

Feminine Capital and Ethical Agency in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*

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In Regency-era England, women's lives were constrained by legal and social systems that limited independence and reinforced dependence on men. Marriage, while potentially elevating a woman's social position, legally subsumed her identity under her husband, and inheritance laws favored male heirs, tethering women's material security to marital prospects (Crawford 153; Bohang 219; "Fee Tail"; Crawford 156). Social expectations further constrained agency: accomplishments in music, language, or etiquette were valued less for personal enrichment than for enhancing marriageability, while intellectual engagement and assertiveness could undermine a woman's social acceptability (Gregory; Sutherland 214; Young 155). Within these restrictions, women's power often operated in subtle, socially sanctioned ways. Jane Austen's novels, particularly *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, illustrate how women navigated these constraints through what can be understood as "feminine capital"—the ethical, aesthetic, and social resources that enabled influence in a patriarchal society. Using Pierre Bourdieu's frameworks of cultural and social capital, this paper examines how Austen's heroines convert intellect, taste, wit, and social networks into forms of agency. Elizabeth Bennet exercises moral discernment to assert autonomy and ethical judgment in her choices, while Emma Woodhouse learns to temper inherited social and cultural authority with humility and responsibility. Together, these novels demonstrate that female power in Austen's world is not solely a matter of wealth or status but of ethically grounded skill, strategic social insight, and cultivated taste.

I. Regency Constraints: Legal, Social, and Gendered Limits on Women

In the early nineteenth century, Regency-era England was governed by extremely rigid social and gender hierarchies that left women largely dependent on men for financial security and social legitimacy. Women's lives were circumscribed both legally and socially: while men

could acquire status and independence through wealth and property, women were “confined... expected to marry young and prioritize childbearing” (Bohang 218). Marriage functioned as both a social necessity and a form of systemic oppression: it could elevate a woman’s social position, yet legally, her identity and autonomy were effectively erased. Under the doctrine of coverture, “a husband and wife became one person, and that person was the husband” (Crawford 153). All of a woman’s property and legal rights became her husband’s, leaving married women unable to control their own assets, enter contracts, or pursue professional opportunities (Bohang 219). In this system, securing a favorable marriage was often less a matter of personal choice than a strategy for survival within a patriarchal society.

Legal dependence was reinforced by inheritance practices designed to keep wealth within male lines. Many estates were legally restricted so that property would pass to male heirs, leaving daughters without direct claims to family land or income (“Fee Tail”). While some arrangements theoretically allowed inheritance through the female line, in practice, women were excluded from ownership in most cases, reinforcing financial dependence and limiting social power (Crawford 156). These legal structures tied women’s material security directly to marital prospects, and marriage became a crucial arena in which women negotiated limited forms of agency.

Beyond legal constraints, women were subjected to strict social norms governing behavior, speech, and education. Manuals on etiquette and conduct defined the actions and manners deemed appropriate for ladies, often emphasizing decorum and self-restraint over independence or intellectual engagement (Gregory). For example, John Gregory’s “A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters” argues that frank behaviour might, on some occasions, “render [women] more agreeable as companions, but ... make [them] less amiable as women” (Gregory).

Women were expected to cultivate accomplishments such as playing musical instruments, learning foreign languages, or practicing dance—skills that were valued less for personal enrichment than for their utility in securing a desirable marriage (Young 155, in “An accomplished woman”). Intellectual pursuits, particularly novel-reading, were discouraged for women: Gisborne, for example, suggested that novels could undermine femininity by fostering excessive intellect (Sutherland 214, in “An Accomplished Woman”). Women were taught to moderate wit, assertiveness, and opinion: as Gregory warns, “wit is the most dangerous talent you can possess. It must be guarded with great discretion and good nature, otherwise it will create you many enemies” (Gregory). Collectively, these reveal a society determined to shape women into pleasing, compliant figures, prioritizing social acceptability and marital prospects over intellectual development, autonomy, or personal expression.

These constraints were vividly reflected in the worlds Austen depicts in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*. Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse navigate a society that monitors female behavior, where speaking too boldly, acting independently, or prioritizing personal desire over social expectation could invite censure. Elizabeth, for instance, refuses a financially advantageous marriage, asserting her moral judgment over social convention. Likewise, Emma, though wealthy and socially privileged, must carefully calibrate her actions to maintain propriety while exercising influence in her community. Their experiences reveal how women of Austen’s era were required to convert intellect, virtue, and social skill into limited forms of “feminine capital” to gain leverage in a society that circumscribed legitimate forms of female authority.

Education and social training also reinforced women’s dependence. While women could gain knowledge, their learning was often restricted to subjects considered socially appropriate, emphasizing refinement rather than autonomy. This shaped Austen’s heroines’ understanding of

themselves and their options: Elizabeth is keenly aware of her intellectual and social limitations, yet she uses discernment and wit to navigate her constrained world. While Emma's confidence in her wealth and social position enables her to act boldly, it is not, as John Gregory and other authors of female conduct books assert, without social risk. While Emma's confidence in her wealth and social position enables her to act boldly, though not without social risk, Austen's depiction of these social and legal pressures provides the backdrop against which her heroines negotiate power, revealing both the constraints imposed on women and the subtle forms of influence they could exercise within a patriarchal system (Gregory).

II. Cultural and Social Capital: Gendered Agency in Austen's Regency World

While women were severely limited in their legal and educational attainment, Jane Austen situated the women in her novels as having unique forms of gendered power, or "Feminine Capital." Understanding gendered power in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* requires a framework beyond legal and social history. In Regency England, women's authority was rarely exercised through economic or legal means; instead, it operated through alternative forms of capital. This is social capital in the form of tastes, manners, virtues, accomplishments, and social networks ("Pierre Bourdieu"). These forms of cultural and social influence allow women to negotiate a patriarchal society, shaping outcomes in subtle but significant ways. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social capital provides a valuable lens for analyzing these dynamics, offering a vocabulary to describe the ways women exercise constrained forms of agency. Literary theorists have applied Bourdieu's concepts to 19th-century novels, showing how attention to social positioning, aesthetic sensibilities, and social networks reveals the mechanisms through which women wield power within the limits imposed upon them.

Bourdieu defines cultural capital as a set of socially valued dispositions and competencies that exist in three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. The “embodied state,” habits of speech, taste, manners, posture, and cultivated sensibility, requires long-term investment and is “linked to the body” through processes of socialization and education (Bourdieu 185-186). Because embodied capital accumulates gradually, it tends to reflect one’s upbringing and class position, allowing individuals from elite families to acquire it “without delay, without wasted time,” beginning from childhood (188). Objectified cultural capital refers to meaningful cultural objects, like books, paintings, and instruments, while institutionalized capital consists of formal credentials or titles that legitimize one’s social authority (185). In Austen’s world, women were largely excluded from institutionalized capital (vocational credentials, university education), and they had limited access to economic capital through property. Thus, the embodied forms of cultural capital, taste, elegance, wit, self-presentation, and interpretive intelligence became their primary means of negotiating status.

Bourdieu’s framework clarifies how distinctions of taste function not merely as personal preferences but as mechanisms of symbolic power. Because cultural competence carries a “scarcity value,” those with refined taste accrue social credibility and moral authority (187). This logic underlies much of the nineteenth-century novel’s interest in aesthetic judgment, and, as Garson in *Moral Taste: Aesthetics, Subjectivity, and Social Power in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* argues, Austen is particularly attuned to the ways taste operates as a quiet but potent form of social control (Garson 113-114). The book emphasizes that characters in Austen’s novels, and 19th-century novels more broadly, wield cultural capital, especially taste, not only to assert superiority but also to navigate social networks that determine their prospects and influence. In this reading, Emma Woodhouse’s aesthetic sensibility and refined taste become a form of

birthright cultural capital that immediately aligns her with the moral and social authority of the gentry (152). By contrast, characters like Harriet Smith possess “defective” or “bad” taste, which signals deficiencies in wit, discernment, and even moral stability (159). Taste, therefore, functions as a marker that distinguishes who can legitimately participate in social authority and who cannot.

Garson also emphasizes the gendered nature of cultural capital in Austen. Because Regency era women were barred from public institutions and political life, their power became concentrated in the arena of aesthetic judgment—taste, wit, conversation, and interpretive skill (123). In performing cultivation, women enact what Garson calls a “rhetorical stance” toward accomplishments, where the performance of indifference or humorous self-deprecation becomes more socially valuable than the accomplishment itself, as she notes: “The charm of Emma’s performance suggests that actual accomplishments are not as important as the rhetorical stance one takes towards them,” performing indifference with self-deprecating wit and effortless cultural allusion (155). This subtle art of self-presentation not only signals cultural refinement but also stabilizes one’s social position. Austen’s heroines, particularly Emma, participate in these dynamics, using language and interpretation, rather than traditionally “masculine” forms of action, to shape social reality. For instance, Emma’s matchmaking schemes hinge entirely on reading social cues, arranging encounters, and narrating others’ intentions—demonstrating how her authority operates through performance and persuasion rather than overt power.

Bourdieu’s concept of social capital further contextualizes the relational aspect of women’s power in Austen’s world. Social capital refers to the resources available through networks of mutual recognition (Bourdieu 190). Because these networks must be built and maintained, they require “an endless effort at institution,” and their value is contingent upon the

capital possessed by others in the network (190). For women, whose public roles were restricted, this form of capital was especially crucial. Kinship ties, neighborhood relationships, and participation in socially sanctioned gatherings formed the basis of women's social visibility and influence. Moreover, Bourdieu notes that individuals who possess inherited social capital, symbolized by a "great name," can convert casual acquaintances into meaningful social connections, amplifying their social authority (191). This dynamic resonates strongly with the hierarchical communities Austen portrays, where reputation and association with high-status individuals determine one's access to opportunities and legitimacy.

Taken together, the frameworks offered by Bourdieu and Garson's *Moral Taste* reveal the extent to which women's agency in Austen's novels is shaped by embodied cultural capital, aesthetic judgment, and social networks, rather than by economic or institutional power. These forms of capital operate subtly and symbolically, creating distinctions of taste, credibility, and belonging that determine who may exert influence within the social world. In Austen's fiction, aesthetic and sociocultural capital become primary mechanisms through which heroines negotiate restrictive gender systems, opening space for forms of moral and interpretive authority that resist, or strategically navigate, the limits imposed by patriarchal norms.

III. Pride and Prejudice: Ethical Judgement as Feminine Capital

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen presents female agency as a form of ethical discernment—an interpretive skill that allows a woman to navigate the patriarchal systems that constrain her. Elizabeth Bennet's power does not lie in rejecting marriage as an institution but in reading people accurately, judging character, and making moral rather than strategic choices within the limits available to her. Her "feminine capital" is therefore largely interpretive and

ethical, not economic or institutional. Critics such as Claudia Johnson argue that the novel frames “personal happiness as a liberating moral category,” allowing Elizabeth to resist marriages based solely on economic necessity (77). Others, such as Stephanie Barron, in “Investigating the Male Mystery,” suggest that Austen’s heroines operate as “private detectives,” gathering clues and deciphering character in order to “examine marriageable male prospects,” in a world where “women were expected to marry, transferring their economic dependence from father to husband” (Barron 1-3).

Building on past scholars' contributions, this section will show that Elizabeth’s interpretive power is also a form of cultural and moral capital, one that Austen treats as ethically grounded rather than socially manipulative. Elizabeth Bennet exemplifies how feminine agency operates through moral discernment and ethical judgment rather than through overt resistance. Through her refusals, confrontations, and reflective self-correction, Elizabeth converts interpretive intelligence into social power, though Austen makes clear that such power remains precarious within a system still governed by property, class, and patriarchal authority.

The Meryton Ball is the origin point of Elizabeth’s social and moral authority, while the encounter also exposes the social limitations of Regency-era women. While Darcy and Bingley are chatting at the ball, Darcy, talking about Elizabeth, states: “She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me” (Austen 7). This immediately exposes the gendered system Elizabeth is required to navigate; her worth, and women’s more broadly, is publicly assessed through beauty, desirability, and marriageability, and Darcy performs this assessment in front of the entire room. His dismissal echoes the social norms outlined above, as women are judged constantly, and their “value” is determined by men with higher rank. Darcy’s remark, therefore, reflects the masculine monopoly on evaluation. He exercises institutional power through his rank

and aesthetic authority, through his judgment, which are the very structures Elizabeth must work around.

Elizabeth does not respond directly to Darcy because doing so would violate Regency era expectations for female modesty and deference. Instead, she uses one of the only sanctioned tools available to her: reframing the moment socially. Elizabeth “told the story, however, with great spirit among her friends” (7). Here, Elizabeth converts public humiliation into power through wit, a form of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 186). She transforms Darcy’s insult into a social performance that entertains her group and strengthens her social network, “among her friends.” Her “lively, playful disposition, which delighted in anything ridiculous,” signals a strategic stance towards constraints placed on her (7). Elizabeth does not ‘fight back’ through rebellion; she fights back through ethically framed wit—a mode of expression that society allows women to use because it appears harmless. Yet Austen uses it to show how women carve out meaningful interpretive authority within oppression.

Austen continues to explore the pressures placed on women through the famous “accomplished woman” debate at Netherfield. Miss Bingley articulates the narrow forms of cultural capital structuring female worth, stating a “woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages” along with “a certain something in her air and manner of walking” (26). This reduces women to carefully curated aesthetic objects, valued for a series of ornamental performances rather than moral or intellectual virtues. Her phrasing reflects the logic of a conduct manual: women must “greatly surpass what is usually met with” merely to be considered “esteemed,” suggesting that female worth depends on relentless evaluation and comparison (26). Darcy complicates this standard by insisting that a truly accomplished woman must also “add something more substantial, in the improvement of

her mind by extensive reading,” thereby shifting the conversation from decorative skills toward intellectual cultivation (26). Yet it is Elizabeth who most effectively critiques the entire notion of accomplishment; her reply, “I rather wonder now at your knowing any,” exposes the inherent absurdity of such inflated expectations (26). Her wit does not overthrow the system, but it destabilizes it by revealing its contradictions, demonstrating how women like Elizabeth wield discernment and rhetorical agility as forms of feminine capital within a social order that denies them institutional power. Austen’s scene thus dramatizes how Elizabeth negotiates patriarchal standards ethically and intelligently, converting interpretive skill into a socially resonant, if constrained, form of agency.

When Elizabeth turns down Mr. Collins' marriage proposal, Austen redefines female agency as an ethical practice rather than a merely strategic or social one. Legally and socially, Mr. Collins is the “correct” choice for Elizabeth: he will inherit Longbourn, and he offers financial security. Thus, her refusal directly jeopardizes her family’s future. Within the logic of Regency marriage, declining Mr. Collins is almost irrational. Yet Elizabeth’s rationale centers entirely on ethical judgment: she states, “You could not make me happy, and I am convinced that I am the last woman in the world who could make you so” (74). The statement is striking for its clarity. Elizabeth grounds her refusal not in rebellion but in a rational assessment of incompatibility. The repetition of “could...make” phrases emphasizes a negation of the coercive logic that frames marriage as a unilateral male decision. Rather than deferring to Mr. Collins’s social authority as a man and future heir of Longbourn, Elizabeth asserts that to accept would be a violation of her moral integrity. Her rejection is a moment of ethical self-definition, demonstrating her refusal to convert her embodied cultural capital, wit, discernment, conversational skill, into the socially sanctioned form of capital the system demands: marriage to

the “correct” man. In doing so, she asserts that feminine capital should not be deployed merely for survival but must align with principles of mutual respect and individual happiness.

Darcy’s letter marks the pivotal moment when Elizabeth’s interpretive agency becomes self-reflexive, transforming her social wit into ethical insight. Reading it, she experiences a profound destabilization of her certainty: “How despicably I have acted!” she exclaims, recognizing that her judgments were shaped by “vanity, not love” (141). The word choice, “despicably,” and the sharpness of Elizabeth’s self-rebuke mark a shift in her self-understanding; this is one of the rare instances in the novel when she speaks inwardly with the same directness she usually reserves for others. Darcy’s account forces her to reconsider the interpretive framework through which she has read both Darcy and Wickham. Most crucially, she admits, “Till this moment, I never knew myself” (141). This shift arises not from Darcy’s authority but from her own ethical self-examination; she rereads his account “with a strong prejudice against everything he might say,” gradually uncovering the inconsistencies in her earlier judgments (138). Austen stages this internal process carefully, as Elizabeth traces how her “vanity, not love” and her “prejudice” rendered her “blind, partial, and prejudiced” (141). In recognizing these distortions, Elizabeth begins to cultivate the ethical authority that will define her growth, grounding her future judgments not in wit or pride but in honest self-scrutiny.

Austen reinforces Elizabeth’s transformation by lingering on the meticulous slowness of her interpretive process. When Elizabeth “put down the letter” to “weigh every circumstance with what she meant to be impartiality,” the phrasing exposes the tension between her intent to judge fairly and her habitual dependence on first impressions (139). The verb “weighed” suggests careful, almost judicial evaluation, yet Austen undercuts Elizabeth’s confidence by adding “what she meant to be impartiality,” implying that true objectivity is something she must

consciously strive for. As she “deliberated on the probability of each statement,” she realizes that both Darcy and Wickham present her only with “assertion,” a term that strips Wickham’s earlier charm of its persuasive veneer and forces her to confront the ungrounded nature of her prior certainty (139). Her resolve falters, and she turns “again” to the letter, rereading it not out of trust but out of a dawning sense that her interpretive framework may be flawed. Austen emphasizes this shift through the phrase “every line proved more clearly,” which suggests that evidence is now directing her judgment (139). The very event she once thought “impossible...to render Mr. Darcy’s conduct in it less than infamous” now reveals itself as “entirely blameless” (139). This reversal signals Elizabeth’s movement from socially performative wit to ethically grounded discernment: she is learning to apply interpretive rigor not outward, in the service of social navigation, but inward, toward the reshaping of her own character. In this moment, her feminine capital becomes moral capital, rooted in humility, intellectual honesty, and the willingness to revise her own narrative.

The willingness to re-interpret is what constitutes her deepest form of agency. Elizabeth’s capacity to read herself ethically, to scrutinize her own vanity and prejudice with the same acuity she once used to judge others, marks a shift from social wit to moral discernment. Here, she exceeds the ornamental forms of Regency feminine capital—accomplishment, charm, graceful conversation—by cultivating a rarer quality: principled self-knowledge. Austen suggests that such ethical self-correction, rather than obedience or romantic submission, is what ultimately renders Elizabeth worthy of partnership and true moral authority within a patriarchal world.

In her confrontation with Elizabeth, Lady Catherine embodies the ideology of marriage as a rigid social contract rooted in rank and lineage rather than personal judgment. Catherine arrives at Longbourn not merely to inquire but to command, insisting Elizabeth promise never to

marry Darcy and proclaiming that such a marriage would be “scandalous” and “a disgrace” (237, 240). Lady Catherine confronts Elizabeth with a barrage of imperatives and rhetorical questions: “This is not to be borne. Miss Bennet, I insist on being satisfied. Has he, has my nephew, made you an offer of marriage?” and “Miss Bennet, do you know who I am? I have not been accustomed to such language as this” (238). Lady Catherine’s repeated use of imperatives, questions, and moral admonitions is designed to assert dominance through social hierarchy, appealing to lineage, family honor, and the “interest” of all involved: “Because honor, decorum, prudence, nay interest forbid it...do not expect to be noticed by his family or friends, if you wilfully act against the inclination of all” (239). Lady Catherine’s rhetoric frames marriage as a transaction governed by patriarchal and aristocratic rules, where wealth, rank, and family approval are paramount and individual judgment is secondary.

Elizabeth, however, refuses to be intimidated. By responding calmly and asserting her equality, “He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman’s daughter; so far we are equal,” she strategically mobilizes the limited social capital available to her (239). Though she lacks Lady Catherine’s wealth and title, Elizabeth draws on moral authority, gentility, and verbal skill to claim legitimacy and negotiate power. Austen frames this interaction as an exercise in ethical and social negotiation: Elizabeth does not openly defy the social system, but she subtly reshapes the rules in her favor, converting her intellect, wit, and understanding of propriety into a form of influence. In this way, the passage illustrates how women in Austen’s world can wield constrained agency, exercising authority through the careful, ethical deployment of social and moral resources rather than through wealth or coercion.

Ultimately, Elizabeth’s transformation is not only a narrative of personal maturity but also Austen’s intervention in contemporary debates about women’s agency and social role.

Elizabeth is not a “new woman” in the modern sense—she does not reject marriage, economic dependence, or social convention. Instead, Austen proposes a model of female authority grounded in ethical discernment rather than rebellion. Elizabeth embodies a form of agency that is compatible with, yet quietly resistant to, patriarchal norms: she evaluates suitors morally rather than strategically, holds men accountable through judgment rather than submission, and insists on self-knowledge as the foundation for relational choice. In this way, Austen offers her readers not a radical model of female autonomy but a compelling alternative to passive femininity: a heroine whose authority emerges through integrity, intellectual independence, and the capacity for ethical self-correction. Elizabeth demonstrates that women’s power, though relational, constrained, and socially mediated, can nonetheless reshape the moral terms on which partnership, community, and respect are negotiated.

Across *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen dramatizes Elizabeth’s development not through dramatic rebellion but through a series of interpretive trials that hone her moral judgment. Each major encounter traces the evolution of a heroine who learns to align perception with ethical responsibility. These moments demonstrate how Elizabeth’s wit becomes disciplined into discernment, allowing her to navigate gendered power structures without capitulating to them. Rather than simply illustrating a “spirited” heroine, Austen uses Elizabeth’s interpretive journey to show how agency can emerge from clarity, humility, and principled action. This model of mature feminine authority also anticipates the dynamic at work in *Emma*, where the challenge is not discovering one’s agency but learning to wield inherited social and cultural power with ethical restraint.

IV. Emma: Ethical Maturation and the Responsible Use of Feminine Capital

While *Pride and Prejudice* explores feminine agency through moral discernment, *Emma* turns to a different but related question: how does a woman with real social power learn to use that power ethically? Unlike Elizabeth Bennet, whose limited economic and social position forces her to negotiate authority through wit and judgment, Emma Woodhouse begins the novel already possessing extraordinary forms of feminine capital; she is wealthy, well-educated, and socially central. She enjoys what Bourdieu describes as inherited social and cultural capital, and what Austen depicts as the subtle authority of taste, influence, and visibility (Bourdieu 191). Yet Austen's narrative is not a celebration of Emma's privilege—it is an examination of how easily such power can be misused, and how moral growth requires learning to temper social authority with humility, ethical awareness, and genuine understanding of others.

Scholars have long recognized *Emma* as one of Austen's most complex explorations of female power, in part because its heroine occupies an unusual position of class privilege, education, and social authority. Critics like Garson argue that Emma's authority stems from the "cultural capital she possesses as a birthright," with her refined taste and aesthetic judgment granting her subtle but potent social power (152). Others, like Eugene Goodheart in "Jane Austen's Errant Heroine," emphasize her imaginative excesses, suggesting that her errors foster emotional intimacy and narrative vitality rather than moral failure (597). Despite their differences, these readings converge in portraying Emma as a figure whose authority is culturally produced, socially contingent, and ethically unstable.

Emma's journey is neither a rejection of her social influence nor a celebration of unchecked imagination; instead, Austen uses Emma's mistakes to chart how cultural capital must be transformed into ethical discernment. The novel traces Emma's misuse of her social and aesthetic authority, her gradual recognition of the limits of feminine capital, and her realization

that true agency requires humility and a willingness to revise one's interpretive claims. As Garson notes, "because we are taught by Austen to value taste over performance and to recognize Emma's taste as fundamentally sound, we know that she is capable of reformation" (123). In this sense, *Emma* ultimately suggests that female authority becomes legitimate only when grounded in ethical self-knowledge and in a responsible use of the aesthetic and social power she has possessed all along.

From the opening paragraph of *Emma*, Austen signals that her heroine's authority is rooted not in economic power alone but in a birthright cultural capital—a cultivated ease with manners, aesthetics, and social judgment that aligns her with the moral authority of the gentry. The narrator introduces Emma through the advantages of being "handsome, clever, and rich... with very little to distress or vex her," signaling that she has been insulated from hardship and thus habituated to a world in which her opinions and tastes carry weight (Austen 7). This absence of distress is itself a form of privilege, suggesting that Emma's authority has been shaped as much by affirmation and social approval as by personal effort. Austen immediately frames Emma's "fancy" as socially consequential: her imagination and judgment, whether in matchmaking or orchestrating social visits, shape the life of Highbury itself (27). Emma's embodied cultural capital, her elegance, refined taste, poise, and conversational skill, reinforces this influence, allowing her to move through social space with confidence and authority unavailable to others, such as Harriet Smith, whose "defective" taste marks her as dependent and impressionable (Garson).

Emma's social capital amplifies her influence: she does not just participate in Highbury society but actively directs it, managing introductions and orchestrating relationships. Yet Austen critiques these privileges, noting she is "spoiled by being the cleverest of her family" and

warning that the true risks lie in the unregulated exercise of her power (36). Emma's talents in taste, judgment, and social skill are inseparable from the esteem she receives, and as Austen observes, "The real evils...were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself." (7) Her "disadvantages" are not a lack of skill but the unchecked extension of her capital, which makes her influential yet prone to error. Austen frames Emma's confidence as both admirable and ethically fragile: the very resources that mark her as exemplary also enable her missteps.

Emma's decision to take Harriet Smith as a protégé is the first major test of her aesthetic and social authority, framed from the start as a misuse of cultural capital. When Emma first meets Harriet, she appraises her through taste rather than ethics: "She was a very pretty girl...with a fine bloom...regular features...and a look of great sweetness," and so Emma is "quite determined to continue the acquaintance" (23-24). Harriet's prettiness and deference suit Emma's refined sensibilities, and Emma immediately imagines her as "exactly the young friend she wanted—exactly the something which her home required," reducing Harriet to a decorative addition (26). Austen reinforces this objectification by showing that Emma values Harriet's docility even more than her beauty: Harriet is "not clever," but has a "sweet, docile, grateful disposition...only desiring to be guided by any one she looked up to" (26), making her infinitely malleable. Harriet's "ignorance," as Mr. Knightley warns, serves as "hourly flattery" (37), confirming Emma's sense of superiority and blinding her to her own limitations.

Once Emma adopts Harriet, she assumes a quasi-masculine role of social educator. Austen makes this explicit: "She would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintance, and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and her manners" (24). The verbs "improve," "detach," and "form" signal not gentle guidance but the

imposition of Emma's aesthetic categories onto another person. This is Bourdieu's symbolic violence: the unquestioned belief that one's own taste is the universal standard (Bourdieu as cited in Lakowski 151). Emma's first major act of symbolic violence is detaching Harriet from the Martins. Knightley immediately sees the ethical fault, warning: "Hartfield will only put her out of conceit with all the other places she belongs to... They only give a little polish" (37). His critique is devastating: Emma's cultivation does not strengthen Harriet's mind but merely "polishes" her enough to feel alienated from her own class. Austen uses the metaphor of polish intentionally, as it implies surface refinement without ethical depth. Emma's aesthetic training destabilizes Harriet's social belonging instead of empowering her.

Emma's confidence in her own judgement produces further ethical failures when she attempts to direct Harriet's romantic life. Emma asserts, with sweeping arrogance, "I lay it down as a general rule... that if a woman doubts... she certainly ought to refuse him" (51). This "general rule" is not a moral insight but an excuse to override Harriet's inclination toward Robert Martin. Emma believes she has "given Harriet's fancy a proper direction," revealing that she sees desire itself as something she can engineer (41). Austen ironizes Emma's certainty: she assumes she can manufacture taste, romantic, aesthetic, and social, by sheer force of cultural superiority. The portrait scene crystallizes Emma's overreach. In painting Harriet, Emma literally reshapes her: "She meant to throw in a little improvement to the figure, to give a little more height, and considerably more elegance" (46). The scene is symbolic: Emma alters Harriet's image just as she attempts to alter her identity. Mr. Elton's rapturous praise, "the attractions you have added are infinitely superior to what nature gave," confirms Emma's dangerous belief that she can *create* Harriet (41). The portrait becomes a visual emblem of cultural capital gone wrong, marking the moment when Emma's aesthetic authority blinds her to human character.

The Box Hill excursion marks the moment when Emma's cultural and social capital shifts from charming to cruel. Until this moment, Emma has used her social influence playfully or paternalistically, but here it becomes ethically compromised. When she insults Miss Bates, she enacts the symbolic violence Bourdieu describes, wielding her elevated position and taste to publicly diminish someone defenseless (154). Frank Churchill's flirtatious provocation encourages Emma to display her wit for amusement: he frames her as arbiter of cleverness, feeding her sense of social dominance. Miss Bates responds with habitual humility, "I shall be sure to say three dull things as soon as ever I open my mouth," trusting Emma and the group to treat her kindly. Emma's reply, "Ah! ma'am, but there may be a difficulty... only three at once," turns Miss Bates's self-deprecation into public humiliation (347). Though she "did not immediately catch her meaning," the slight blush shows Miss Bates' pain, intensified by the poor woman's inability to defend herself due to her "good-humoured dependence" (347). Here, the mechanisms of symbolic power become painfully visible, revealing how easily Emma's refined social capital can translate into domination rather than benevolence.

Mr. Knightley's rebuke becomes the catalyst for Emma's moral awakening, forcing her to confront the ethical responsibilities that accompany her social power. Mr. Knightley's rebuke, "It was badly done, indeed!" serves as the ethical turning point of both the scene and Emma's development (351). He articulates what Emma's cultural capital has blinded her to: the moral obligations of privilege. By emphasizing Miss Bates's age, gentility, and poverty, "How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates?... a woman of her character, age, and situation?" Knightley reframes Emma's wit as oppressive when directed at her social inferior (351). He links her social authority to responsibility, insisting that "her situation should secure your compassion," and emphasizes that charm and intelligence must be tempered by humility. Yet one could also argue

that Knightley, in correcting Emma, replicates her pattern toward Miss Bates: both are enforcing hierarchical power relations, but critically, Knightley does so privately rather than publicly. Emma's reaction shows the depth of her reckoning: she "sunk back for a moment, overcome" and feels "agitated, mortified, grieved" (352). Unlike earlier embarrassments, this shame is profound, as she recognizes the truth in Knightley's words: "She felt it at her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates!" (352). Austen signals that this is a moral, not merely social, lapse. Austen's choice of "brutal" and "cruel" signals that this is not a minor lapse in etiquette but a moral wound, marking a significant moment in Emma's ethical maturation.

Austen also gestures toward a darker mode of feminine capital in this moment—the kind sociologists describe as relational aggression, the socially acceptable forms of female hostility available in patriarchal systems that forbid overt confrontation. Because women could not challenge opponents through physical force or public authority, their power often manifested through exclusion, subtle humiliation, sarcasm, or the manipulation of social networks. Characters such as Caroline Bingley or Lady Catherine embody this aggressive deployment of cultural authority, and Emma herself momentarily approaches this dynamic at Box Hill. Her witticism at Miss Bates's expense functions as a sanctioned form of cruelty, made possible precisely because wit and taste are the only socially legitimate weapons available to women of her class. Austen's aim, however, is not to condemn Emma as a "mean girl," but to show how easily feminine capital can drift into harm when unregulated by ethical judgment, illustrating the moral stakes of the maturation the novel traces.

Emma's attempt to reflect and correct herself after the incident further emphasizes her ethical maturation. She acknowledges that the Box Hill outing was "a morning more completely misspent... than any she had ever passed," and she resolves that "Miss Bates should never

again—no, never!” be treated with anything less than respect (353). Her decision to visit Miss Bates the next morning, motivated by “true contrition,” marks the beginning of Emma’s shift from aesthetic judgment to ethical discernment (353). Where she once valued Harriet for her usefulness as a social project and judged Miss Bates for her lack of refinement, Emma now recognizes moral worth independent of taste or status. At this moment, Austen rewrites Emma’s dominant mode of power. Before Box Hill, Emma’s cultural capital, her wit, taste, and refinement seem to elevate her; after Box Hill, those same traits are revealed as ethically insufficient unless grounded in compassion and the ability to apply the same standards to herself. The scene forces Emma (and the reader) to confront the limits of feminine capital when unmoored from moral responsibility. Box Hill becomes the hinge of the novel: the moment when Emma abandons the symbolic violence of her earlier matchmaking attempts and begins to cultivate the humility required for true ethical authority.

Emma’s deepest moment of self-reproof comes not after Box Hill, but in the aftermath of Harriet’s misplaced hope in Mr. Knightley. The narrator captures Emma’s dawning self-awareness through her repeated exclamation, “Harriet, poor Harriet!”—a line that signals where Emma locates the true moral crisis (377). The phrase becomes a refrain of conscience: Harriet is not simply unfortunate; she is “poor” because Emma’s influence, her social authority, her aesthetic judgment, and her confidence have misled her. The narrator reveals that Emma’s primary grief is not Frank Churchill’s deception, but “the scrape which he had drawn her into on Harriet’s account,” emphasizing that Emma reads the situation through the ethical lens of responsibility and harm (377). Emma recognizes that Harriet has been “a second time the dupe of her misconceptions and flattery,” a line that directly indicates Emma’s misuse of cultural capital (377). Austen’s word choice, “dupe,” “misconceptions,” “flattery,” shows the symbolic violence

Emma has enacted (in Bourdieu's terms) on Harriet, imposing her own classed imagination onto Harriet's desires (153). In recognizing Harriet as the true victim of her misjudgments, Emma confronts the ethical weight of her social and cultural influence, marking the emergence of a self-reflexive moral consciousness.

Emma's recognition of her role in shaping Harriet's misguided expectations marks a crucial stage in her ethical maturation, as she confronts the limits and responsibilities of her social and cultural authority. Crucially, Emma admits that she could have "prevented the indulgence and increase of such sentiments," revealing her newfound understanding of her authority: "Her influence would have been enough" (377). The shift from confident social engineer to self-critical agent marks a turning point in her ethical development. Emma sees that she has "risked her friend's happiness on most insufficient grounds"—an acknowledgment that her interpretive powers, her "fancy," have moral limits (377). The narrator intensifies this admission by letting Emma condemn herself: "with common sense...I am afraid I have had little to do" (377). This moment exposes how Emma's earlier social maneuvering lacked the very discernment she prized in herself. Emma's remorse deepens when she confronts Harriet's presumption of Mr. Knightley's affection. She asks, "How Harriet could ever have had the presumption...?", but the rhetorical question immediately turns against her (387). The narrator draws a direct causal line: "Was not that her own doing too? Who had been at pains to give Harriet notions of self-consequence but herself?" (387). This repetition of "herself" stresses Emma's responsibility for inflating Harriet's sense of rank, for leading her to read signs of interest where none existed. Harriet's transformation, "from being humble...to vain", is attributed explicitly to Emma's misguided instruction. This is Emma's clearest recognition that

not all forms of feminine capital are benign: her mentorship has altered Harriet's self-perception in ways that violate both class realities and ethical boundaries.

After Knightley confesses his love, Austen reveals the precise nature of Emma's moral development—not a sentimental self-sacrifice but a clear-sighted, ethically grounded recognition of her own faults. Far from collapsing in guilt, Emma experiences “the glow of attendant happiness” as she finally comprehends “the exact truth of the whole”: Harriet's hopes are “a delusion,” mistaken in precisely the way Emma's own fantasies have misled her throughout the novel (403). Her first response is intellectual clarity, not emotional excess, marking a shift from imaginative misreading to accurate moral discernment. Yet this clarity comes paired with genuine remorse: “She felt for Harriet, with pain and with contrition,” acknowledging the ethical implications of her influence (403). Importantly, Austen emphasizes what Emma does not do: she does not indulge in “any of that heroism of sentiment” that would require self-annihilating generosity. “Emma had it not,” the narrator states with characteristic dryness. Emma's growth is therefore realistic rather than idealized; she recognizes that she “had led her friend astray,” but also that it would be morally unreasonable to ask Knightley to “transfer his affection” to Harriet or to demand that she renounce him herself (403). Her judgment remains “as strong as her feelings,” showing that her maturation lies not in self-sacrifice but in bringing her feelings under the governance of ethical discernment. In this scene, Emma finally embodies the thesis of the novel: feminine capital (interpretive intelligence, social influence) becomes true agency only when it is guided by humility, responsibility, and moral clarity.

In *Emma*, Austen demonstrates that feminine capital, social influence, aesthetic judgment, and interpretive intelligence carry ethical weight. Through Emma's early misuse of her privilege, her objectification of Harriet, and the humiliation of Miss Bates, the novel shows

how social power can harm others when untempered by moral awareness. Knightley's rebukes and Emma's ensuing self-reflection mark the transformation from unchecked authority to responsible agency. By the end, Emma's growth is not sentimental but ethical: her intelligence and social influence are integrated with humility, responsibility, and compassion, showing that true female agency requires the disciplined, ethical use of the very privileges she has possessed from the start.

Conclusion

In *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, Jane Austen presents a vision of female agency that is subtle, socially mediated, and ethically grounded. Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse demonstrate that women's power in Regency England did not rely solely on wealth, inheritance, or social rank, but on the careful cultivation of moral discernment, taste, and social influence—forms of what this paper has called “feminine capital.” For Elizabeth, agency emerges through ethical judgment and the interpretive skill to read both others and herself, allowing her to navigate patriarchal constraints while asserting moral autonomy. For Emma, inherited cultural and social authority carries responsibility; her ethical maturation arises from recognizing the consequences of her influence, tempering wit and taste with humility, and exercising social power responsibly. Across both novels, Austen emphasizes that true female authority depends not on rebellion against societal norms, but on the disciplined, ethical use of intellect, virtue, and social acumen. By linking agency to ethical self-knowledge and social responsibility, Austen envisions a model of women's power that is both constrained by, and subtly transformative within, the patriarchal structures of her world.

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