

“The Meaner & More Usual &c.”: Everybody in *Emma*

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How many characters are there in Jane Austen’s *Emma* (1815)? On some reckonings, the novel, Austen’s longest and most intricate, could be said to contain a grand total of just one person: the twenty-year-old Surrey heiress, matchmaker, and “imaginist” Emma Woodhouse. The only Austen novel to be named after its protagonist, *Emma* can plausibly be classed as a kind of monodrama, an extraordinarily intensive and sharply focalized study of the social, mental, and emotional life of a self-obsessed young woman whose domineering fullness—she has been dubbed “the most fully characterized Person in all Austen”¹—is to some extent purchased at the expense of everyone else in the novel that bears her name. Other people in *Emma*, as Bharat Tandon has remarked, often seem to function as “counterfactual” versions of Austen’s heroine—that is, as portraits of what she might have been or what she might become—rather than as freestanding, autonomous selves with their own

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¹ D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003), p. 61.

narrative trajectories.² Given the extent to which the heroine pervades and dominates this novel, it is not difficult to feel the persuasive force of Reginald Farrer's contention, in his bracingly opinionated centenary essay on Austen, that "the whole thing *is* Emma."³

From what we can infer, Austen herself harbored a slightly more generous sense of *Emma's* demographic range and inclusivity. In a now-famous letter to her niece, the aspiring novelist Anna Austen, Jane remarks that "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on."⁴ As numerous readers have observed, Anna's aunt might well have been talking about the novel that she was herself writing at the time. Austen's most ambitious but also her most tightly delimited work of fiction, *Emma* is a concentrated study of the interactions and alliances between three respectable families (the Woodhouses, the Westons, and the Knightleys) in one neatly circumscribed location, the Surrey village of Highbury, over the course of twelve months. However, despite what might seem like their pleasingly precise relevance to *Emma*, the words of affectionate professional counsel that Austen shared with her niece should not be uncritically accepted as offering the last word on the geographic and demographic scope of her fiction. It may well be that, when Austen envisages the anthropological parameters of her art, what she sees in her mind's eye is a neatly closed, bordered, self-contained, and transparently knowable social space containing a handful of families—but the truth, in *Emma*, is altogether messier. Its geography, for one thing, is by no means

² See Bharat Tandon, *Jane Austen and the Morality of Conversation* (London: Anthem, 2003), p. 166. *Emma's* cast of "counterfactual" Emmas includes an impoverished spinster (Miss Bates); a sickly waif (Jane Fairfax); the future Mrs. Elton (Augusta Hawkins); and a social nobody (Harriet Smith). Of course, to the extent that it encourages us to see other characters as an array of "alternative" Emmas rather than as substantive selves, *Emma* is formally complicit in the very solipsism to which it purportedly supplies the antidote. As Alex Woloch has observed, for all the surprises and salutary blindsidings that would appear to dethrone its heroine from narrative pride of place, the text nevertheless "consistently works to center Emma" (Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003], p. 358, n. 15).

³ Reginald Farrer, "Jane Austen, ob. July 18, 1817," *Quarterly Review*, 228 (1917), 23; emphasis in original.

⁴ Jane Austen, letter to Anna Austen, 9-18 September 1814, in *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye, 3d ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), p. 274.

confined to Highbury. Extending well beyond the confines of one village, the ramifications of the storyline reach eastward to London, southward to Weymouth, northward to Enscombe in Yorkshire, and westward to Maple Grove, Bath, and Bristol—and indeed across the Irish Sea to Baly-Craig and Dublin.⁵ Nor is the novel's demographic field of vision restricted to three or four families, boasting as it does a cast of dozens of named and unnamed persons whose lives, to the extent that Emma is even aware of them, exceed the limits of her fantasies of knowledge and mastery. Who are these other people?

Beyond Emma's intimate circle of family and close friends (Mr. Woodhouse, the Knightleys, the Westons), we might roughly sort them into: acquaintances and neighbors (the Coxes, the Coles, the Eltons, and others); servants (James, Patty, Mrs. Hodges, and others); named offstage or "absentee" characters with significant roles (Mr. Perry, Mrs. Churchill, Colonel Campbell, and others); named offstage characters with seemingly minor or even trivial roles (Mr. Wingfield in London, the Braithwaites in Yorkshire, the Tupmans in the west country, and others); and unnamed, unidentified, and unindividuated characters (such as the gypsies, the poultry thieves, the pupils at Mrs. Bragge's school, and others). As we approach the fringes of *Emma's* dramatized and narrated world, we encounter some figures at the very outer reaches of characterhood. Does the "shepherd's son" who is reported by Harriet Smith as having sung to her in the Martins' parlor count as a character?⁶ What about the "family of old friends" and the "carriage of cousins" (*Emma*, pp. 345, 346) who unexpectedly swell the

⁵ In *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900* (London: Verso, 1998), Franco Moretti sketches the cartography of what he calls "Austen's middle-sized world" (p. 22), in which significant places (say, Longbourn and Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice* [1813] or Portsmouth and Mansfield Park in *Mansfield Park* [1814]) are neither cheek-by-jowl nor separated by vast distances—they are, rather, within a few days' travel of one another, and the journey between them inscribes a new map of nationwide interrelations in the early-nineteenth-century English imagination. See also Douglas Murray, "Mobility in England, 1816: Austen's *Emma* and Repton's 'View from My Own Cottage,'" in *Jane Austen's Geographies*, ed. Robert Clark (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 237-50.

⁶ Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. Richard Cronin and Dorothy McMillan (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013), p. 27. Further references are to this edition and appear parenthetically in the text.

ranks at the ball at the Crown Inn without ever coming into focus as named individuals? An influx of supererogatory personnel beyond the strict requirements of the social occasion and indeed the apparent narrative needs of the text, these friends and cousins seem to embody a certain principle of demographic excess in *Emma*, a tendency for the novel's *dramatis personae* to expand beyond what is formally itemizable or countable.⁷

Whenever it glimpses this wider community of secondary and tertiary characters on the fringes of its heroine's social world, *Emma* runs up against what we can call the census-taker's dilemma: when we attempt to gauge who is meaningfully present—that is to say, who *counts*—in a certain community or a certain literary text, how do we know when to stop counting? It is a dilemma that Austen is capable of negotiating with a certain brutal offhandedness in her own social experience, as when she reports back to Cassandra on those who were in attendance at a pleasant if underwhelming ball at Deane House: “The Portsmouths, Dorchesters, Boltons, Portals & Clerks were there, & all the meaner & more usual &c. and &c's.”⁸ Sprinkled throughout *Emma* are comparably truncated roll-calls, often comprising the names of a trio of secondary characters whom we may take to be representative of the social circles in which Emma moves: “Mrs. and Miss Bates and Mrs. Goddard” (*Emma*, p. 19); “Miss Nash, and Miss Prince, and Miss Richardson” (p. 28); “Mrs. Bates, Mrs. Perry, Mrs. Goddard” (p. 313); “the Mrs. Eltons, the Mrs. Perrys, and the Mrs. Coles” (p. 425); “Mrs. Cole, Mrs. Perry, and Mrs. Elton” (p. 511). To be *named* in this kind of gossip narrative discourse is no doubt a welcome sign of social recognition, and surely preferable to languishing in collective anonymity with the “others”; to be *listed* alongside other names is perhaps less desirable, since one's status and

⁷ According to Alastair Duckworth, the presence in Austen of “characters who exist only as references in another character's speech or thoughts” is the author's way of exploring the limitations of individual perception and the unknowability of others (Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971], p. 160).

⁸ Jane Austen, letter to Cassandra Austen, 1 November 1800, in *Jane Austen's Letters*, p. 53.

significance in such a list comes to depend on the company one keeps; to be *pluralized*, as the Mrs. Eltons, Mrs. Perrys, and Mrs. Coles are, is to suffer the indignity of being individuated and de-individuated in the same breath. It would obviously be unthinkable for *Emma's* singular heroine ever to have that pluralizing -s appended to her name, but a host of this novel's secondary characters are only ever a whisker away from casual assimilation to the ranks of "the meaner & more usual &c. and &c's."

To consider the presence of these marginal, uncountable others in *Emma* is to revive a long-standing controversy about the social range of Austen's fiction, a body of work that has been described by some influential readers as inexcusably narrow and exclusive. David Aers puts it pointedly when he describes Austen as a writer who "waves a magic wand and the mass of the population vanishes into thin air."⁹ To be sure, the lived experiences of servants, tradesmen, farm workers, and the rural poor are scarcely visible in Austen, but the aesthetic vanishing-act or cover-up that her writings perform is by no means as supernaturally clean as Aers seems to suggest.

Despite the masterful gestures of exclusion that constitute the narrative space of a text such as *Emma*, this novel is, I want to suggest, subliminally discomfited by everything it leaves out, distractedly attuned to the absent-presence of a community beyond its immediate limits, the "&c's" who hover on the fringes of Highbury respectability and indeed on the very outskirts of narratability. The novel's collective nickname for this off-center community-of-the-unnarrated—and it is a term that appears approximately one hundred times in the text—is *everybody*.¹⁰ References to what "everybody"—or, as it frequently

⁹ David Aers, "Community and Morality: Towards Reading Jane Austen," in David Aers, Jonathan Cook, and David Punter, *Romanticism and Ideology: Studies in English Writing 1765-1830* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 128. Other notable critiques of Austen's social exclusiveness include Arnold Kettle, *An Introduction to the English Novel, Volume 1: To George Eliot*, 2d ed. (London: Hutchinson Univ. Library, 1967), pp. 86-98; and Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), pp. 18-24.

¹⁰ "Everybody" appears some seventy times in *Mansfield Park*, fewer than forty times in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and fewer than thirty times in *Northanger Abbey* (1817) and *Persuasion* (1817).

appears in Austen's text, "every body"—is doing, thinking, feeling, and saying (or what they are *thought* to be doing, thinking, feeling, and saying) pervade *Emma* from beginning to end.¹¹ From the opening chapter, where Emma is pleased to report that "Every body was punctual, every body in their best looks" at the wedding of Mr. Weston and Miss Taylor (*Emma*, p. 9), to the very end, when Emma is ashamed that she ever believed that she was "in the secret of everybody's feelings" and able "to arrange everybody's destiny" (p. 449), this novel, for all its seeming fixation on the person of Emma Woodhouse, is, in a curiously displaced way, the story of *everybody*.

The discussion that follows is an attempt to trace the presence and gauge the significance of *everybody* in *Emma*. Who is everybody in this novel? How is everybodyness constituted in Austen's narrative discourse? Who belongs—and who does not belong—to this collective entity? What are its functions, powers, and limitations? Does it have a location, a center, or a headquarters? Is it endowed with characterological interiority or anything resembling a consistent narrative role? Does it have individual representatives—spokesmen or spokeswomen? Does everybody have a body—or bodies? In broaching these questions, I read *Emma* as an affectionately forgiving case-study of narcissism in which the figure of "everybody" adumbrates a different kind of selfhood, or perhaps an alternative to conventional models of selfhood—a distributed subjectivity, one that is spread and shared across people, discourses, spaces, bodies, and institutions; one that is variously apprehended as public opinion or as a ubiquitous collective gaze or as a shared repertoire of constantly updated gossip-narratives, without ever being quite reducible to any one of these phenomena. Frequently denigrated by Highbury's more privileged residents as an otherness that is characterized by mediocrity,

¹¹ The split of "everybody" into "every body" is an instructive one, provoking as it does a mildly uncomfortable lexical "double take" for modern readers accustomed to the seamlessness of "everybody." Commenting on the use of these terms in Austen's letters, Freya Johnston observes: "'Every Body' stresses single members of a group, and therefore that any collective is made up of many particular bodies potentially at variance with one another, eluding or striving for attention; 'everybody' treats that group itself as an indivisible single entity" (Johnston, "Jane Austen's Universals," *Essays in Criticism*, 68 [2018], 213).

homogeneity, repetitiveness, and neediness, “everybody” is a collective selfhood that spills beyond the spatial, aesthetic, and ideological structures that aim to make it a knowable quantity or a containable abstraction—never more so than when it is glimpsed out of the corner of the text’s eye as a faintly disgusting and obscurely threatening assemblage of hungry, disease-prone, and recalcitrantly unclosed mouths. To focus on *Emma* in this way, as a novel haunted and vexed by an uncontainable “everybodiness,” is to canvass for a skeptical view of Austen’s trusty—and trusted—model of “3 or 4 families in a Country Village.” I want to contend that Austen’s charmingly self-deprecating remarks to her niece are a self-protective *fantasy*, one generated by an author who, for all her ambitions to the contrary, cannot *not* write about everybody.



Who, then, is “everybody” in *Emma*? In its most restricted sense, “everybody” denotes all those who are acknowledged to be formally or officially present in a given social situation. When the Westons and their guests are snowed in on Christmas Eve at Randalls, for example, their genially unflappable host is confident that “accommodation might be found for every body” (*Emma*, p. 137). In a broader and more abstract sense, meanwhile, “everybody” can refer to the taste and judgment of civilized, rational human beings in general, as when the narrator opines that “a likeness pleases every body” (p. 46) or when Knightley insists to Emma that “respect for right conduct is felt by every body” (pp. 158-59). The first thing we need to observe about the word “everybody,” whether it is being used in a restricted or a more open sense, is that it functions as an exclusive gesture of inclusivity. Weston’s expansively hospitable words obviously do not translate into an open house to any passers-by who might have been inconvenienced by the weather, while the “everybody” that is invoked by Knightley is rhetorically meaningful precisely to the extent that it leaves room for contrarian outsiders—those who, for whatever reason, place themselves beyond the pale of his suavely inclusive truth-claims.

Whether it is deployed by Austen's narrator or by her characters, then, "everybody" is a seemingly innocuous but decidedly slippery term, one that flickers constantly between specificity ("everybody here present"), generality ("civilized opinion") and universality ("humanity as a whole"). "Everybody" is a term that ripples out to include those not in immediate earshot—a wider circle of family, friends, acquaintances, and neighbors in a given locality, say—or contracts back to designate a certain in-group whose membership need not be explicitly specified. "Everybody" can denote an inclusive *us* but also a dismissive *them* in the same breath. When Emma reflects that "they say every body is in love once in their lives" (*Emma*, p. 285), the voice of the "they" seems to speak with all the authority of timeless aphoristic wisdom and all the dubiety of popular neighborhood say-so, and the "everybody" to whom it refers is comparably ambiguous—does Emma, in this context, mean "everybody" in the sense of everybody *else*?

Stubbornly unresolved in *Emma* is the question of whether "everybodiness" is a privilege to which one might aspire or a bland ordinariness from which one might recoil. On the one hand, the novel is the story of the ways in which the "everybody" that is a new Highbury social circle—comprising old friends, upwardly mobile neighbors, and variously glamorous or objectionable new arrivals—is constituted and consolidated around Austen's heroine just as she "comes out." In this context, the question of who does and who does not get invited to walks, dinners, parties, balls, excursions, and other exclusive events assumes something like world-historical importance in the small universe of Highbury. On the other hand, for this community to live up to its own sense of specialness, there must always be a rump of uninvited *personae non gratae* who miss out on the exclusive fun enjoyed by Highbury's in-crowd. Not everybody can belong to this particular "everybody"—but, then again, not everybody wants to. In the dismissive sense of *everybody else* or *everybody but me*, "everybody" can designate not the novel's social elite but rather "the second rate and third rate of Highbury" (p. 165) about whom Austen's heroine is so memorably sniffy.

Emma's persistent emphasis on the complex dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in a densely populated social world represents a notable change of direction for Austen. The thronging presence of "everybody" in this novel may come as something of a surprise for Austen's readers after the curiously depopulated social backdrop of its predecessor, *Mansfield Park*—a text that rivals *Emma* for substance and gravitas but has none of its demographic density. "The neighborhood that did not exist in *Mansfield Park*," says Claudia L. Johnson, "is everywhere in *Emma*."¹² But what does it mean for a neighborhood to be everywhere? The Highbury neighborhood, in *Emma*, is by Austen's standards a richly and concretely imagined social environment, with a post office, an inn, a shop, a bakery, a school, a vicarage, a church, and a network of roads and lanes; it has outlying areas of farmland, pasture, and woodland; several eminent households (including Hartfield and Randalls); and one grand dwelling (Donwell Abbey)—spaces in which people live, work, socialize, transact business, and bump into one another.¹³ But the "everywhereness" of Highbury also takes less concrete forms. The neighborhood in *Emma* has a pervasive virtual existence as a cognitive ecosystem in which knowledge, opinion, and interpretation are constantly generated, shared, circulated, revised, tested, refined, and restated through the unofficial channels of informal conversation, personal letters, and village-wide rumor. "Everybody" does not take center stage in *Emma* but is rather continually overheard as a steady background hum of

¹² Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 130.

¹³ See Janine Barchas, "Setting and Community," in *The Cambridge Companion to "Emma"*, ed. Peter Sabor (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015), pp. 120-34, for an informative discussion of the wealth of geographical detail in the novel (some of which mischievously tempts us to scour maps in a bid to discover "real-world" counterparts to its fictive cartography). For a useful general overview of social environments in Austen, see D. W. Harding, "The Social Habitat in Jane Austen: Distant and Nearer Contexts," in his *Regulated Hatred and Other Essays on Jane Austen*, ed. Monica Lawlor (London: Athlone Press, 1998), pp. 48-68. See also William Deresiewicz, "Community and Cognition in *Pride and Prejudice*," *ELH*, 64 (1997), 503-35. Deresiewicz contends that *Pride and Prejudice* is "Austen's most deliberate and sustained critique of community" ("Community and Cognition," p. 504), but his insights on the way individual judgments are conditioned in that novel by the norms and expectations of a densely interconnected local community resonate strongly with *Emma*.

neighborhood chatter and consensus-building. “Oh, Mrs. Churchill,” says Emma’s sister Isabella; “every body knows Mrs. Churchill” (*Emma*, p. 131). Isabella speaks for everybody, and “everybody” automatically seconds what she has to say—or, rather, what in the event she does not *need* to say—about Frank Churchill’s notoriously difficult guardian. Thanks to the prefabricated unanimity of “everybody,” what might seem like waspish personal opinion on Isabella’s part thus achieves a kind of safety in numbers, since one cannot dissent from her verdict on Mrs. Churchill without opting out of the comfort zone of “everybodiness.”

Isabella’s conspiratorially eye-rolling allusion to Mrs. Churchill is just one example of an ongoing story of *Emma*, which is that of how individuals and groups negotiate their relationship to an everybodiness that validates opinion, supervises behavior, enforces social norms, and regulates what is sayable in a given social sphere.¹⁴ “Everybody” also functions frequently as a proxy via which delicate emotions and risky opinions might be cautiously aired in public. The uncontroversial blandness of neighborhood consensus is something in which one might take refuge, or to which one might diplomatically or backhandedly attribute opinions one does not hold, as when Emma greets news of Mr. Elton’s betrothal to Miss Hawkins by coolly remarking that the Highbury vicar “will have everybody’s wishes for his happiness” (*Emma*, p. 186)—where the question of whether Emma belongs to the “everybody” whom she invokes is left hanging in the air, wickedly and unanswerably. Likewise, when Jane is cross-examined by Emma about Frank Churchill, she guardedly reports that “every body found his manners pleasing” (p. 181). “Everybody,” in this last context, is hardly an exclusive club, but it is a community where the noncommittal and the circumstantially tongue-tied will find grateful refuge.

Not all the invocations of “everybody” in *Emma* are quite so artfully reticent. Consider, in this regard, Harriet Smith’s

¹⁴ Cf. Henry Tilney’s notorious description of a typical English community as “a neighbourhood of voluntary spies” (Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. Barbara M. Benedict and Deirdre Le Faye [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006], p. 203).

animated appreciation of Mr. Elton: “a man that every body looks up to, quite like Mr. Knightley! His company so sought after, that every body says he need not eat a single meal by himself if he does not chuse it” (*Emma*, p. 80). In this rhapsodic appraisal of Highbury’s vicar, Harriet lets “everybody” do the speaking, the seeing—and the desiring. Harriet’s feelings for Elton are passed through a filter of respectable public opinion that seemingly purges them of any trace of impropriety and grants her permission to speak excitedly about a male object of desire—indeed, about *two* male objects of desire, since she smuggles into her words of praise for Elton a notably thrilled cross-reference to Mr. Knightley. In the same utterance, “everybody” is thus understood as a gaze of social humility (everybody looks up with meek appreciativeness to Elton and Knightley), the voice of the neighborhood’s regulatory superego (everybody provides collective confirmation of Elton and Knightley’s respectability), and a breathless outlet for Harriet’s unconscious desires (that exclamatory “Knightley!” is a tell-tale tremor of the feelings that will be—or perhaps already have been?—prompted in her by Highbury’s most distinguished bachelor).

Harriet’s description of Elton as “a man that every body looks up to” is notable for its emphasis on “everybody” as a collective gaze, a kind of abject panopticon in which Highbury’s luminaries are surveilled not from the heights of a disciplinary watchtower but from a vantage point of easily overawed humility. This collective gaze in *Emma* is apprehended as a mirror in which villagers catch variously pleasurable, reassuring, and unsettling glimpses of their social identity. “Everybody’s eyes are so much upon me” (p. 350), says Mrs. Elton, with a shiver of narcissistic self-regard, during the ball at the Crown Inn. Emma herself is more or less openly conscious of her status as the object of the appraising gaze of public opinion, and, for all her proud contrarianism, her relationship with Highbury at large is characterized by a vexatious sense of superiority-as-dependence: she looks down on everybody, but only to reassure herself that they are looking up at her. When the narrator reports of the Woodhouses that “all looked up to them” (p. 5), for example, we can take it that the text is channeling Emma’s complacent self-importance, even if this reference to the imagined gaze of the other discloses

the extent to which our heroine's feelings of power and privilege depend upon a steady flow of deferential esteem from Highbury to Hartfield.¹⁵

Emma experiences her relationship with "everybody" as an ongoing game of epistemological one-upmanship—she likes to think she can see what everybody sees and know what everybody knows, and she is usually confident that she can outperceive, outthink, and outknow everybody else. Typical of her imagined access to what "everybody" knows or thinks is her confident supposition that her relationship with Frank Churchill will be the talk of the town: "She could not but suppose it to be a match that every body who knew them must think of" (*Emma*, p. 128). A preening sense of novelist-like omniscience is fed in Austen's heroine by her sweeping assumptions about how she is perceived and misperceived by "everybody." Dining at the Coles', for example, Emma is once again convinced that she can divine "what every body present must be thinking. She was his [Frank's] object, and every body must perceive it" (p. 238). Here "everybody" is summoned to corroborate Emma's self-flattering thoughts about Frank Churchill's imagined designs on her, even if such flattery involves Austen's heroine in a curious kind of secondhand self-objectification. And yet those aggressively confident thoughts—with their emphasis on what everyone *must* be thinking and *must* be perceiving—betray an undercurrent of self-doubt in their insistence that Emma occupy a starring role in the fantasy worlds of other people.

Austen's heroine likes to assuage such doubts by measuring her own cognitive strengths and freedoms against the imagined limitations of an "everybody" that is dimwittedly enslaved to the self-evident and the already known. Being right—or, rather, proving "everybody" wrong—is a narcissistic hobby in which Emma seeks continued proof of her own singularity. Exulting in the role she imagines she played brokering the marriage of Mr. Weston and Miss Taylor, Emma cries: "Every body said that Mr. Weston would never marry again. Oh dear,

¹⁵ George Butte, in his *I Know That You Know That I Know: Narrating Subjects from "Moll Flanders" to "Marnie"* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2004), pp. 113-21, provides a perceptive analysis of intersubjectivity and the dynamics of "misimagination" (p. 119) in *Emma*.

no!" (*Emma*, p. 10). The flipside of this jubilant one-upmanship is Emma's ever-present anxiety that her grand conjectures about likely pairings-off in Highbury might struggle to outsoar the banal gossip that circulates among "everybody." The possibility of a romantic attachment between Elton and Harriet, for example, is felt by Austen's heroine to be so likely that "she feared it was what every body else must think of and predict" (pp. 34-35).

One reason Emma cannot initially bring herself to like Jane Fairfax is because Jane's likability, and her potential friendship with Emma, have been predecided by others: "she was made such a fuss with by every body! . . . every body had supposed they must be so fond of each other" (*Emma*, p. 178). "Everybody" is thus imagined by Austen's heroine as a formidable rival imaginist whose speculative narratives will map out oppressively predictable narrative futures for Emma herself. Her vivid animosity toward "everybody" might therefore be chalked up to a certain narcissism of minor differences, an uncomfortable inkling that Emma objects to "everybody" precisely to the extent that "everybody" shares her own appetite for gossip and matchmaking.

Gossip in *Emma* is the vernacular in which "everybody" talks to itself. More than any other Austen novel, *Emma* asks us to listen to this popular discourse and appreciate how, via the near-constant spread of unofficial news, rumor, and speculation through a given social space, a community gossips itself into existence. What Isobel Grundy nicely terms the "general wordiness" of Highbury denotes not only the irrepressible talkativeness of the place but also its status as a community that is constructed in and sustained by a constant round-robin of informal conversation between a network of garrulous neighbors.¹⁶ Austen's relationship with the

¹⁶ Isobel Grundy, "Why Do They Talk So Much? How Can We Stand It? John Thorpe and Miss Bates," in *The Talk in Jane Austen*, ed. Bruce Stovel and Lynn Weinlos Gregg (Edmonton: Univ. of Alberta Press, 2002), p. 49. For a broader discussion of conversation as it is both privileged and problematized in *Emma*, see Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), pp. 201-38. Identifying a "centrifugal" dynamic in the text's linguistic world ("The further from home one gets in *Emma*, the more conversation proliferates and degenerates into a kind of Babel" [*Conversable Worlds*, p. 235]), Mee

discourse of neighborhood gossip is never less than ambivalent and shifting, sometimes critical and aloof, sometimes affectionate and shamelessly immersive.¹⁷ Such marked ambivalence is symptomatic of the intense rivalry in Austen's writings between gossip and novelistic discourse as forms of communal storytelling and self-understanding. No reader of Austen's letters can doubt her voracious appetite for what she calls the "important nothings" of gossip,¹⁸ but no reader of her fiction can doubt her awareness of the besetting problems, flaws, and limitations of unregulated chatter. Gossip is protonovelistic in its conversion of contingent events into shareable narrative and its emphasis on the minor ethical quandaries of everyday life, but antinovelistic in its capacity for cruelty, inaccuracy, and partiality, its promiscuous garrulousness, its myopic fixation on newsworthiness as the sole criterion of narratability, and its indifference to the deep, or even the nonrecent, past. An ephemeral archive whose contents are updated so frequently that it lives in a kind of breathless permanent now of ongoing revelations, gossip allows news to spread quickly, is difficult to censor or regulate, and has standards of quality control that are somewhere between casual and nonexistent. Warily remarking that the story of Harriet's run-in with the gypsies "was the very event to engage those who talk most, the young and the low"

argues that *Emma's* fantasy of an idealized discursive community centered on Hartfield is compromised from the outset by the inhibiting presence of the heroine's father.

¹⁷ In "'The Tittle-Tattle of Highbury': Gossip and the Free Indirect Style in *Emma*," *Representations*, 31 (1990), 1-18, Casey Finch and Peter Bowen argue that the novel's narrator "sides not with the individual but with the vague chorus of gossip that permeates the community" (p. 4). See also Frances Ferguson, "Jane Austen, *Emma*, and the Impact of Form," *MLQ*, 61 (2000), 157-80, for analysis of a narrator who merges seamlessly into anonymous communal narratives in which individuals are known and judged. In *Gossip* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 165-70, Patricia Meyer Spacks treats gossip in Austen as a valuable discourse of the quotidian, an alternative to official high-mindedly serious patriarchal narratives. For the subversive possibilities of informal chatter in Austen, see Jan B. Gordon, *Gossip and Subversion in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction: Echo's Economies* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996). Gossip in Austen, Gordon argues, often emerges as an "attempt of the socially disenfranchised [e.g., Miss Bates in *Emma* or Mrs. Smith in *Persuasion*] to participate vicariously in a life of comfort and leisure" (*Gossip and Subversion*, p. 67).

¹⁸ Jane Austen, letter to Cassandra Austen, 15-17 June 1808, in *Jane Austen's Letters*, p. 125.

(*Emma*, p. 363), *Emma*'s narrator classes gossip as conversational narrative that has been outsourced to peripheral and socially inferior talkers, the verbal quantity of whose narratives is inversely correlated to its intellectual quality.

Like her creator, Emma is at pains to distance herself from gossip, which she regards as a discourse that is the *lingua franca* of the slow on the uptake and the poorly informed. When she makes scornful reference to "the tittle-tattle of Highbury" and vents her impatience with the "Highbury gossips!—Tiresome wretches!" (*Emma*, pp. 58, 62), Austen's heroine seems to discount the possibility that she is an active participant—and an enthusiastic and influential one—in the wider speech community's ongoing practices of informal self-narration. Nowhere is our heroine's disavowal of her own predilection for gossip more evident than in a memorable exchange between Emma and Knightley, two speakers who habitually pour scorn on neighborhood tittle-tattle but reserve the right to engage in their own upmarket version of the same activity. The exchange in question is a disagreement about Frank Churchill that turns on what kind of relationship this Highbury newcomer will enjoy with the world at large—that is, with "everybody." Emma talks up Frank as someone who will "adapt his conversation to the taste of every body" (*Emma*, p. 161); Knightley, in contrast, fulminates unguardedly at the thought of a debonair shape-shifter cutting an effortlessly ingratiating figure in Highbury society, "the king of his company—the great man—the practised politician, who is to read every body's character, and make every body's talents conduce to the display of his own superiority" (pp. 161-62).

To be sure, this is a serious and thoughtful difference of opinion between two of Highbury's most articulate residents. But it is also gossip. For all Emma's spirited playfulness and Knightley's Johnsonian gravitas, we must accept that they are engaging in a sophisticated brand of small talk, one in which a community's limits are policed, its hierarchies are enforced, and its potential new members are vetted.¹⁹ And it is small

¹⁹ Cf. D. A. Miller on the functions of communal narrative in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72): "Characters who are felt to threaten the ideology of social routine enter immediately into the network of chatter and gossipy observation that promotes their eccentricities to a state of story-worthiness" (Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents*:

talk that tells as much about the speakers as it does about its ostensible subject. Knightley's version of Frank's likely career in Highbury is by no means implausible. One can readily imagine a drama of misrecognition in which a naive and easily impressed village community will catch flattering glimpses of itself in the polished, multifaceted mirror of Frank's brilliantly superficial social identity. But this is not the only moment of misrecognition in this episode. Frank-and-everybody are all already functioning jointly in Knightley's discourse as a different kind of mirror, one in which Knightley beholds *himself*, with more than a little wounded *amour-propre*, as the rightful "great man" of his neighborhood, the uncrowned king of Highbury.



It is always convenient, for those who profess to scorn informal chatter, to be able to cast someone (ideally a person of lower social status) as an egregious personification of gossip—a vessel into which this unruly communal discourse can be poured, labeled, and isolated. Miss Bates, the genial, impoverished, relentlessly talkative spinster, plays this scapegoat role in *Emma* with a kind of desperate wholeheartedness.²⁰ One of the hallmarks of Miss Bates's social identity is her thriving relationship with everybody: "She loved every body, was interested in every body's happiness, quick-sighted to every body's merits The simplicity and cheerfulness of her nature, her contented and grateful spirit, were a recommendation to every body" (*Emma*, p. 20). No one appears to be on better terms with "everybody" than Miss Bates, even if it is hard not to suspect that this affectionate sketch of Highbury's arch-gossip is a displaced self-portrait, laced with the self-comforting terms in which Miss Bates would like to perceive her own position in the community.

Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981], p. 113).

²⁰ Commenting on the doubly pejorative notion of gossip as the preserve of the *unmarried* woman, Gordon argues that the woman in Austen who "fails" in the marriage market is destined to become "the impecunious old maid charged with the community's verbal re-presentations rather than its genealogical reproduction" (*Gossip and Subversion*, p. 62).

Of course, it is not long before Emma punctures the notion that Miss Bates enjoys anything like a universally positive local reputation by denouncing her as “so silly—so satisfied—so smiling—so prosing—so undistinguishing and unfastidious—and so apt to tell every thing relative to every body about me” (p. 91). The contradiction between the narrator’s warm words about Miss Bates and Emma’s heartlessly dismissive ones points to a contradiction in Miss Bates’s social positioning. Highbury and Miss Bates enjoy a curiously paradoxical relationship in which she is both essence and parasite, the very heart and soul of the community and a tolerated but dispensable eccentric on its fringes. Miss Bates is the voice and in some ways the personification of Highbury everybodyness at its most open, amiable, good-natured, and ingenuously inclusive, even if her membership in “everybody” is one that she clings to by her fingernails.²¹ Perhaps for this very reason the gossipy discourse in which she articulates her relationship with “everybody” is notable for the sharp tension between its submissively ingratiating *content* (nonstop expressions of abject gratitude for permission to belong) and its rebarbative *form* (an almost aggressive loquacity that floods the discursive space of others). When the narrator remarks that “every body’s words, were soon lost under the incessant flow of Miss Bates” (*Emma*, p. 348), the delicate and difficult accommodations between Miss Bates and the “everybody” whom she effortlessly outtalks come into unforgiving focus. On the one hand, Miss Bates might be said to encompass the totality of “everybody” in the neighborhood in her capacity as Highbury’s unofficial spokeswoman-cum-town crier; on the other, she is at best marginal to polite society in the village, and is obliged to talk her way into recognition in a community that needs nothing from her—except, perhaps, the flattering tribute of her neediness itself.

²¹ Austen’s readers have looked more kindly on Miss Bates than Emma ever does. Julia Prewitt Brown describes her as “perhaps the nearest symbol of Highbury” (Brown, *Jane Austen’s Novels: Social Change and Literary Form* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979], p. 112); while June Sturrock regards her as the “voice” of Highbury (Sturrock, *Jane Austen’s Families* [London: Anthem Press, 2013], pp. 97–98). A notable exception is Miller, who describes the “boring, supererogatory prattle” of Miss Bates as a shapeless travesty of the immaculately stylized discourse of her creator (*Narrative and Its Discontents*, p. 41).

A curious economy seems to govern the relationship between Miss Bates and the “everybody” to whom she (almost) belongs. Her career as a gossip might be seen as an ongoing attempt to repay in seemingly worthless chatter the crippling debt of gratitude that she believes she owes genteel Highbury for the permission it has granted her to live on its fringes. Often she attempts to discharge this debt by engaging in a kind of breathless public-relations offensive on behalf of her village community in which all items of news, however trivial or ephemeral, must redound to the glory of the neighborhood. Typical in this regard is an encomium for Mr. Elton that balloons into an adoring group-portrait of Highbury:

“He is the very best young man—But, my dear Jane, if you remember, I told you yesterday he was precisely the height of Mr. Perry. Miss Hawkins,—I dare say, an excellent young woman. His extreme attention to my mother—wanting her to sit in the vicarage-pew, that she might hear the better, for my mother is a little deaf, you know—it is not much, but she does not hear quite quick. Jane says that Colonel Campbell is a little deaf. He fancied bathing might be good for it—the warm bath—but she says it did him no lasting benefit. Colonel Campbell, you know, is quite our angel. And Mr. Dixon seems a very charming young man, quite worthy of him. It is such a happiness when good people get together—and they always do. Now, here will be Mr. Elton and Miss Hawkins; and there are the Coles, such very good people; and the Perrys—I suppose there never was a happier or a better couple than Mr. and Mrs. Perry. I say, sir,” turning to Mr. Woodhouse, “I think there are few places with such society as Highbury. I always say, we are quite blessed in our neighbours.” (*Emma*, pp. 187-88)

Gossip, as blurted out by Miss Bates, is a frustratingly rambling, inconsequential, and ingenuous affair, groaning with redundancy and repetition (Jane has now learned on two consecutive days that Elton and Perry are the same height), banal hyperbole, tedious detours, mystifying non sequiturs, and simpering name-dropping, as though Miss Bates fears that this community would vanish into thin air if the names of its prominent members—Jane, Perry, Hawkins, Cole, Elton, Dixon, Campbell—were not

ritually intoned. However, this intuition—that the everybody of Highbury is in some sense an effect of the narratives in which it is invoked—is by no means wildly off the mark. Miss Bates’s permanent tizzy of euphoric neighborliness may well be an ordeal for her more refined listeners, but without such unabating chatter permeating Highbury, then perhaps there would be no “Highbury” to speak of in the first place.

A character who never stops talking but who—seemingly—has nothing to say is always going to be conspicuously reliant on repetition as a mechanism for prolonging narrative beyond its natural lifespan. One occupational hazard, for any member of Highbury’s elite, is exposure to the “eternal” talk of Mrs. Bates or the “ceaseless repetitions” of Harriet Smith (*Emma*, pp. 178, 197)—that is, to discourse of interminable mediocrity in which a drearily homogeneous “everybody” talks itself into existence through sheer force of repetition. When John Knightley attends Christmas dinner at Randalls, it is with undisguised dread at the prospect of there being “nothing to say or to hear that was not said and heard yesterday, and may not be said and heard again to-morrow” (p. 122).

Highbury is a place that cannot stop talking, and it seems to tell the same story of itself over and over again. Yet, for all that it grates on Highbury’s more fastidious residents, the compulsive but empty repetitious talkativeness of Miss Bates, Harriet Smith, and others is more than parasitic small talk; rather, it plays a crucial role in providing a discursive life for “everybody” in this novel. The repetition in which they specialize is thus both redundant and indispensable, a needless excess that is in some sense the very grammar of communal experience—and a seemingly conservative grammar at that, one in which, whatever new *parole* might divert or dazzle the villagers with the promise of an influx of revitalizing novelty, the deep *langue* of existing social structures must always remain the same. Rightly emphasizing the centrality of feelings of ennui, boredom, and entrapment in the world of *Emma*, Tony Tanner declares that “as-ever-ness is the condition to which such a society aspires.”²² In such a context, the repetitive gossip of “everybody” performs a kind of

²² Tony Tanner, *Jane Austen* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986), p. 191.

alchemy-in-reverse, converting that which is rich and strange into the comforting quotidian dross of everyday life. But to regard “everybody” in this way, as Highbury’s dreary purveyors of soporific repetition, is to tell only half the story.

It needs only a modest adjustment of perspective to sense that the voice of “everybody” in *Emma* is routinely disparaged not because of its insistent tediousness or lackluster homogeneity but because it reverberates with political possibilities that might trouble the time-honored hierarchies of such a community. “Everybody” in *Emma* is at its most politically disquieting when glimpsed not as a rhetorical abstraction or a set of narrative behaviors but rather as a body—and, specifically, as a *mouth*. Consider, in this regard, Emma’s notably visceral reaction to chatter about Mr. Elton’s marriage: “‘Mr. Elton and his bride’ was in every body’s mouth . . . Emma grew sick at the sound” (*Emma*, p. 287). The disgusting proximity of “every body’s mouth” makes Emma ill-at-ease not simply because of her particular aversion to Mrs. Elton but because “every body’s mouth,” the mouth of the other, in which discourse has been tasted and shared and chewed over, is an opening onto a social world that she cannot curate or control. When “Mrs. Elton’s praise [is] passed from one mouth to another” (p. 303), meanwhile, it is as though the “mouths” of Highbury somehow operate independently of their owners, uncritically repeating and amplifying vacantly platitudinous discourse as if it were precious wisdom. The personification of open mouths and ungoverned tongues in *Emma* is of course the relentlessly talkative Miss Bates, a talker who “never holds her tongue” (p. 209) and who speaks with self-deprecating confidence of her capacity “to say three dull things as soon as ever [she] open[s her] mouth” (p. 403). The episode on Box Hill, when Emma imperiously silences Miss Bates, is so jarringly memorable because Austen’s heroine, in a stinging and inexcusable moment of social cruelty, thoughtlessly abuses the many advantages she has over a vulnerable and harmless woman—not least her superior gifts of verbal wit. It is customary for *Emma*’s readers to be shocked at a moment in which the brilliant wit of Austenian discourse operates in a way that is so cold-bloodedly divorced from its characteristic kindness. But perhaps Emma’s real

transgression here is that she has said the unsayable by vocalizing all too aggressively what seems to be a pervasive fantasy of the novel—the fantasy that *if only everybody would stop talking, or if only the mouth of the other would clam up*.

Stubbornly, and even disgustingly, unclosed mouths are everywhere in *Emma*. Laced into the gossipy exchanges of news in Highbury is a string of seemingly unimportant references to the seaside resort of Weymouth.²³ As all of the novel's second-time readers will know, these apparently ignorable geographical references are a trail of clues pointing to the place where Frank Churchill struck up his clandestine relationship with Jane Fairfax, the secret on which the novel's complex structure hinges. Every reference to Weymouth, in other words, is an iteration of the novel's private joke with itself at the expense of those who are not (yet) in the know. But this smartly self-conscious running joke is also a revealing tic. In its insistent repetition of the place-name "Weymouth," the novel itself, so fascinated with the way mouths do and do not speak of secrets, cannot stop mouthing "mouth"—and in doing so makes a kind of reiterated subliminal confession of its fascinated-and-disgusted fixation on the mouth as a potentially disturbing opening onto otherness, onto the voices and desires that lie beyond the neatly "closed" limits that the novel prescribes for itself.²⁴

The mouth of the other, as we have seen, talks and babbles; it is also significantly associated with food and eating in *Emma*. There is much talk of food in this novel (Maggie Lane calls it Austen's most "food-laden" text),²⁵ but one of the novel's more intriguing intuitions is that talk is *itself* a kind of food, or rather a kind of eating, a practice of consumption in which those who gossip feed off the lives of others. In this context, the seemingly inconsequential gift of a hindquarter of pork from Hartfield to

²³ See *Emma*, pp. 103, 157, 171, 180-81, 208-9, 215-16, 245, 260-61, 349, 430.

²⁴ The mouths of *Emma* might be read as another manifestation of the strain of bodily innuendo so diligently uncovered by Jillian Heydt-Stevenson, who in *Austen's Unbecoming Conjunctions: Subversive Laughter, Embodied History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) briskly dismantles the notion that Austen was squeamishly disengaged from corporeality and sexuality.

²⁵ Maggie Lane, *Jane Austen and Food* (London: Hambledon, 1995), p. 168. See also Michael Parrish Lee, "The Nothing in the Novel: Jane Austen and the Food Plot," *Novel*, 45:3 (2012), 368-88.

the Bateses—that is, to the very headquarters of gossip in Highbury—is also a coded acknowledgment of the extent to which Miss Bates “feeds” avidly and promiscuously on the lives of her social superiors. News about the lives and loves of respectable families of Highbury is the narrative substance that enables her to eke out an existence that is, in other respects, worryingly underprovisioned. The gift of pork thus confirms the Woodhouses in their social superiority even as it discloses a certain anxiety in Hartfield that an existence as privileged as theirs is no absolute defense against the prospect of being “consumed” by the lower orders. After all, this is a novel that ends with the knowledge that unidentified local felons are stealing, and presumably consuming, the poultry of respectable neighbors. Everybody’s mouth can be temporarily silenced by a sharply witty put-down—but it is still hungry.

The queasy anxieties that attach to the mouth of the other in *Emma* are perceptible also in the text’s preoccupation with oral health. Consider in this regard the mouth of Harriet Smith, a character whose “everybodiness” is announced in her very surname.²⁶ A throat infection keeps Harriet from Christmas festivities at Randalls; later in the novel she experiences dental problems that require the intervention of a London specialist—a plot twist that reunites her with Robert Martin but also provides her with a quiet exit from the dramatized world of the novel and from Emma Woodhouse’s social sphere. Early in *Emma*, Austen’s heroine endeavors to “frame” Harriet’s social identity by making her the subject of a portrait, though Emma struggles to capture her friend’s likeness because of “a peculiarity” in “the lines about the mouth” (*Emma*, p. 45). By the end of the novel, it is medicine rather than art that places Harriet, and her peculiar mouth, permanently outside of Emma’s social sphere. The unnamed London dentist who attends to Harriet’s bad tooth thus occupies a position of inconspicuous cultural authority

²⁶ Aghast to discover that his daughter counts among her close friends a widow named Smith, Sir Walter Elliot guesses that Mrs. Smith’s late husband was “one of the five thousand Mr. Smiths whose names are to be met with every where” (Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. Janet Todd and Antje Blank [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006], p. 170).

in *Emma*—authority that is exercised through the way he ministers to the mouth of the other as a site of illness and infection that, one way or the other, needs to be safely framed, contained, and silenced.

When Harriet Smith melts away from Emma's social circle, a new *cordon sanitaire* between Emma Woodhouse and the neighborhood at large seems to have been successfully constructed in a novel where privileged subjectivity constitutes itself through a fastidious disavowal of everybodyness. But such a disavowal, as we have seen, is never quite as clean as it wants to be. When *Emma* thinks about "everybody" it often does so with a decidedly undemocratic sense of other people as noise, chatter, sameness, mediocrity, and illness—but, even as it thinks these thoughts, the text grants "everybody" the opportunity to claim more narrative space than Austen's narrative discourse seems to want to concede to it.

None of this is to say that *Emma* is a text that contains—still less celebrates—multitudes. Set *Emma* alongside a novel such as James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), for example, and it suddenly begins to look distinctly provincial and underpopulated. But the comparison between Austen's immaculate realist novel and Joyce's hyperexperimental modernist masterwork might nevertheless shed a certain light on the way "everybody" is positioned in *Emma*. As a thought experiment, it would be useful to imagine how the words "Here Comes Everybody"—the celebrated motto in which Joyce's novel proclaims its openness to all human history, culture, language, and mythology—might sound if they were uttered by the discourse of *Emma*. They would, I suggest, function to sound the alarm about an *en masse* visitation of mediocre, impoverished, and sickly otherness. Here come the Mrs. Eltons, Miss Bateses and Mrs. Coles. Here come the sick, the impoverished, the excluded, the vulgar, the landless, the unpropertied. Here come "all the meaner & more usual &c. and &c's." Here comes everybody. And the everybody who comes has a body. He, she, they have open mouths, ungovernable tongues, bad teeth, and infectious throats—and voices that are muffled, but never quite silenced, by the Hartfield shrubbery.

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ABSTRACT

Michael Greaney, “‘The Meaner & More Usual &c.’: Everybody in *Emma*” (pp. 417-440)

This essay aims to read Jane Austen’s *Emma* (1815) not as a portrait of a pampered individual but as a story of collective or communal selfhood—that is, as the story of *everybody*. “Everybody”—the term is used approximately one hundred times in this novel—in *Emma* is both more and less than a village or a neighborhood. Spread and shared across people, discourses, bodies, and institutions, “everybodiness” is variously apprehended as public opinion, or a ubiquitous collective gaze, or a shared repertoire of constantly updated gossip-narratives, without ever being quite reducible to any one of these. With a mixture of disdain and disquiet, *Emma* equates everybodiness with banal group-think, senseless chatter, lackluster mediocrity, and oppressive sameness—but, even as it thinks these superciliously undemocratic thoughts, Austen’s novel grants “everybody” narrative space in which to contest the terms of its own marginalization.

Keywords: Jane Austen; *Emma*; everybody; gossip; public opinion