THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

JOHN SUTHERLAND

Can Jane Eyre Be Happy?

More Puzzles in Classic Fiction

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fashion accessory. Too little attention to breeding leads to the jungle of the Price household at Portsmouth—with its stravaiging pack of 'ill-bred' young dogs. None the less, Portsmouth—for all its undisciplined breeding—produced William and Fanny. Mansfield Park has produced Julia and Maria. Austen would seem to endorse the principle known to all dog breeders and eugenicists—that breeds must be regularly reinvigorated from outside the pedigree line. The aristocratic Bertrams, on the verge of inbreeding (as was the pug in 1810), need an admixture of mongrelized Price blood.

The World's Classics *Mansfield Park* is edited by James Kinsley, with an introduction by Marilyn Butler.

How vulgar is Mrs Elton?

In 1994 Pat Rogers published an elegant article on a small piece of fashionable (or perhaps not) slang in *Emma*, entitled: '"Caro Sposo": Mrs Elton, Burneys, Thrales, and Noels'.[1] The Italian endearment ('dear husband') is associated indelibly in the reader's mind with Mrs Elton (née Augusta Hawkins)—heiress of Bristol, whose money is very new and breeding rather dubious. We first hear her favourite phrase when she returns, victrix, with the Revd Elton ('Mr E.') in tow as her newly wed husband.

Among the flood of offensive things which Mrs Elton pours out to Emma (whom she regards as a bested opponent in love) one remark causes unforgivable offence. Mrs Elton is talking of the descriptions her husband has given her of his circle at Highbury. '"My friend Knightley" had been so often mentioned,' she tells Emma, 'that I was really impatient to see him; and I must do my caro sposo the justice to say that he need not be ashamed of his friend' (p. 250). Fuming after their meeting, Emma thinks savagely that her new neighbour at the vicarage is 'A little upstart, vulgar being, with her Mr. E., and her *caro sposo*, and her resources, and all her airs of pert pretension and under-bred finery'.

As Rogers points out, Mrs Elton's slangy speech, particularly her 'easy application of a cant Italianate phrase . . . is a strong pointer towards her affectation and vulgarity'. But *caro sposo*, he further suggests, may be something more than 'a mark of pretension'. Arguably it carries a subtler satirical load. He goes on to survey the rise and

fall of the phrase (in the mouth of the middle- and upper-class English) as something fashionable. Its heyday was in the 1770s and 1780s, when it was often used in the conversation and correspondence of younger members of noble and literate families, such as the Noels, Burneys, and Thrales. It was less commonly used in the 1790s, largely because it had become hackneyed. The latest non-ironic usage Rogers can find is 1808 (used by an elderly member of the Burney family). By this date, also the putative period of *Emma*, *caro sposo* would be very vieux jeu—rather like someone in the 1990s resurrecting trendy jargon from the swinging sixties ('Cool, man!'). Such cultural infelicities make the sensitive listener's skin crawl. Rogers's history of the currency of *caro sposo* is learned and wholly convincing. He concludes that 'Mrs Elton's attempts at "smart talk" reveal her not just as uncultivated, but as badly out of date with fashionable slang . . . people were not saying *caro sposo* any more'.

It's a satisfying demonstration of the value of historical philology to the general reader. Unfortunately textual bibliography steps in to complicate things. Rogers relies on the R. W. Chapman text (on which the 1988 World's Classics edition is also based). When he prepared *Emma* (initially for the Clarendon Press in 1923) Chapman made some silent alterations to the original 1816 text which materially affect the *caro sposo* business. In the first (1816) edition the offending words of Mrs Elton read as follows: '"My friend Knightley" had been so often mentioned, that I was really impatient to see him; and I must do my cara sposo the justice to say that he need not be ashamed of his friend. Knightley is quite the gentleman.' Not *caro sposo*, that is, but the ungrammatical *cara sposo*.

The next time Mrs Elton uses the jarring term is after having received some routine courtesy from Emma's father over dinner. If anything, the notion that her aged

parent might be sexually interested in Mrs Elton infuriates the heroine even more than the gross impertinence about 'my friend Knightley'. 'I wish you had heard his gallant speeches to me at dinner,' Mrs Elton tells a frozen-faced Miss Woodhouse. 'Oh! I assure you I begin to think my cara sposa would be absolutely jealous. I fancy I am rather a favourite.'

Now it is 'cara sposa' which Chapman again silently emends to 'caro sposo'. His editorial judgement was evidently that these linguistic lapses were printer's errors which might be cleaned up without distracting comment. English printers often make errors with foreign phrases, particularly when working from handwritten copy-text.

Not all editors and readers (when it is pointed out to them) agree with Chapman's correction, on the grounds that what Austen is trying to get across—with sly wit—is Mrs Elton's blundering ignorance of Italian. Such is the line taken by the Penguin Classic and the 'Norton Critical Edition' editors, who religiously retain the misspelled versions of 1816. These lapses from strict grammatical correctness, it is assumed, are intended satire on Austen's part. She knows, Emma knows, we know, Mrs Elton has got *caro sposo* wrong. The only person who doesn't know is Mrs Elton herself.

What, then, are the arguments in favour of Chapman's emending all the usages to 'caro sposo'? First, Mrs Elton—incorrigibly tactless as she may be—is a woman of the world. She has seen more of that world (specifically Bath, as she incessantly points out) than Emma. She has almost certainly been to the theatre. Much slang and cant Italian would be heard in these places. Bristol, where Miss Hawkins originated, is a large cosmopolitan city (it was also the centre of the British end of the African slave trade, from which we may assume the Hawkins money came—Sir John Hawkins was a well-

known slave-trader and Austen presumably intends us to pick up the allusion). From her comments on music, the young Augusta Hawkins evidently had the services of an expensive governess. She is obnoxious, but no fool. It is quite clear in the above exchange about Mr Woodhouse's gallantries that she knows she is galling Emma: she *wants* to gall her rival and does it with malicious and practised expertise. The phrase 'caro sposo', as Pat Rogers demonstrates, was extremely well known by the early nineteenth century—so well known that people of real *ton* took great care not to use it any more. One would have to be very vulgar and very ignorant to misquote or mispronounce it in 1810. And, as even Emma grudgingly admits, Mrs Elton does have a modicum of 'accomplishment'. She quotes Gay and Gray from memory (reasonably accurately) and uses French terms like *carte blanche* and *chaperon* correctly. Mr Elton is a conceited man; but an educated clergyman like himself who has been to university would not marry a complete ignoramus, and if his wife were consistently misusing Italian to his public embarrassment he would have a quiet word with her ('*caro sposo*, my love, *caro sposo*!').

There is also some textual support for the correction. Immediately after the first 'cara sposo' insult, a furious Emma inwardly passes the irreversible verdict: 'Insufferable woman . . . A little upstart, vulgar being, with her Mr E., and her *cara sposo*, and her resources, and all her airs of pert pretension and under-bred finery'. It could be argued that Emma is spitefully mimicking the gross error, or that she does not register it as an error. But if she did mark 'cara' as a mistake, surely Austen would have indicated her heroine's contempt for the solecism a little more clearly for the duller reader's benefit. It is not, on the face of it, an Austenish kind of humour. It seems more likely that the printer was unsure of the spelling from

the author's manuscript and hopefully reproduced what he had printed a few lines up.

There is a third use of the phrase which, I think, lends further support to Chapman's decision to correct and regularize. In volume III, chapter 6, during the planning for the picnic, a relentlessly talkative Mrs Elton—whose proposals are becoming more and more impractical—declares: 'I wish we had a donkey. The thing would be for us all to come on donkies, Jane, Miss Bates, and me—and my caro sposo walking by (p. 331)' (the 1816 text has 'caro sposo'). Now it seems she can get it right. Why then did she butcher the phrase two different ways a few weeks earlier? One could argue that Mr Elton has finally had a word in her ear, or she may have been tactfully instructed by her dear Miss Fairfax, who knows quite a lot about Italy.[2] But if that were the case, Mrs Elton would surely have avoided 'caro sposo' altogether in these latter days, embarrassed at the awful gaffes she had made earlier.

This is a very tiny puzzle. Its value is that it obliges readers to determine for themselves just how vulgar they think Mrs Elton is, and what kind of vulgar. Is she the kind of grossly uneducated woman who would mangle a well-known Italian phrase? Or is she merely someone who would use a once-fashionable phrase correctly, but long after it had ceased to be fashionable, and in provincial company where it would strike her listeners as disgustingly 'slangy'? Is she coarse; or merely egotistic and insensitive to social nuance? Readers will determine the issue for themselves; myself, I tend towards Chapman's view of Mrs Elton—she is vulgar, but not so ignorantly vulgar that she would say 'cara sposo'.

The World's Classics *Emma* is edited by James Kinsley, with an introduction by Terry Castle.

the user to freeze the result, the better to make his count . . . By 1770 the logic of this pursuit of ever finer time measurement led to the appearance of the first center-seconds watches with fractions of seconds marked on the dial; the earliest I have seen show fifths. Who cared about fifths of seconds in those days?' Laurence Sterne evidently did.

3. H. K. Russell, '*Tristram Shandy* and the Techniques of the Novel', *Studies in Philology*, 42 (1945), 589.

Mansfield Park

1. Tony Tanner, *TLS*, 25 June 1995.
2. The full text reads: 'She had not time for such cares. She was a woman who spent her days in sitting nicely dressed on a sofa, doing some long piece of needlework, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children' (pp. 16–17). Conceivably, it could be the needlework which is of 'little use and no beauty', but I prefer to think Austen meant Lady Bertram.
3. I discuss this question, which remains somewhat ambiguous, in *Is Heathcliff a Murderer?* (Oxford, 1996), 5–9.

Emma

1. *The Review of English Studies*, NS 45: 177 (1994), 70–5.
2. The excellent education Jane has received is described on pp. 145–6 of the World's Classics edition.

Oliver Twist, Great Expectations

1. As many commentators note, there is ambiguity about the historical setting of *Oliver Twist*, and some perplexing pockets of anachronism. The Bow Street Runners who come to the Maylie household, for example, would have been abolished and replaced by modern policemen, around the same time that the Bloody Code was abolished in 1829. In chapter 9, Oliver overhears the Jew musing about five 'fine fellows' who have gone to the gallows—for robbery, one assumes—and never 'peached' on him. They too would seem to be victims of the pre-1829 Bloody Code. It is arguable that we are to assume the execution of Fagin to take place in one of these pockets of anachronism, in the mid-1820s, a decade before other sections of the narrative.
2. As Angus Wilson sardonically notes in his Penguin Classics edition of *Oliver Twist* the murder of a London tart by her ponce

cannot have been all that rare an event in the London underworld of the 1830s.

3. Oddly enough, in *Sikes and Nancy*, the 'reading version' of *Oliver Twist*, Dickens altered the episode, so Nancy does indicate Sikes by surname. See the World's Classics edition *Sikes and Nancy and Other Public Readings*, edited by Philip Collins.
4. Philip Collins, *Dickens and Crime* (London, 1964), 281.
5. *Great Expectations* (Everyman Paperback, ed. R. Gilmour, London, 1992), 442.

Jane Eyre

1. For the popularity of the Bluebeard story in the nineteenth century, see Juliet McMaster, 'Bluebeard at Breakfast', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 8 (1981), 197–230.
2. See Sherrill E. Grace, 'Courting Bluebeard with Bartok, Atwood, and Fowles: Modern Treatment of the Bluebeard Theme', *The Journal of Modern Literature*, 11: 2 (July 1984), 245–62.
3. The 'Sister Anne on the Battlements scene' in the Bluebeard story is alluded to in Jane's visit to the towers of Thornfield Hall with Mrs Fairfax, pp. 111–12.
4. See J. A. Sutherland, *Victorian Novelists, Publishers and Readers* (London, 1995), 55–86.
5. As Michael Mason points out, in his Penguin Classics edition of *Jane Eyre* (Harmondsworth, 1996, p. viii), there is confusion as to whether Bertha is confined on the second or the third floor. She is no madwoman in an attic, or locked in a tower (as the 1944 film suggests).
6. See, for example, the allusions to Byron's *The Corsair* (1814) by the Ingram party (p. 189 of the World's Classics edition).

Shirley

1. According to her nephew, James Austen-Leigh, Jane Austen 'took a kind of parental interest in the beings who she had created , and did not dismiss them from her mind when she had finished her last chapter'. Of *Emma*'s characters she told him 'that Mr Woodhouse survived his daughter's marriage, and kept her and Mr Knightley from settling at Donwell, about two years' (James E. Austen-Leigh, *Memoir of Jane Austen* (1871), ed. R. W. Chapman, Oxford (1926), 157).