

Goucher College

Blurring the Lines Between Captive and Master in *Emma's* Mrs. Elton

Grace Fischbach

LIT 335

Professor Juliette Wellst

Spring 2021

Jane Austen's novel *Mansfield Park* sparked discussion about slavery and what Austen's views were on the institution. Her subsequent novel, *Emma*, also delved into the realm of slavery. According to Paul Pickrel, the two novels are considered the "most unlike" of any of the novels published during Austen's lifetime (Pickrel 135). While there are major differences between *Emma* and *Mansfield Park*, Pickrel argues in his article, "Emma as Sequel" that there are more similarities in between the novels in terms of character traits and plot events than differences, enough for him to call *Emma* a sequel to *Mansfield Park*. I will be extending Pickrel's argument to include the discussion of slavery in both novels as another point of similarity. Slavery is not merely discussed or alluded to in *Emma* through the depiction of Miss Hawkins or the conversation between Jane Fairfax and Mrs. Elton over Jane wanting to be a governess. It is in fact pointedly alluded to elsewhere as well, notably a scene in *Emma* which has escaped prior notice in the literature, the Donwell Abbey strawberry picking scene. I argue that because *Mansfield Park* discusses its major theme, slavery, through Fanny Price, *Emma* rightly can be seen as a sequel that continues that discussion through Mrs. Elton and this particular overlooked scene.

The discussion of slavery within Austen's novels is a topic that has drawn the attention of many critics. Some of these note the associations between Austen's familial connections to the British Empire and slavery, while others extend her connections to slavery by the way in which Austen portrays the dynamics between her characters. Both Catherine Ingrassia and Ruth Perry

address the parallels between slaves and women in their articles. After Ingrassia illustrates Austen's understandings of imperialism and slavery in her piece "Emma, Slavery, and Cultures of Captivity", she goes on to argue that Austen shows parallels between the captivity of slaves and women in *Emma* through the characters of Mrs. Elton and Jane Fairfax. For her part Perry argues that Austen uses class and gender to illustrate the shared experiences between women and slaves in her article "Jane Austen and British Imperialism."

In her article "Mrs. Elton's Pearls: Simulating Superiority in Jane Austen's Emma" Carrie Wright expands upon the arguments of Ingrassia and Perry to assert that the relationship between Mrs. Elton and Jane Fairfax in *Emma* is not one of women in equal levels of captivity, but rather one in which Mrs. Elton has a higher level of power and influence over Jane Fairfax due to her stature in society. While I agree with the nature of Wright's argument, I use the context provided by Perry and Ingrassia to draw connections between Austen's understanding of slavery and how she depicts Mrs. Elton in relation to Jane Fairfax as a second tier of power, i.e., power given from the master to a captive with which they can exert on the rest of the captives. As such I argue that thinking of *Emma* as a continuance of the discussion on slavery that started in *Mansfield Park* allows us to see Austen exploring the dual hierarchy within captivity of women and slaves through Mrs. Elton, who plays the role of slave driver. Mrs. Elton embodies the slave who, while still oppressed, is given power over the other captives which can be seen through her insistence that she arrange Jane's governess position, as well as in the language she uses to describe the work of strawberry picking at Donwell Abbey – a scene whose connection with slavery heretofore has gone unnoticed by scholars.

The similarities between *Emma* and *Mansfield Park* go beyond the manifest craft elements of the stories but extend to the latent discussion of slavery. Pickrel's argument that

Emma is a continuation of *Mansfield Park* has strong claims. He points out the overlapping character attributes, plot devices, concepts and structures between the two novels. For example, Pickrel explains both Fanny Price and Emma Woodhouse marry men who are the mix of a brother and a father figure due to their efforts to push the heroine to grow and mature (Pickrel 148). However, he fails to discuss the themes of slavery the two novels share. By applying Pickrel's process of connecting *Emma* and *Mansfield Park* on surface level craft elements, I illustrate how the two novels are connected on their deeper discussions of slavery.

Austen was able to write two novels that discuss the meanings of slavery because of her thorough understanding of the institution. It is well known that Austen had familial and distant connections to the slave trade. According to Perry, two of her male cousins moved to the West Indies, similarly her aunt moved to India and married a man who worked for the East India Company (Perry). Perry shows that her father was intended to care for his friend Nibbs's plantation in Antigua if he died before his wife (Perry). Ingrassia explains that her naval brothers working in the British Atlantic were to "enforce the abolition of the slave trade" after 1807 (Ingrassia 98).¹ Perry expands and notes that Austen's elder brother, Francis, was vehemently opposed to slavery because of his time on the islands of St. Helena and Antigua where he saw the institution at work (Perry). Clearly, Austen's knowledge of slavery was not merely anecdotal but stemmed from such familial connections.

Austen sought to educate herself on the matter of slavery through reading which is evident in her depiction of Mrs. Elton, formerly Miss Hawkins, in *Emma*. According to

¹1807 is the year that Britain passed legislation that made it illegal to sell slaves within the British Empire while owning slaves remained legal until the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833.

Ingrassia, Austen was a thorough reader of abolitionist texts which depicted the city of Bristol's role in the slave trade (Ingrassia 98).² Bristol was home to different aspects of the trade.

Ingrassia points out that there were pubs, business houses, and lodgings that worked with different employees involved in the trade (Ingrassia 102). Even those who were not directly involved with slavery knew or worked with those who were involved with the institution. I assert that Austen's knowledge on the innerworkings of Bristol enabled her to make connections between Mrs. Elton and the slave trade.

Austen applied her knowledge of Bristol to Mrs. Elton's character description. She describes Mrs. Elton as "the youngest of the two daughters of a Bristol – merchant" (127). Ingrassia argues that referring to Mrs. Elton as a daughter of a "merchant" connects Mrs. Elton to her father who likely is a member of Bristol's Society of Merchant Venturers. Ingrassia continues to discuss how the Bristol Society of Merchant Venturers' main goal was to preserve the slave trade (Ingrassia 101). Mrs. Elton's father, though not a slave merchant, is involved in continuing the institution. Due to Mr. Elton's involvement, though limited, Mrs. Elton understands the inner workings of the slave trade.

Mrs. Elton's familial connections to slavery extend past her father's career. According to Ingrassia, Austen was well versed in the historical connotations of names. Austen used this information to provide accuracy to her characters through their names and settings (Ingrassia 102). This information gives further depth to Mrs. Elton's maiden name Hawkins. Hawkins was the first English slave trader under Elizabeth I (Ingrassia 102). Having the first introduction of

² She is known to have read works by Cowper and Clarkson. William Cowper was a poet, which Austen refers to having purchased his works as well as hearing some read. Thomas Clarkson was an abolitionist to whom Austen wrote that she was "much in love" with and admired his work *The History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*.

Mrs. Elton be a description of her character before she was unmarried, Austen is making a direct link between Mrs. Elton and the slave trade. Deforest argues that upon its publication readers of *Emma* would have understood the allusion of Miss Hawkins's name (Deforest). Therefore, the readers would have had a deeper understanding of Mrs. Elton's connection to the slave trade. This serves to illuminate Mrs. Elton's clear knowledge and understanding of slavery and all that it encompasses.

Mrs. Elton's knowledge of the slave trade is not limited to her father because by virtue of being a native of Bristol she is surrounded by every aspect of the trade. Austen further illustrates this by describing "the very heart of Bristol" as Mrs. Elton's home (127). According to Ingrassia, this part of Bristol contained pubs, business houses, and lodgings were associated with the trade in the "heart of Bristol" (Ingrassia 102). I argue that by assigning Mrs. Elton to the center of Bristol, the reader learns what information she was absorbing through her development from girl to woman. Because slavery is at the heart of Bristol's economy it is implausible that Mrs. Elton would have been ignorant of the institution, something that is deepened by her father's connections to Bristol Society of Merchant Venturers. Therefore, the reader can assume that Mrs. Elton has a conscious awareness of slavery and that she makes subconscious connections to the trade due to the environment she was surrounded by during her development.

Austen's understanding of Bristol's involvement in the slave trade therefore informed Mrs. Elton's background in slavery which provides invaluable context to the infamous conversation between Mrs. Elton and Jane Fairfax over her becoming a governess. The literature connecting *Emma* to slavery focuses largely on the conversation between the two women when Jane compares being a governess to, "Offices for sale—not quite of human flesh—but of human intellect" (207). Here the reader sees how quickly Mrs. Elton assumes Jane is referring to, "a

fling at the slave-trade” (207). I assert this conversation illustrates how deeply ingrained slavery is into Mrs. Elton’s mind due to her upbringing in Bristol. Without the information provided by Austen during Miss Hawkins’ family background, Mrs. Elton’s immediate thought of slavery would seem improbable. The reader understands Mrs. Elton to have intimate knowledge of Bristol and its economic connections, due to Austen’s understanding of the city, which provide an understanding of the biases that exist within Mrs. Elton’s mind.

The conversation between language and Mrs. Elton’s associations with slavery supplies the basis for a deeper understanding of Mrs. Elton’s later comments when strawberry picking at Donwell Abbey, an understanding that has escaped previous scholars’ attention and that is central to my argument. The language Mrs. Elton uses to describe picking strawberries is indicative to the imagery of depicting slave labor. Here Mrs. Elton describes her dislike for picking strawberries, “[my] only objection to gathering strawberries the stooping—glaring sun—tired to death—could bear it no longer—must go and sit in the shade” (248). Slaves in the British Empire harvested sugar cane which, much like American slaves who picked cotton, experienced back breaking work. Donald Holley, a historian, describes slaves working in American cotton fields as, “stooped gangs of cotton pickers” (Holley 44).³ Because Mrs. Elton is well versed in the undertones of the language used in the slave trade, her decision to use of the word “stooping” illustrates her association with the labor of picking strawberries to the work that slaves did on plantations throughout the Empire. By using terms that describe slavery Mrs. Elton is drawing parallels between herself and slaves.

³ This description comes in the introduction to depict what image is conjured when cotton labor is mentioned. Holley’s article describes how the cotton industry in the United States, specifically in Arkansas, changed due to the invention of the “mechanical cotton picker.”

The concept that Austen is comparing women to slaves is well discussed in the literature. Ingrassia uses the term “captivity” to describe the similarities between women and slaves. Mrs. Elton can be seen as a “captive” to Mr. Elton because she is, as Ingrassia describes Jane Fairfax, “dependent, subordinate” to her husband (103).⁴ Mrs. Elton’s financial stability is tied to her husband’s fortune when they marry. One of the vows she takes in the marriage service for the Church of England is that a woman is to “obey” her husband.⁵ This directly makes Mrs. Elton the subordinate of Mr. Elton. Even if Mrs. Elton tries to divorce Mr. Elton, Wolfram explains Parliament only grants a woman’s petition for divorces if the husband has committed more than adultery (Wolfram 157).⁶ It would be difficult for her to leave her marriage as she needs proof that her husband was unfaithful and was guilty of other unlawful offenses. Yet she is not merely subordinate and dependent on her husband but is ultimately trapped in her marriage. My argument goes further and shows that Mrs. Elton is effectively more than just a captive of Mr. Elton: she is like a slave subservient to their master.

Mrs. Elton’s representation of a slave continues beyond the strawberry picking scene in her commentary on relocating after marrying Mr. Elton. Slaves were relocated, forcibly, to the country where they were to be enslaved. The British Empire relocated slaves from Africa to colonies across the world including Antigua, which is where Sir Bertram has a plantation. In this

⁴ Ingrassia in her article uses the term to describe how Jane Fairfax is “captive” because of her financial and familial situation which is clear by the diction that Austen uses to describe her.

⁵ As discussed in a class meeting of the course “Jane Austen and Her Readers” with Professor Juliette Wells of Goucher College.

⁶ Parliament granted divorces solely for adultery. However, when a woman was suing her husband for divorce, adultery alone was not sufficient grounds for a divorce.

case, Mrs. Elton is moved from her home at Maple Grove to Mr. Elton's abode in Hartfield. Mrs. Elton describes her relocation as, "one of the evils of matrimony" (188). Mrs. Elton makes the connection between relocation and marriage, a manner of captivity, as she warns Emma that she will experience relocation when she marries. Not only does Mrs. Elton understand her lower standing compared to her husband, but she sees how it is connected to the institution of marriage. Despite Mrs. Elton's understanding of the power dynamics at play, she seeks to impose captivity on others.

While Mrs. Elton remains captive to her husband, she also has power which she asserts over Jane Fairfax. The power that Mrs. Elton holds over Jane is due to her stature as the wife to the town's vicar, which was a higher rank in society to poor unmarried women. Mrs. Elton is insistent that Jane become a governess and that she finds Jane her position. Mrs. Elton tells Jane "I shall write to Mrs. Partridge in a day or two, and shall give her a strict charge to be on the look-out for anything eligible", drawing criticism from Jane (207). By pestering Jane about her entrance into the workforce, Mrs. Elton is continuing the cycle of captivity. Jane is becoming dependent on her employer for her financial support and societal status. These elements of her job as a governess make her, like Mrs. Elton, captive to a man. Governesses were not expected to leave their position and marry like Miss Taylor in *Emma*.⁷ In that way, Jane will become trapped in her job making her a captive to her employer if Mrs. Elton succeeds to place Jane into a position.

⁷ As discussed in a class meeting of the course "Jane Austen and Her Readers" with Professor Juliette Wells of Goucher College.

Mrs. Elton's views on Jane Fairfax's personality clarifies why she considers Jane an ideal person for captivity. Mrs. Elton describes Jane to Emma Woodhouse as, "So mild" (194) and "very timid and silent" (195). Those who are "mild," "timid" and "silent" do not fight the institution or their superiors, thus making them ideal captives. Mrs. Elton is taken by Jane because of her personality because it makes her an ideal candidate for Mrs. Elton to continue the cycle of captivity. In fact, Stevenson asserts the submissive and passive qualities of slaves are prevalent in other depictions of slaves after Austen's works were published (Stevenson 494). By placing Jane in a subordinate position, Mrs. Elton will keep her power over Jane because Jane will remain in a lower-class rank as a governess. The difference in rank between the two women allows Mrs. Elton to continue imposing her power over Jane.

Mrs. Elton by being both a captive to Mr. Elton and a master to Jane, is representative of the position of a slave driver. The National Humanities Center Toolbox Library: Primary Resources in U.S. History & Literature explains that slave drivers were men who oversaw the work of slaves on a plantation. While they were often white men, masters would also promote favored slaves to become drivers ("Driver"). In this case the process of becoming a slave driver is reversed. Mr. Elton expresses his favor of Mrs. Elton by proposing marriage he is showing his preference for her. Their inevitable marriage ultimately makes her his captive. Once married, her increase in status enables her to maintain the cycle of captivity.

After being promoted and translocated to Hartfield after her marriage, Mrs. Elton takes it upon herself to look after Jane's welfare. When talking to Emma, Mrs. Elton says "we must exert ourselves and endeavour to do something for her" (194). In this way, Mrs. Elton is looking after a figurative plantation as she attempts to place Jane into captivity. Putting Jane into captivity continues the cycle of oppression that Mrs. Elton joined upon her marriage. Her consistent

discussion of Jane becoming a governess represents how Mrs. Elton is responsible for continuing captivity, the equivalent to running the plantation. She is checking in with Jane to see how fruitful the search for employment is to see the status of the impending captivity. Mrs. Elton is representative of a slave driver because while she is a captive to Mr. Elton, she exerts power and influence over Jane from her appointed position as Mr. Elton's wife.

Mrs. Elton's comments at Donwell Abbey also clearly depict her role as a slave driver through the labors of slaves. Mrs. Elton, because she is a wife, does not expect herself to be doing work as she has been elevated to a new status despite her captivity. Instead of doing the figurative labor of being a slave, she is written to be doing the physical labor of slaves. Her assimilation into the intermediate role of slave driver, is clear as she finds the labor of gathering strawberries unpleasant, "...[my] only objection to gathering strawberries the stooping—glaring sun—tired to death—could bear it no longer—" (248). Mrs. Elton prefers to insert herself into Jane's life, performing her current role of management instead of physical labor.

After Mrs. Elton complains about the laborious nature of gathering strawberries, she rejoins the party where she again brooches the topic of Jane's search for a governess position (248). By directly conferring with Jane on how she will be becoming a captive, Mrs. Elton is asserting her position as a slave driver because she is monitoring Jane's entrance to captivity. Which reflects how slave drivers were put in charge of the wellbeing of the other slaves on the plantation or as Mrs. Elton describes it to Emma "we must exert ourselves and endeavour to do something for [Jane Fairfax]" (194). Instead of exerting herself to positively guard over Jane, she is continuously pursuing employment for Jane. In this manner, she is figuratively watching over the plantation and the workers.

Jane's polite refusal of help is an example of the mixed reactions that slaves had to their drivers. Slave drivers did not have enough authority to be equal to the overseers – white men who were responsible for the slaves – but they did have authority over their fellow slaves (“Drivers”). The National Humanities Center Toolbox Library: Primary Resources in U.S. History & Literature explains how this unfair appointment to power left the other slaves subject to a variety of feelings about the slave drivers (“Drivers”), which is also true in *Emma*. While Mrs. Elton naturally has more authority over Jane, as she is an unmarried poor woman, they are both captives because of their gender. As women they will continually be dependent on someone for their wellbeing whether that is a husband in the case of Mrs. Elton or an employer like Jane. Therefore, Mrs. Elton's aims to help Jane produce an annoyance on Jane which she expresses to Mrs. Elton repeatedly. Jane sees the authority that Mrs. Elton has over her and resents her efforts and assisting her.

While the arguments that *Emma* sheds light on the captivity of women and their connections to slavery are well known, the literature has not made direct associations between Mrs. Elton and the dual hierarchy of captivity. While a captive, Mrs. Elton has her own authority over another captive, Jane Fairfax. The ambiguous line between captive and master embodied in Mrs. Elton is representative of slave drivers. This association is seen through Mrs. Elton's involvement in Jane's personal life, her lack of willingness to pick strawberries, and the complex nature of Jane's reactions to her meddling. While the novel illustrates a variety of ways Mrs. Elton encapsulates a slave driver, the Donwell Abbey strawberry gathering, in particular, manages to address many of the connections between slave drivers and Mrs. Elton. This is the first time Mrs. Elton's behavior at Donwell Abbey has been discussed in the literature, despite the undertones of slavery.

Although scholars have made many references to slavery in both *Emma* and *Mansfield Park* in the past, *Emma*'s Donwell Abbey scene largely has escaped notice and is a unique argument put forth by this paper. One important reason ~~why~~ the allusions to slavery in the Donwell Abbey scene have not been explored is because most of the literature surrounding Austen emerged from scholars in the United Kingdom where slavery itself never existed and where the conditions of field slavery are not as rooted in British consciousness. However, slavery is ever present in the American consciousness. The education starts young, around the third or fourth grade, with a simplified depiction of slavery. Through students' school careers, their understanding of the institution is deepened and contextualized. Students read novels that openly discuss slavery and others that allude to the ramifications of the institution. They analyze paintings and photographs of slaves hunched over, or "stooping", in the cotton fields which are conjured in Mrs. Elton's descriptions of strawberry picking at Donwell Abbey.

Due to the prevalent allusions to the institution in American life, the American perspective offers vital and particular scope of analysis on Austen's discussion of slavery. Americans have more experience dealing with the topic of slavery and how structural racism exists to this day because of the surface level discord on race relations and how they are a product of slavery, enables Americans to provide a current and contextualized understanding of literature that discusses the institution. The debate on how to heal the wounds of the past is in the forefront of the American mind. Discussions range from reparations, the school to prison pipeline, to police brutality. This is the background which enables me to see the connections between Mrs. Elton and a slave driver.

Certain words and phrases are cemented into my consciousness because of the ongoing racial tensions in this country that have come to the forefront during the Black Lives Matter

movement. The work of Angela Davis, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and more contemporary critics such as Cornel West have shaped the education of race and its connections to structures of power in ways not only the United States but the world. The analysis and perspectives of such influential Americans should be applied to the literature canon, including Jane Austen. Without the deep understanding of slavery, much of the finer allusions and details will go unseen.

Works Cited

Deforest, Mary. "Mrs. Elton and the Slave Trade." *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal*, vol. 9, 1987, p. 11-12, <http://jasna.org/persuasions/printed/number9/deforest.htm?>

"Driver." *National Humanities Center Toolbox Library: Primary Resources in U.S. History & Literature*, March 2007, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/enslavement/text4/text4read.htm>.

Holley, Donald. "The Second Great Emancipation: The Rust Cotton Picker and How It Changed Arkansas." *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, vol. 52, no. 1, 1993, pp. 44–77. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40030834.

Ingrassia, Catherine. "Emma, slavery, and cultures of captivity." *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal*, vol. 38, 2016, p. 95+, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A495938720/ITOF?u=goucher_main&sid=ITOF&xid=b6a4610a.

Perry, Ruth. "Jane Austen and British Imperialism." *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, edited by Lawrence J. Trudeau, vol. 316, Gale, 2016. *Gale Literature Resource Center*,

link.gale.com/apps/doc/H1420120685/GLS?u=goucher_main&sid=GLS&xid=2e4a3f26.
 Accessed 27 Apr. 2021. Originally published in *Monstrous Dreams of Reason*, edited by
 Laura J. Rosenthal and Mita Choudhury, Bucknell UP, 2002, p. 231-254.

Pickrel, Paul. "Emma as Sequel." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 40, 1985, p. 135-153,
<https://doi-org.goucher.idm.oclc.org/10.2307/3044587>.

Stevenson, Brenda E. "Filming Black Voices and Stories: Slavery on America's Screens." *Journal of
 the Civil War Era*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2018, pp. 488–520. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/26483636.

Wolfram, Sybil. "Divorce in England 1700-1857." *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2,
 1985, pp. 155–186. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/764190.

Wright, Carrie. "Mrs. Elton's Pearls: Simulating Superiority in Jane Austen's Emma." *Persuasions On-Line*, vol. 37, 2016, <http://jasna.org/publications-2/persuasions-online/vol37no1/wright/>.

Works Consulted

Downie, J. A. "Who Says She's A Bourgeois Writer? Reconsidering the Social and Political
 Contexts of Jane Austen's Novels." *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 40, 2006, p. 69-84,
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30053492>.

Smith, Peter. "Politics and Religion in Jane Austen's 'Emma.'" *The Cambridge Quarterly*, vol. 26, 1997, p.
 217-241, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42967795>.

Wright, Carrie. "Mrs. Elton's Pearls: Simulating Superiority in Jane Austen's Emma." *Persuasions On-Line*, vol. 37, 2016, <http://jasna.org/publications-2/persuasions-online/vol37no1/wright/>.