

When we speak of tale order, then, we must consider fragments—blocks of tales—rather than individual tales within fragments, which invariably observe distinct orders.

The fragments too fall into distinct patterns of placement in the manuscripts. Fragment *i* always appears first, and Fragment *x* always appears last. Fragment *ix* (Manciple's) almost always appears before the Parson's Tale, except in two manuscripts with a non-Chaucerian link between the Franklin's and Parson's tales. Fragment *vii* invariably appears just before the concluding tales (usually Fragments *ix* and *x*, or *viii*, *ix*, and *x*). Variations for other fragments have been convincingly explained as scribal misunderstandings. Fragment *viii* (G)—Second Nun's, Canon's Yeoman's—offers the hardest case, since in many manuscripts this group appears before Fragment *vii*, including those in the types *b*, *c*, and *d* orders. Larry Benson has argued that Fragment *viii* was "displaced" when "the non-Type *a* ancestor was copied," which seems the simplest, least problematic explanation for the discrepancy between the Ellesmere sequence and the sequences in some other manuscripts. It is possible that Fragment *viii* should go before *vi* (Manly-Rickert's "scribal order"), but the manuscripts offer no other possibilities for placement.

To support his argument that the received fragment orders are scribal, Owen relies on inconsistencies in the last four tales and in the *Canterbury Tales* generally. There are of course many contradictions in the *Canterbury* book: inexplicable time references (references to actual time that seem to have symbolic value); apparent errors regarding tale-tellers; and misplaced geographical names, especially the reference to Sittingbourne before Rochester, an inconsistency that occasioned the "Bradshaw shift" (Fragment *vii* moved to just after *ii*). The shift cleared up one inconsistency but left many others unresolved (including some noted by Owen). But I believe that most Chaucerians have reconciled themselves to inconsistencies and contradictions as a received part of the *Canterbury* book, recognizing that "roadside realism" was not one of Chaucer's major concerns, and that these inconsistencies do not preclude thematic relations between fragments. The *Canterbury* poet is the same man who could cite the *House of Fame* and the *Legend of Good Women*, both unfinished, as if they were completed works (*LGW* F.417; *CT* x.1086). I believe that the Ellesmere order reflects Chaucer's intention for the arrangement of the tales—however that arrangement came into being; that thematic evidence strengthens the case for the Ellesmere order, especially for the last four tales; and that the Parson's Tale and Retraction offer a more fitting and Chaucerian close to the *Canterbury Tales* than a return journey or, as Owen conjectures, a reversion to the storytelling contest could ever be.

Owen's final point about the alleged change of speaker in the Retraction deserves special consideration,

since the rubric is doubtless scribal and since "litel tretys" better describes the Parson's Tale than the *Canterbury Tales*. Ironically, through this argument Owen strengthens the case for the revocation of Chaucer's writings—x.1084 ("and namely") to the middle of x.1090 ("to the salvacioun of my soule")—as an interpolation, a case strongly stated by Skeat, although Skeat believed that the interpolation was Chaucer's. Owen judges the revocation of writings to be Chaucer's own voice, whereas the first three sentences of the Retraction, he thinks, belong to the Parson. But if Skeat is correct about the interpolation and if Owen is right about the first three sentences as the Parson's words, then someone other than Chaucer interpolated the Retraction into the Parson's (alleged) final statement about his "litel tretys."

I think, however, that all this speculation, though ingenious, is unnecessary. The phrase "litel tretys" does indeed seem to refer to the Parson's Tale, just as "this litel tretys heere" (vii.957) and "this tretys lite" (vii.963) refer to Chaucer the pilgrim's Melibeus. But Chaucer the poet is ultimately responsible for the Parson's Tale, and I do not share Owen's opinion that the speaker is "well-nigh impossible to determine." The first sentence of the Retraction, beginning "Now preye I to hem alle," to my ear sounds like a different voice, a statement distinct from the Parson's treatise. In my reading, Chaucer the man begins his reflections on his poetic career and his moral obligations by citing the Parson's Tale: "this litel tretys" (of mine, told by my Parson). Then he ranges back to other writings including those tales from the *Canterbury Tales* "that sownen into synne."

Finally, we should be cautious about moving tales around, in assigning tales to tellers not authorized in the manuscripts, or in conjecturing about voices. We should first attempt the "harder readings"—those of the Ellesmere manuscript—and speculate only when Ellesmere fails, as it sometimes does. But not as often as Owen seems to believe.

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Reading and Misreading *Emma*

To the Editor:

Joseph Litvak's essay on reading and misreading in Jane Austen's *Emma* ("Reading Characters: Self, Society, and Text in *Emma*," 100 [1985]: 763–73) itself offers what can only be termed a clever and interesting misreading of the novel. Litvak explicates with great ingenuity a number of key passages that center on reading more or less puzzling texts in which he celebrates the creative results of *Emma*'s errors. What Litvak seems

to forget, however, is that all the passages he discusses indicate persuasively that misreading texts or characters almost always leads to the injury either of an innocent party or of the misreader herself. In other words, Litvak extracts his chosen incidents from their necessary moral context, thus significantly distorting them.

Moreover, Litvak fails to discuss two key passages that concern interpreting oral “texts”: Emma’s insult to Miss Bates and Mr. Knightley’s proposal of marriage. In the first, Emma’s thoughtless cruelty occurs in the word game proposed by Frank Churchill: Miss Bates good-naturedly offers to say three very dull things, on which Emma remarks “but you will be limited to number—only three at once.” It is at this point that Mr. Weston offers his riddle about perfection—M. and A.—of which Litvak comments, “Mr. Weston has reminded her that character need not be a homogeneous entity, . . . that the self is no more a fixed identity than the name, a construct susceptible to fragmentation and rearrangement” (770). Mr. Weston’s observation, following as it does Emma’s wholly gratuitous attack on an old friend, is clearly nonsense: Emma is ironically reminded that her self is most imperfect, that she is irresponsible, and that she lacks delicacy in dealing with others.

Furthermore, Emma’s insensitivity points toward the importance for Austen of the middle term of the subtitle of Litvak’s essay, “Society,” to which he pays virtually no attention except to condemn its “demands” on the liberated self of the unregenerate Emma. Her remark here is a text that also is an act; for Austen, acts always have social and moral consequences, and one is always responsible for them. Any act, even one that appears to involve only the self, invariably affects others. Miss Bates is in a precarious social situation, having fallen from one rank to the borders of a lower, and she is wholly dependent on the goodwill and respect of those above her to maintain her position in the community. Not only does Emma insult Miss Bates, then; she sets an example (bad, in this case) for the community. Emma’s wit, like Mr. Weston’s, is truly “indifferent”—both deficient in humor and untempered by “compassion” for a weak old woman who deserves it. Society does have legitimate claims in Austen’s world, and Emma is justly censured for failing to accept them here.

The scene in which Mr. Knightley proposes to Emma centers on misreadings of other sorts. The possibility is that he and Emma both will continue to misread the other’s character: each must overcome a previous misreading to see the other’s love. Heretofore his jealousy of Frank Churchill has blinded him to Emma’s lack of real affection for Frank, and Emma’s many errors about Harriet and Harriet’s putative lovers have convinced Emma that Mr. Knightley’s talk of love is directed toward another. In other words, misreading here would hardly be valuable: indeed, the desired outcome will re-

quire all their skills at reading character correctly. And so when he says, “in a tone of such sincere, decided, intelligible tenderness” that he loves her, though he does so most indirectly, he can see at once “‘that you understand me.’” Austen then reports that Emma “‘had been able . . . to catch and comprehend the exact truth of the whole. . . .’” Emma has “read” Mr. Knightley’s text precisely and accurately, and I cannot envision there being present here the slightest degree of irony.

Litvak concludes that even their marriage, instead of achieving the “state of mutual transparency” presumably desired by Mr. Knightley, is “marked by the fictiveness and the evasions of the social” (770) that are characteristic of Emma’s errors, principally because she now fails to reveal that Harriet loves him. (It is perhaps worth noting that Litvak is misreading unintentionally here: the marriage takes place only in the last paragraph.) First, it is significant that Emma’s lack of candor springs from a genuine desire to avoid causing Harriet additional pain, not from self-serving motives. Second, Litvak makes Mr. Knightley demand “mutual transparency,” but Austen does not. Indeed, immediately after his proposal she writes: “Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure . . . but where, as in this case, though the conduct is mistaken, the feelings are not, it may not be very material.” Austen asserts that “truth and sincerity” in human relations are almost impossible, but there are privileged moments when something near this ideal can be achieved. Mr. Knightley’s proposal surely is one of them. Moreover, I would have thought it obvious that, as a devout Christian, Austen regards men and women as imperfect by nature, never able to attain *perfect* truth even though they may desire it. (This assumption, by the way, makes Mr. Knightley’s declaration that he has always doted on Emma “‘faults and all’” less than shocking. Being human she could hardly be faultless, and were he not to love her as she is, he could not love her at all.)

I close with a more general remark. The case for a feminist, subversive Austen springs not so much from her fiction as from the desire of some modern readers to remake her in their image—the project not of critics but of “imaginists,” to borrow the nonce word she coins for Emma. Austen hardly accepts tradition blindly, for she does insist that the nominal values of her class and culture be seriously taken and earnestly lived. But in the end Emma must accommodate herself to the greater community and adopt its moral structures, accepting thereby that women are to fill a lesser place in life. The novel ends with a brief account of the wedding that inaugurates “a union of perfect happiness,” during which Emma of course has pledged herself to love *and obey* Mr. Knightley. Here too I see no indication of irony.

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