Analyzing the Source of Wealth of Mr. Suckling and Mrs. Elton in Jane Austen's Emma

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Abstract
In this paper, I discuss the source of wealth of Mr. Suckling and Mrs. Elton in *Emma* (1815) by focusing on the campaign against the slave trade in Britain and the implications of their origin, family name, and estate. Mr. Suckling is a shadowy minor character whose history is hardly mentioned. However, his origin, family name, and estate may provide a hint to help the readers understand his characterization. He is from Bristol, which was the center of the British triangular trade with the colonies, and his wife and sister-in-law Mrs. Elton are from Bristol as well. *Emma* was written in the aftermath of the 1807 abolition of the slave trade. The Sucklings' strong connection with Bristol implies that their family business involved the slave trade. Moreover, Mr. Suckling's family name and estate—Suckling and Maple Grove—hint sugar, one of the primary products that Britain traded with the colonies. The family name "Suckling" can be easily associated with the words "sucking" and/or "coerced." Both of Mrs. Elton's maiden and married names imply the slave trade, too. Mr. Suckling's and Mrs. Elton's fashioning themselves as a gentlemen and gentlewoman from a good family represents Austen's awareness of the social mobility by which the new rich are accepted by their social betters.

Keywords: Austen, Bristol, New Money, Slave Trade, Slavery, Social Mobility, Thomas Clarkson

Introduction

In this paper, I discuss the source of wealth of Mr. Suckling and Mrs. Elton in *Emma* (1815) by focusing on the campaign against the slave trade in Britain and the implications of their origin, family name, and estate. Mr. Suckling is a shadowy minor character whose history is hardly mentioned. However, together with the case of Mrs. Elton, hints that his wealth comes from slave trade are provided. Jane Fairfax's allusion to the slave trade by the terms "offices for the sale" and "the human flesh" and Mrs. Elton's sudden assurance that "Mr. Suckling was always rather a friend to the abolition" in Vol. 2, Ch.17 in *Emma* reveal Austen's interest in the abolition of the slave trade, a significant political issue in her lifetime, and her dislike of the new rich who benefited from trading in human beings. Focusing the history of the anti-slave trade campaign in Britain, I would like to analyze the changes that occurred in the British class society of Austen's lifetime and the art of Austen's criticism and satire.

Austen's interest in British imperialism and the campaign against the slave trade

Irene Collins writes that at the end of the eighteenth century, the educated British public had an interest in all matters related to the British navy and colonies (14). Following this suggestion, I would like to clarify the extent of Austen's concern for British imperialism and the issues of the slave trade. On January 24, 1813, she wrote to her sister Cassandra as follows: "We quite run over with Books. *she* [*sic*, Mrs. Austen] has got Sir John Carr's Travels in Spain from Miss B. & *I* am reading a Society-Octavo, an Essay on the Military Police & Institutions of the British Empire, by Capt. Pasley of the Engineers, a book which I protested against at first, but which upon trial I find delightfully written & highly entertaining. I am as much in love with the Author as I ever was with Clarkson or Buchanan, or even the two M^{r} Smiths of the city. The first soldier I ever sighed for; but he does write with extraordinary force & spirit."

In this short passage, three persons were mentioned who were greatly concerned with British imperialism and the slave trade. Pasley was Charles Pasley (1780–1861), who was an expert in artillery and sieges. He argued that after the independence of America, Britain should make the best use of its colonies to send soldiers and sailors to fight overseas and expand its territory. His *Essay on the Military Policy and Institutions of the British Empire* was published in 1810 and went through four impressions by 1812, earning a good reputation. Clarkson refers to Thomas Clarkson (1760–1846), a leading campaigner against the slave trade, while Buchanan was Claudius Buchanan (1766–1815), a theologian who contributed to the spread of Christianity in India. It is evident that Austen had great interest in the expansion and dark side of the British colonies.

To understand the background of Jane Fairfax's allusion to the slave trade in *Emma*, we should pay attention among these three to Clarkson. Clarkson was born in 1760 in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire. His father was a priest of the Church of England and master of Wisbech Grammar School. He studied math at St John's College, Cambridge, and received his BA in 1783. He then continued his studies at Cambridge to enter the Church of England. In 1785 he applied for a Latin essay competition at the university with the paper entitled "Anne liceat invitos in servitutem dare?" (Is it right to enslave men against their will?), and won the first prize (Gifford 7, Takei 192–93). After being translated into English, the essay was published as *An Essay of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African* in 1786. Thereafter, for

the rest of his life he engaged in the campaign for the abolition of the slave trade between Britain and the African Continent.

This book immediately gained a good reputation that brought Clarkson into contact with others involved in the anti-slave trade campaign, such as Granville Sharp (1735–1813) and William Wilberforce (1759–1833). In May 1787, the Committee for Abolition of the African Slave Trade was founded, which Clarkson joined. Thereafter Clarkson was in charge of collecting testimony from ex-sailors in slave ships and confiscating handcuffs and fetters used to torture slaves. From 1787 to 1794, he travelled around England, 35,000 miles in total. He frequented Liverpool and Bristol because these towns were major ports for the slave trade. His activity was exhausting and dangerous. I would like to introduce a few examples from his writing. In Liverpool, after receiving a blackmail letter, he was attacked in the harbor and nearly drowned (Clarkson 1:204–05). In Bristol, a slave merchant bribed witnesses on Clarkson's side, who were then sent to the sea (Clarkson 1:213). When he travelled for sixty miles to meet a surgeon who had highly esteemed Clarkson's campaigns at first, the surgeon suddenly refused to testify for Clarkson from fear of losing the favor of wealthy patients returned from the colonies (Clarkson 2:20). Despite all the enthusiasm and contributions of the campaigners, the slave trade continued because the MPs included gentry with estates in the colonies and merchants who made fortunes from the slave trade (Morgan, *Bristol* 132, Morgan, *Slavery* 54, Sherwood and Sherwood 28, 74). The Abolition Bill was declined in Parliament in 1804 and 1805, and finally passed in 1807. Clarkson's achievement and contribution were applauded by William Wordsworth, who wrote the poem "To Thomas Clarkson" (1807). Austen would have read this poem.

The implication of the family name and estate of Mr. Suckling

Emma was published in December 1815, and the story is set in 1813–14 (Moody), exactly the period when Austen was writing this novel. As stated above, in 1807 the slave trade was outlawed in Britain. Slave ships were forbidden to depart from the colonies, and in 1808, slaves were refused entry to Britain. However, patrolling was carried out in very limited fashion and penalties were quite low (Southam 13). The illegal slave trade continued by camouflaging the nationality of the ships or forging a certificate for the sale of a ship (Sherwood and Sherwood 38, 72, 74). Sugar cane, coffee, and tobacco grown in the colonies sold dearly in Britain and the slave trade was a profitable business, a goldmine for Britons. Laws and penalties were nothing in light of the high returns.

Considering this historical background, the dialogue of Jane Fairfax and Mrs. Elton on the slave trade in Vol 2, Chapter 17, may be read as Jane's hinting at her suspicion that the Sucklings rose through the slave trade and that the present Mr. Suckling was involved in the illegal slave trade. Just before this dialogue, she is annoyed at Mrs. Elton's advice to seek the job of a governess in any family in Mrs. Elton's circle. She refuses Mrs. Elton's help and counterattacks with the following remark: "There are places in town, offices, where inquiry would soon produce something—Offices for the sale—not quite of human flesh—but of human intellect" (325). Mrs. Elton replies, "Oh! my dear, human flesh! You quite shock me; if you mean a fling at the slave-trade, I assure you Mr. Suckling was *always rather* a friend to the abolition" (325, italics mine). Her reply reflects the fact that because of the influence of the Dissenters, by the 1780s celebrities in Bristol were increasingly aware of the inhumanity and immorality of this

trade; Bristol was the first English provincial town to set up a committee opposing the slave trade, and Bristolians were divided for and against the slave trade (Morgan, *Bristol* 150). Mrs. Elton's astonishment and sudden jump to the slave trade and the term "always rather" suggest that the Sucklings feigned abolitionist sentiments after they had gained enough money to purchase a country estate—Maple Grove.

Obviously, Mrs. Elton is agitated by Jane's allusion to the slave trade, and makes a slip of the tongue about the fact that they are upstarts. In her habitual praise of Mr. Suckling's wealth and his estate Maple Grove, she passionately attacks a new family who recently moved from Birmingham to the neighborhood of Maple Grove:

I have quite a horror of upstarts. Maple Grove has given me a thorough disgust to people of that sort; for there is a family in that neighbourhood who are such an annoyance to my brother and sister from the airs they give themselves! Your description of Mrs. Churchill made me think of them directly. People of the name of Tupman, very lately settled there, and encumbered with many low connections, but giving themselves immense airs, and expecting to be on a footing with the old established families. A year and a half is the very utmost that they can have lived at West Hall; and how they got their fortune nobody knows. They came from Birmingham, which is not a place to promise much, you know, Mr. Weston. One has not great hopes from Birmingham. I always say there is something direful in the sound: but nothing more is positively known of the Tupmans, though a good many things I assure you are suspected; and yet by their manners they evidently think themselves equal even to my brother, Mr. Suckling, who happens to be one of their nearest neighbours. It is infinitely too bad. Mr. Suckling, who has been eleven years a resident at Maple Grove, and whose father had it before him—I believe, at least—I am almost sure that old Mr. Suckling had completed the purchase before his death. (335–36)

She is so upset that she confesses that Mr. Suckling has been living in Maple Grove for only eleven years and the late Mr. Suckling bought the estate just before his death. She usually boasts of her connection with good families and the elegance and luxury of Maple Grove. However, the Sucklings are indeed upstarts who have continued for just two generations. They recently managed to rise socially with new money earned by trade, and it was not long before that their family estate was purchased. This scene typifies Austen's satire because an upstart ridicule another upstart and reveals she is also an upstart.

In addition to Mrs. Elton's blunder, the names Suckling and Maple Grove imply that the Sucklings engaged in the slave trade. Deirdre Le Faye states that Maple Grove was modelled on the village of Clifton to the northwest of Bristol (*World* 271). In this village, wealthy slave traders and planters returning from the West Indies settled after their retirement. Several houses built there remain today whose locations have been identified by Rachel Lang, a researcher from the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slave-Ownership at University College London (Smith). Maple Grove might be a product of the slave trade.

Moreover, the names Suckling and Maple Grove hint at *sucre* (meaning sugar in French) and maple sugar. Sugar was one of the primary products that Britain traded with the colonies and played a significant role in Bristol's prosperity in the eighteenth century (Morgan, *Bristol* 184–88). James Walvin notes, Bristol "was home to groups of

prosperous sugar merchants.” Bristol thrived thanks to slavery and sugar trade (see the photos 1-2 below), and the Sucklings likely benefited from slaves and sugar. The family name “Suckling” can be easily associated with “sucking” and “coerced.” The family business of the Sucklings would then be sugar trade with the colonies, and their fortune might have been made by coercing “human flesh” ―slaves.

Photo 1. No 7 Great George Street, Bristol was the home of John Pinney (1740–1818), now Georgian House Museum. Pinney owned a sugar plantation in the island of Nevis, West Indies. Photo by Akiko TAKEI.

Photo 2. Hotel du Vin, Bristol. This hotel was Lewin’s Mead Sugar House (1714–1837). Photo by Akiko TAKEI.

New money comes to Highbury

Jane escapes inclusion in Mrs. Elton's circle because the obstacle to her marrying Frank Churchill is solved by Mrs. Churchill's sudden death, after which she no longer needs Mrs. Elton's unwanted patronage. However, the heroine Emma Woodhouse must still welcome Mrs. Elton as a new resident of Highbury and maintain harmony with her.

Social standing based upon family connections and wealth is maintained quite well in Highbury, where the Woodhouses are located on the top of social ladder. They belong to gentry that had continued for several generations and are the richest in Highbury. Therefore, before actually meeting Mrs. Elton, Emma already despises her as an upstart with bad upbringing.

This passage is the first example where Emma guesses who Mrs. Elton is:

Of the lady, individually, Emma thought very little. She was good enough for Mr. Elton, no doubt; accomplished enough for Highbury—handsome enough—to look plain, probably, by Harriet's side. As to connection, there Emma was perfectly easy; persuaded, that after all his own vaunted claims and disdain of Harriet, he had done nothing. On that article, truth seemed attainable. *What* she was, must be uncertain; but *who* she was, might be found out; and setting aside the 10,000l. it did not appear that she was at all Harriet's superior. She brought no name, no blood, no alliance. Miss Hawkins was the youngest of the two daughters of a Bristol—merchant, of course, he must be called; but, as the whole of the profits of his mercantile life appeared so very moderate, it was not unfair to guess the dignity of his line of trade had been very moderate also. Part of every winter she had been used to spend in Bath; but Bristol was her home, the very heart of Bristol; for though the father and mother had died some years ago, an uncle remained—in the law line—nothing more distinctly honourable was hazarded of him, than that he was in the law line; and with him the daughter had lived. Emma guessed him to be the drudge of some attorney, and too stupid to rise. And all the grandeur of the connection seemed dependent on the elder sister, who was *very well married*, to a gentleman in a *great way*, near Bristol, who kept two carriages! That was the wind-up of the history; that was the glory of Miss Hawkins. (196–97)

Mary DeForest argues, "the emphasis on Bristol for four times in the short passage, particularly the angry satisfaction with which Bristol is substituted for Bath, implies that Bristol had unsavory connections." Bristol was the first city in Britain to develop the slave trade; between the 1730s and the early 1740s, this town was a leading port for the slave trade (Morgan, *Bristol* 132–33, Sherwood and Sherwood 80, Giles). Clarkson wrote of his first impression of Bristol as follows: "I found that people talked very openly on the subject of the Slave-trade. They seemed to be well acquainted with the various circumstances belonging to it. There were facts, in short, in every body's mouth, concerning it; and every body seemed to execrate it though no one thought of its abolition" (1:151). It is unsurprising that Emma instantly conceives a prejudice against Mrs. Elton's upbringing.

As well as Mr. Suckling, both Mrs. Elton's maiden and married names imply her connection with the slave trade. Her maiden name Hawkins corresponds to John Hawkins (1532–95), the pioneer of the slave trade in the Elizabethan era (DeForest, Sherwood and Sherwood 16–17). Her married name Elton might come from the Elton

family in Bristol (Le Faye, "Bristol" 191). The Eltons succeeded in the grass business and pottery, converted to the slave trade, and settled in Cliffton. By 1750, they owned eight slave ships in total, including one named *The Elton*. The name Elton remains in Bristol as Elton Road running from Salthouse Park to the town center in Clevedon (Cork). As shown by Mrs. Elton's elder sister's marriage with Mr. Suckling, who also comes from Bristol, as already mentioned, a circle of slave traders and planters returned from the colonies is supposed to have formed in Bristol.

Emma tries to underestimate Mrs. Elton's fortune, but her dowry of 10,000 pounds a year is fairly good property (DeForest). Together with Mr. Elton's income, it is enough for her to maintain the lifestyle of the well-to-do. Mr. Hawkins's income is probably less than that of the Sucklings and he could not afford to buy a country estate. In any case, Mrs. Elton's fortune is far greater than Emma's estimation.

As soon as Mrs. Elton comes to Highbury, Emma's initial dislike of her increases. For instance, Emma is angry at Mrs. Elton's comparison of Maple Grove with Emma's estate Hartfield and boast of a fashionable barouche landau because her pride in the inherited estate and fortune for generations is injured. In social mixings in Highbury, Mrs. Elton is respected much more than Emma because she is a newly-wed woman. When the ball is started by Mr. Weston and Mrs. Elton, Emma, who usually enjoys being unmarried, is so irritated with having to "stand second to Mrs. Elton" (352) as to think of marriage. In addition to her standing as a married woman, Mrs. Elton owns much that Emma does not, such as opportunities for holidaying, friends of the same age, rides in a fashionable carriage, and an expensive pearl necklace. Because of their unique nature and glow different from those of other gem stones, pearls were highly valued; wearing pearls was a luxury limited to the privileged (Nagai 783). In nineteenth-century Europe, necklaces and earrings of large pearls were popular among royal families, and the growing middle classes likewise purchased pearls, especially small seed pearls (Landman 88, 90). In Austen's world, only Mrs. Elton is seen to be wearing pearls (Eleanor Tilney inherits a set of pearls from her mother, but she is not seen with them). Mrs. Elton is likely to have chosen as large a set as she could afford. As Gillian Ballinger and Carrie Wright note, Mrs. Elton wears and boasts of the pearls to display her wealth and overwhelm other women considered superior to her. Although Emma's social standing in Highbury is unchanged, whenever Emma meets Mrs. Elton, she cannot help recognizing the fearlessness and vitality peculiar to the new rich.

Conclusion

The descriptions of Mr. Suckling and Mrs. Elton, especially the emphases on their Bristol origin, portray the existence of those newly rich from colonial business without much criticism after the abolition of the slave trade. The narrator voices the abolitionists' disapproval through Jane's allusion to the slave trade and a good family's contempt for new money through Emma's dislike of Mrs. Elton. However, the British public, such as Highbury residents, was not perturbed by the evil of buying and selling human beings and welcomed the new rich and their money. Mr. Suckling's and Mrs. Elton's love for anything luxurious and fashionable is satirized, but their wealth was admired by those with lower incomes. Their settlement in the country estate demonstrates the flexibility and mobility by which they were accepted in the British upper-middle classes.

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