

Austen embodied: Class and gender performances in *Emma* and *Persuasion*

DARCEY HOYLE

Abstract

This essay analyses gender performances in Jane Austen's *Emma* and *Persuasion*. It uses Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which argues that masculinity and femininity are constituted of a series of repeated bodily acts. Through such acts, characters like Emma Woodhouse, Anne Elliot, Sir Walter Elliot, and Mr Knightley blur or traverse gendered lines. This essay further argues that gender performances in *Emma* and *Persuasion* carry class implications. Through their 'incorrect' embodiments of gender, Jane Austen's characters offer critiques of class structures. Austen's depictions of such characters also provide insight on exactly how masculinity and femininity, upper class and lower, are constructed.

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Austen's novels have a reputation for lacking intrigue.¹ They are commonly believed to focus on manners and morality, in the confined context of their marriage plots. However, closer analysis of Austen's depictions of gender and class reveals an acute focus on the body. The bodies of Austen's characters are inscribed with social conventions and identity performances that have the power to alter plot, as well as to critique or support the social structures of Austen's day. Embodiment, or use of the body as a means of communication, facilitates such performances. Judith Butler argues that gender is one such embodied performance, giving the illusion of a stable identity through the 'stylized repetition of acts'.² Gender performance also implicates class, influencing understandings of how men and women of different classes should behave. The ways in which Austen's characters perform their gender and class roles shape the perspectives these novels offer on Austen's period and our own. Whether or not these performances are in line with social expectations impacts the character's status and how they interact with the plot. This essay will analyse the gender performances of Emma Woodhouse, Anne Elliot, Sir Walter Elliot, and Mr Knightley through the lens of gender performativity. It will draw on textual evidence, academic writing, and related texts from Austen's era to analyse the characters of these novels. It will begin with an analysis of Butler's theory, before moving on to close readings of *Emma* and *Persuasion*. It will argue that each character embodies an 'incorrect' (i.e. non-standard or disruptive) form of masculinity or femininity, and that Austen uses these performances to disrupt and critique class structures.

In 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', Judith Butler examines the link between gender identity and theatrical performance.³ They argue that gender is not a stable, internal identity, but rather the 'stylized repetitions of acts'.⁴ This means that masculinity and femininity are brought into being *through* gendered acts—what clothes an individual wears, how they position their body, their speech patterns, their interests and relationships. The repetition of these acts gives the illusion of a consistent identity. Importantly, these acts are socially enforced; 'incorrect' performances (acts that sit outside

¹ Alice Chandler, "'A Pair of Fine Eyes': Jane Austen's Treatment of Sex", *Studies in the Novel* 7, no. 1 (1975): 88–103.

² Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', in *Performance pt. 1: Identity and the Self*, ed. Phillip Auslander (Taylor & Francis, 2003), 97.

³ Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution'.

⁴ Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', 900.

coherent notions of masculinity or femininity) are violently punished.⁵ This theory situates Butler within a legacy of feminist thought which argues that gender and sexual identities are constructed through social relationships and power dynamics, and therefore are open to change.⁶ These theories are useful in analysing the gendered dimensions of novels such as Austen's. They help us connect context to character, by focusing on how characters respond to power in their embodiments of gender.

Writing during the Regency period in England, Austen lived through a politically tumultuous era.⁷ Her own family was divided along party lines, and anxiety around the French Revolution and the slave trade were a constant presence;⁸ yet these broader political issues are remarkably absent from her writing. Austen instead focuses on the private and domestic, leading to the accusations that opened this essay. However, following the feminist doctrine that 'the personal is political',⁹ these moments reveal a politics of their own. Austen's family were not well-off¹⁰ but were still firmly situated in the landed gentry, providing a starting point for Austen's focus on and critique of the aristocracy. Austen herself was a staunch supporter of the House of Stuart,¹¹ a line of royals who had been at the centre of controversies over the English throne for decades. Her critiques of the aristocracy are therefore not anti-monarchist but seek to criticise an aristocracy not living up to its role. Austen's characters embody these class critiques, and their gender performances are intimately tied to this. As will now be discussed, characters such as Emma Woodhouse demonstrate the ways private gender and class performances interrogate broader power structures.

Emma Woodhouse is an example of subversive femininity. Her position as a wealthy woman impacts how she consciously and unconsciously embodies gender. Emma is incorrectly feminine because of her pride, manipulations, and disdain for others, but is not punished for it because of her upper-class status. This links to Butler's argument about incorrect performances resulting in social punishment.¹² Emma's characterisation suggests this is only partly true for the privileged. Her extraordinary level of licence in embodiment is demonstrated by the praises of others: Emma is 'charming',¹³ and 'obliging',¹⁴ no matter how she misbehaves. She insists on pairing up friends and acquaintances and involving herself in the lives of others to the point of causing damage.¹⁵ She also refuses to participate in the typical acts of femininity, specifically marriage:

I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry. Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing; but I never have been in love: it is not my way, or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall. And, without love, I am sure I would be a fool to change such a situation as mine. Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want; I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important ...¹⁶

Such intentions are in themselves unwomanly for the time, and the pragmatic and self-assured tone of her communication renders this speech particularly unfeminine. A guide to what was considered 'correct' femininity in Austen's era, and how Emma fails to embody it, can be found in conduct books. These were texts written by men advising young women on their behaviour. Fordyce's sermons—referenced heavily in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*—talk extensively on the importance of the 'married

⁵ Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution'.

⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 1989); Monique Wittig, 'The Category of Sex', *Feminist Issues* 2, no. 2 (1982): 63–68, doi.org/10.1007/BF02685553; Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution'.

⁷ BC Southam, "'An Easy Step into Silence': Jane Austen and the Political Context", *Women's Writing* 5, no. 1 (1998): 7–30.

⁸ Southam, "'An Easy Step into Silence'".

⁹ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

¹⁰ Southam, "'An Easy Step into Silence'".

¹¹ Southam, "'An Easy Step into Silence'".

¹² Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution'.

¹³ Jane Austen, *Emma*, in *The Complete Works of Jane Austen* (New York: Race Point Publishing, 2012), 720.

¹⁴ Austen, *Emma*, 732.

¹⁵ Austen, *Emma*.

¹⁶ Austen, *Emma*, 696.

state' and how a 'virtuous' woman lives in service of her husband.¹⁷ Emma patently rejects these maxims. Her logic for not marrying is class-based: 'fortune I do not want ... consequence I do not want'. Because of her fortune and consequence, Emma's incorrect femininity is excused. Such licence is not afforded to lower-class characters like Harriet Smith, who must be 'sweet' and 'docile'.¹⁸ However, Emma's 'incorrect' femininity is still restricted by class and cultural expectations. This is demonstrated by Emma's faux pas at the picnic at Box Hill, particularly within Jonathan Grossman's thesis on manners as a form of high-class labour.¹⁹

According to Grossman, manners constitute the labour of the 'leisured' classes, those who do not have to earn money because of their connection to land or family wealth.²⁰ This labour is performed as an act of social duty, and its chief form is marriage, which is how the class system reproduces itself.²¹ Gender is heavily implicated in this because of its centrality to heterosexual marriage, aligning with Butler's argument about subversive gender performances threatening cultural survival.²² At Box Hill, Emma's failure to be polite contravenes both correct gender and class embodiments, thereby threatening the entire social system:

'Oh! Very well,' exclaimed Miss Bates ... 'I shall be sure to say three dull things as soon as ever I open my mouth, shan't I?' ... Emma could not resist. 'Ah! Ma'am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me, but you will be limited as to number—only three at once.'²³

The phrase 'open my mouth' directly invokes the body as a vehicle for performing manners. Upper-class characters in particular are called upon to embody politeness—it is after all the chief form of labour for their class.²⁴ The use of phrases such as 'could not resist' and 'pardon me' indicate that Emma is knowingly straying from the realm of polite society. According to Grossman, it does not matter how Emma chose to insult Miss Bates, just that she refused to engage in the labour of politeness. Emma's incorrect embodiment of femininity is generally permissible, but here it crosses the line into threatening understandings of the upper classes. She also comes dangerously close to this line in 'flirting'²⁵ with Frank Churchill and being otherwise 'dull'²⁶ for the rest of the party. Her incorrect embodiment of femininity becomes openly impolite at Box Hill, thereby threatening the reputation of the upper classes as representing good manners. Emma is incorrectly feminine on two levels: first because of her refusal to engage in the standard acts of female embodiment and second because her communications of upper-class femininity threatens the class system.

Anne, the heroine of Austen's *Persuasion*, is also incorrectly feminine. However, this is less attributable to her class and more to embodiment of emotion. Anne's sense of loss throughout the first part of the novel impacts every aspect of her embodiment, including gender performance. She is positioned as an observer, often physically separated from social situations. Her grief impacts her embodiment of gender and prompts rejection from her family. Anne's body unconsciously communicates the enormity of her grief, and simultaneously betrays her by rendering her unattractive—and therefore unfeminine:

her bloom had vanished early; and as, even in its height, her father had found little to admire in her (so totally different were her delicate features and mild dark eyes from his own), there could be nothing in them, now that she was faded and thin, to excite his esteem.²⁷

¹⁷ James Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women* (London: M. Carey, 2007), 114.

¹⁸ Austen, *Emma*, 664.

¹⁹ Jonathan H Grossman, 'The Labor of the Leisured in *Emma*: Class, Manners and Austen', *Nineteenth Century Literature* 54, no. 2 (1999): 143–64, doi.org/10.2307/2903098.

²⁰ Grossman, 'The Labor of the Leisured in *Emma*'.

²¹ Grossman, 'The Labor of the Leisured in *Emma*'.

²² Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution'.

²³ Austen, *Emma*, 842.

²⁴ Grossman, 'The Labor of the Leisured in *Emma*'.

²⁵ Austen, *Emma*, 841.

²⁶ Austen, *Emma*, 841.

²⁷ Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, in *The Complete Works of Jane Austen* (New York: Race Point Publishing, 2012), 1032.

Austen's use of free indirect discourse in this passage sets up the attitude of Sir Walter and the rest of the Elliot family towards Anne. His lack of 'esteem' for his daughter is purely based on looks, and therefore on the body. Anne's grief has profoundly impacted her body by rendering it 'faded and thin'—this is an unconscious communication of her feelings that is rejected by her family. Conduct books of the time tell us that intense displays of feeling, or sensibility, were considered unfeminine.²⁸ Austen investigates this in many of her novels, particularly through the character of Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility*.²⁹ Anne's embodiment of grief is different to Marianne's but is no less condemned. Anne's unconscious communication of feeling is rejected both because it is inconvenient and because it renders her incorrectly feminine; which is demonstrated by Sir Walter's reaction to Anne's body in the above passage. As Kay Young states in 'Feeling Embodied: Consciousness, *Persuasion* and Jane Austen', in her family's eyes, Anne is disembodied or rendered a 'no body'³⁰ by her loss. This rejection results from a lack of utility. Being less attractive and less feminine means it is less likely Anne will attract a suitor—Anne's body is not useful, and therefore it 'vanishes' from her family's view. Anne's femininity is incorrect because it fails to participate in the class-based system of desirability. Through Anne, Austen examines how unconscious bodily communications can have material impacts on gender embodiment and social status.

Complementing her representations of incorrect femininity described above, Austen also explores incorrect masculinity in *Emma* and *Persuasion*. Sir Walter exemplifies incorrect masculinity through his obsession with appearance and legacy. His failure to live up to the ideals of masculinity and the aristocracy leaves him effeminated. Sir Walter's character is firmly established in the opening passage of *Persuasion*:

Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot's character: vanity of person and of situation. He had been remarkably handsome in his youth, and at fifty-four was still a very fine man. Few women could think more of their personal appearance than he did, nor could the valet of any new-made lord be more delighted with the place he held in society.³¹

Here Sir Walter is unconsciously communicating an incorrect form of masculinity and class. His excessive vanity surrounding his looks and status diminishes their value. His infatuation with his own appearance exceeds that of most women, for whom vanity is generally more tolerated. In this description, Austen feminises him. His status as nobility is also reduced by the comparison to 'the valet of any new-made lord'. As Paul Cantor explains in 'A Class Act: *Persuasion* and the Lingering Death of the Aristocracy', through Sir Walter, Austen provides an 'aristocratic critique of the aristocracy'.³² She criticises the contemporary aristocracy, rather than the system that made it, for 'failing to live up to its own aristocratic principles'³³ of politeness and high-mindedness. Sir Walter's obsession with the Baronetage represents the aristocracy's obsession with its own continuation. Cantor links this to the Industrial Revolution and expansion of the British Empire, which prompted a shift from land to money as the primary source of wealth.³⁴ In Austen's time, the aristocracy was becoming less relevant as power shifted to the middle class. Sir Walter therefore embodies an incorrect form of manliness which is tied to a rapidly expiring class system. This transference of power is conveyed through understandings of masculinity. Where Sir Walter is feminine, Captain Wentworth (who represents the middle-class men who could now generate their own wealth) is perfectly masculine. Taylor Walle asserts that Captain Wentworth is 'arguably Jane Austen's manliest hero'.³⁵ Captain Wentworth's first introduction as a

²⁸ Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women*.

²⁹ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, in *The Complete Works of Jane Austen* (New York: Race Point Publishing, 2012), 3–196.

³⁰ Kay Young, 'Feeling Embodied: Consciousness, *Persuasion* and Jane Austen', *Narrative* 11, no. 1 (2003): 82, doi.org/10.1353/nar.2003.0005.

³¹ Austen, *Persuasion*, 1031.

³² Paul A Cantor, 'A Class Act: *Persuasion* and the Lingering Death of the Aristocracy', *Philosophy and Literature* 23, no. 1 (1999): 131, doi.org/10.1353/phl.1999.0012.

³³ Cantor, 'A Class Act', 131–32.

³⁴ Cantor, 'A Class Act'.

³⁵ Taylor Walle, "'He Looked Quite Red": *Persuasion* and Austen's New Man of Feeling', *Eighteenth Century Fiction* 29, no. 1 (2016): 46, doi.org/10.3138/ecf.29.1.45.

‘remarkably fine young man’³⁶ contains none of the mockery that Austen reserves for Sir Walter. Austen contrasts Sir Walter’s and Captain Wentworth’s bodies: one young, spirited, and rugged, the other old and vain. These are both unconscious communications of masculinity, one correct and one incorrect. Through this contrast, Austen provides a critique of the aristocracy and marks the shift of power from nobility to middle class.

Another example of incorrect masculinity is Mr Knightley. However, this embodiment is praised because it depicts an alternate form of gentlemanly conduct. This is demonstrated particularly well in his behaviour at the ball:

Mrs Weston said no more: and Emma could imagine with what surprise and mortification she must be returning to her seat. This was Mr Elton! The amiable, obliging, gentle Mr Elton ... In another moment a happier sight caught her—Mr Knightley leading Harriet to the set! Never had she been more surprised, seldom more delighted, than at that instant ... His dancing proved to be just what she believed it, extremely good ...³⁷

In this quote, the simple fact of bodies in proximity has class implications. By placing himself in proximity to Harriet, Mr Knightley displays an unconventional form of gentlemanliness that contrasts with Mr Elton’s. Mr Elton, despite being ‘amiable, obliging’ and ‘gentle’³⁸ is condemned because he fails to be genuinely considerate of Harriet. His gentlemanliness is purely performative. It does not risk anything that might attract social stigma, like standing up with Harriet, so Austen condemns it as false. In the quote above, Mr Knightley embodies ‘unaffected’ gentlemanliness in a way that Mr Elton cannot, thereby gaining Emma’s approval.

In ‘Jane Austen’s Balls: Emma’s Dance of Masculinity’, Meghan Malone describes the ballroom as a place where bodies are displayed as part of ‘sexualized social interaction’.³⁹ This form of interaction, where the body is foregrounded, puts in stark relief the difference between Mr Knightley’s outstanding masculinity, and Mr Elton’s deficient masculinity.⁴⁰ Mr Knightley’s body is also subject to Emma’s scrutiny and subsequent approval, placing Emma as the observer and evaluator of conduct. This is a reversal of the gender hierarchy and highlights how both she and Mr Knightley incorrectly embody upper-class masculinity and femininity. Mr Knightley’s form of masculinity is, in short, in line with what Austen believes the aristocracy should be: English, considerate, and gentlemanly.⁴¹ It is a consciously communicated rejection of upper-class masculinity that sets him apart from other male characters.

These four principal characters—Emma, Anne, Sir Walter, and Mr Knightley—demonstrate vastly different forms of incorrect masculinity and femininity. Through their conscious and unconscious embodiments of gender, Austen critiques the class system of her day. Incorrect gender is a useful form of critique because, as Butler argues, incorrect performances constitute a threat to the entire system.⁴² Heterosexual masculinity and femininity provide the framework on which modern society reproduces itself; reproduction and social continuation require individuals to act their parts correctly. ‘Incorrect’ gender performances threaten the class hierarchy as well—reproduction was vital to Austen’s aristocracy as a means of passing down wealth.⁴³ Austen’s characters, as members of the aristocracy or landed gentry, both benefit from and challenge the class system. How they enact gender performances shapes their relationship to class. Butler’s theory of gender performativity provides a new perspective on Austen’s work, showing how, within her world of upper-class England, gender, and class interact and influence plot. Emma’s incorrect femininity is enabled by her status but also restricted by the

³⁶ Austen, *Persuasion*, 1043.

³⁷ Austen, *Emma*, 820.

³⁸ Austen, *Emma*, 689.

³⁹ Meghan Malone, ‘Jane Austen’s Balls: Emma’s Dance of Masculinity’, *Nineteenth Century Literature* 70, no. 4 (2016): 428, doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2016.70.4.427.

⁴⁰ Malone, ‘Jane Austen’s Balls’.

⁴¹ Cantor, ‘A Class Act’.

⁴² Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution’.

⁴³ Cantor, ‘A Class Act’.

attached expectations of embodied social labour. Anne's incorrect femininity springs from her socially undesirable embodiment of emotion. Sir Walter's incorrect masculinity is used as a critique of the contemporary aristocracy, while Mr Knightley's is held up as an example of what the aristocracy should be. Theories such as Butler's allow a new perspective on Austen. They show us how, even within the narrow world of Austen's novels, important insights on the embodiment of gender and class can be gained.

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