Mr. Weston would never marry again, may comfort me for anything.

MR. KNIGHTLEY. You made a lucky guess, and that is all that can be said.

MR. WOODHOUSE. Emma never thinks of herself, if she can do good to others. But pray do not make any more matches, my dear; they break up one's family circle grievously.

EMMA. I promise you to make none for myself, Papa, but I must indeed make one more: for Mr. Elton. He has been rector here a whole year and has fitted up his house so comfortably that it would be a shame to have him single any longer.

MR. KNIGHTLEY. Invite him to dinner, Emma, and help him to the best of the fish and the chicken—but leave him to choose his own wife.

(Music. Lights dim on parlor. ALL exit. Lights up downstage. Music fades as HARRIET, crossing from DL, nearly collides with ROBERT MARTIN, crossing from DR.)

HARRIET (*flustered and giggling*). Oh, Mr. Martin.

ROBERT MARTIN (*delighted to see her*). Miss Smith!

HARRIET. Only imagine our happening to meet! How very odd.

ROBERT MARTIN. I did not think you ever walked this way—

(AUSTEN enters. As she speaks to audience, HARRIET and ROBERT mime chatting for a mutually shy moment, then he bows and exits left. HARRIET watches him go, then hurries off right.)

AUSTEN. Harriet Smith was the natural daughter of... somebody. Somebody had placed her, several years back, at Mrs. Goddard's school, and somebody had lately raised her from scholar to boarder. Emma found her altogether very engaging. She decided to notice Harriet, improve her, and introduce her into good society. For Mrs. Weston there was nothing more to be done; for Harriet, everything.

(Lights come up on Emma's parlor again. EMMA enters, followed by HARRIET. AUSTEN exits.)

HARRIET. Well, Miss Woodhouse, what do you think of Mr. Martin? I thought him very plain at first, but not now.

EMMA. He is remarkably plain, Harriet. But that is nothing compared with his entire want of gentility.

HARRIET (*disappointed*). To be sure, he is not so genteel as real gentlemen. He is not like Mr. Knightley.

EMMA. This farm you have been visiting, Mr. Martin rents it of Mr. Knightley, does he not?

HARRIET. Oh, yes. He and his mother have *two* parlors and *eight* cows, one of them a very pretty little Welch cow. As I was so fond of it, she said that it should be called *my* cow. And Mr. Martin went *three miles round* one day to bring me walnuts! (*She pauses, entranced by*

the memory.) But did you never see him? He has passed you very often.

EMMA. A young farmer is the very last sort of person to raise my curiosity. A degree or two lower might interest me; I might hope to be useful to the family in some way. But a farmer can need none of my help; he is as much above my notice as he is below it. What do you imagine his age to be?

HARRIET. He was four-and-twenty the eighth of last June.

EMMA. That is too young to settle. Six years from now, if he could meet with a good sort of young woman in the same rank as his own—

HARRIET. Six years! Dear Miss Woodhouse, he would be thirty years old!

EMMA. That is as early as most men can afford to marry, who are not born to an independence.

HARRIET. But they live very comfortably—

EMMA. I have no doubt that he will thrive, Harriet, but it does not follow that he might marry anybody fit for you to notice. The misfortune of your birth ought to make you particularly careful. There can be no doubt of your being a gentleman's daughter, and you must support your claim to that station by everything within your power. I want to see you permanently well connected.

(Music. HARRIET sits, struggling with disappointment and the desire to please EMMA. Lights dim on parlor. EMMA steps into downstage light and muses to herself.)

EMMA. Mr. Elton is the very person to drive the young farmer out of Harriet's head. He already thinks her beautiful, and any girl who could be gratified by a Robert

Martin's riding about the country to get walnuts for her might very well be conquered by our fine rector's admiration.

(AUSTEN enters with drawing materials and hands them to EMMA, who moves upstage into parlor.)

AUSTEN. Emma was quite convinced of Mr. Elton's being in love already. He often spoke of the improvement in Harriet's manner since her introduction at Hartfield and praised her so warmly that Emma could not suppose anything wanting which a little time would not add.

(Lights up on parlor. AUSTEN exits. MR. ELTON is now in the room, grinning at EMMA, who is sketching HARRIET. MR. ELTON hovers over EMMA but includes HARRIET in his flatteries. Music fades.)

EMMA. What an exquisite possession a picture of Harriet will be, do you not think so, Mr. Elton?

MR. ELTON *(with great enthusiasm)*. It will indeed be a delight. You do well, Miss Woodhouse, to exercise so charming a talent in favor of your friend.

EMMA. Since you give me such kind encouragement, I am happy to try what I can do. Did you ever sit for a picture, Harriet?

HARRIET *(shy, but flattered by their attention)*. Oh, dear, no—never.

EMMA *(to MR. ELTON)*. Harriet's features are very delicate, which makes a likeness difficult.

MR. ELTON. You have given Miss Smith all that she required, Miss Woodhouse. She was a beautiful creature

when she came to you, but, in my opinion, the attractions you have added are infinitely superior to what she received from nature.

EMMA. Harriet only wanted drawing out. I have done very little.

(MR. WOODHOUSE enters with MR. KNIGHTLEY and MRS. WESTON.)

MR. WOODHOUSE. How d'ye do, Mr. Elton?

MR. ELTON. Very well, thank you, Mr. Woodhouse. Mrs. Weston. Mr. Knightley.

MRS. WESTON (*observes EMMA's drawing; is gentle but honest with her*). The expression of the eye is most correct, but Miss Smith has not those eyebrows and eyelashes.

MR. ELTON. I cannot agree with you, Mrs. Weston. It appears to me a most perfect resemblance.

MRS. WESTON (*amused, confidentially, to EMMA*). You have given your friend the only beauty she wanted.

MR. KNIGHTLEY. You have made her too tall, Emma.

MR. ELTON. Oh, no, not in the least too tall. Consider, she is sitting down, and the proportions must be preserved, you know.

MR. WOODHOUSE. It is very pretty, my dear. The only thing I do not like is that she seems to be sitting out of doors, and it makes one think she must catch cold.

EMMA (*affectionately*). But, my dear Papa, it is supposed to be a warm day in summer. Look at the tree.

MR. WOODHOUSE. It is never safe to sit out of doors.

MR. ELTON. Any other situation would have been much less in character. Oh, it is most admirable! I cannot keep my eyes from it.

EMMA (*very pleased, for HARRIET's sake*). Well, we must send it to Isabella in London to see that it is properly framed.

MR. WOODHOUSE. Oh, no, my dear! I cannot bear the idea of your sister stirring out of her house in the fogs of December! Poor Isabella! Nobody is healthy in London—nobody *can* be!

(*MR. ELTON is leading EMMA into downstage light, away from the OTHERS, who exit as lights dim on parlor. SERVANTS enter and arrange Emma's morning room, then exit.*)

MR. ELTON. If I might be trusted with the commission, Miss Woodhouse, I should take infinite pleasure in executing it.

EMMA. You are too good, Mr. Elton! I would not give you such a troublesome office for the world—

MR. ELTON. It is impossible to say, Miss Woodhouse, how much I would be gratified by being employed on such an errand.

EMMA. Very well, then—(*He all but snatches the picture from her, bows and exits. To herself.*) This man is almost too gallant. But I suppose there may be a hundred different ways of being in love. He will suit Harriet exactly.

(*Lights come up on morning room. EMMA sits, pleased with herself, and takes up embroidery. HARRIET hurries on, very agitated.*)

HARRIET. Oh, Miss Woodhouse, something extraordinary has happened! As soon as I got back to Mrs. Goddard's house, I received a letter from Mr. Martin—containing a proposal of marriage!

EMMA (*alarmed*). A proposal of marriage?

HARRIET. Yes! He writes as if he really loves me very much, but I do not know what I should do, and so I have come fast as I could to ask you, Miss Woodhouse. (*Handing EMMA the letter.*) Is it a good letter, do you think? Or is it too short?

EMMA (*skims letter*). Hmm, a very good letter. I can hardly imagine the young man whom I saw talking with you the other day could express himself so well. (*Handing back the letter.*) You must answer it, of course, and speedily.

HARRIET. But what shall I say?

EMMA. Oh, no, the response must be your own. Expressions of gratitude and concern for the pain you are inflicting will present themselves unbidden to your mind, I am sure.

HARRIET. You think I ought to refuse him, then?

EMMA. This is a point which you must settle with your own feelings. However, I lay it down as a general rule that if a woman doubts as to whether she should accept a man or not, she certainly ought to refuse him. Marriage is not a state to be entered into with half a heart.

HARRIET (*looks away, hiding her disappointment*). It will be safer to say "no," perhaps. Do you think I had better say "no"?

EMMA. Not for the world would I advise you either way. If you prefer Mr. Martin to every other person you have ever been in company with, why should you hesitate?

You blush, Harriet. Does anybody else come to you at this moment? (*HARRIET says nothing, but smiles.*) I fancy you and I are the only people to whom the attentions of a certain person, his looks and manners, have explained themselves. (*HARRIET giggles.*) And a woman is not to marry a man merely because he can write a tolerable letter.

HARRIET. Oh, no—and it is but a short letter, too. (*Softens as she looks it over again.*) I hope he will not mind so very much...

EMMA. Let us think of those among our absent friends who are more cheerfully employed. At this moment, perhaps, Mr. Elton is showing your picture to *his* mother and sisters—

HARRIET. But he has left my picture in Bond Street to be framed—

EMMA. No, my modest little Harriet, it is his companion all this evening, his solace, his delight. It opens his designs to his family and introduces you among them. How cheerful, how busy their imaginations all are!

(Music. Lights dim on morning room as EMMA leads off the completely cheered HARRIET. Lights up downstage as AUSTEN enters and speaks to audience.)

AUSTEN. Harriet slept at Hartfield that night. For some weeks past she had been spending more than half her time there, gradually getting a bedroom appropriated to herself. Emma judged it best in every respect to keep her with them as much as possible.