

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/jane-austen-tom-lefroy-kipling-emma-persuasion-love-decoding-pride-prejudice-11637794443>

OPINION | COMMENTARY

## *Breaking News From 1795: Jane Austen Falls in Love*

A poem in the author's irresistible novel 'Emma' may reveal the Irishman who captured her heart.

---

By Colleen A. Sheehan

Nov. 25, 2021 2:59 pm ET



A portrait of Jane Austen dated 1810.

PHOTO: UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Jane Austen's enchanting novels about love and marriage are unrivaled in Western literature. It is an irony that the author herself never married. Was she ever in love?

Rudyard Kipling certainly thought so. In his poem "Jane's Marriage," the dashing but financially shaky Captain Wentworth of Austen's "Persuasion" stands in for the love of Jane's life. Some scholars say Austen's beloved was a young Irishman named Tom Lefroy. Others dismiss the idea of such a romance as poppycock. Austen's relatives destroyed most of her letters, so the matter has primarily been one of speculation.

Here's what we know: In December 1795 Jane, who had just turned 20, met Tom Lefroy, a few weeks her junior, when he visited relatives in Hampshire. A cheeky flirtation soon overtook them, so much so that Austen claimed they broke the bonds of 18th-century

propriety. “Imagine to yourself everything most profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together,” she wrote her sister Cassandra. Austen considered her “Irish friend” “good-looking” and “very gentlemanlike,” picturing him in the role of Henry Fielding’s cocky and comic hero, Tom Jones.

Tom’s attentions toward Jane were amusingly noted by family and friends, causing him a good deal of embarrassment. Progress was nonetheless made, it seems, for Jane expected an offer of marriage. But this was not to be. Shortly thereafter Lefroy returned to London, a development possibly orchestrated by relatives who wished to shield him from a financially imprudent match. Whatever feelings there might have been, in 1799 Tom Lefroy married Mary Paul.

Shakespeare’s dictum “The course of true love never did run smooth” is the theme of Austen’s novel “Emma” (1815). Full of obstacles and mishaps, blindness and blunders, “Emma” is Austen’s most playful work, teeming with messages hidden in word games such as acrostics, anagrams and charades, or cleverly secreted in the text via deliberate errors and incongruities.

In Chapter 9 of “Emma,” Austen underscores one particular charade, or literary riddle, by calling it a “motto to the chapter” and “prologue to the play.” It consists of two four-line stanzas and a couplet, introduced by the salutation “To Miss —.” The stanzas contain at least two answers to the riddle and two related acrostics, which have received scholarly attention. The salutation, however, has been ignored, and so has the couplet: “Thy ready wit the word will soon supply, / May its approval beam in that soft eye!”

Impatient with her protégée Harriet Smith’s “wrong” guesses to the charade, Emma snatches the paper and commands that she listen. “For Miss —, read Miss Smith,” Emma proclaims. But Emma gets two things wrong: She carelessly alters the charade’s salutation from “To Miss” to “For Miss,” and she mistakes her friend Harriet as the charade’s intended recipient. Harriet then reads the actual words of the salutation correctly: “To Miss —,” she says. “Dear me, how clever! Could it really be meant for me?”

“Such sweet lines! . . . these two last,” Harriet observes.

“Leave out the two last lines,” Emma advises, “and there is no reason why you should not write it into your book.”

“Oh! But those two lines are—”

“—The best of all,” Emma says, finishing Harriet’s sentence. Emma continues: “Granted;— for private enjoyment; and for private enjoyment keep them. They are not at all the less written you know, because you divide them. The couplet does not cease to be, nor does its meaning change. But take it away, and all *appropriation* ceases.”

Although separating the couplet doesn’t change its meaning, it does change the “appropriation.” The last two lines are too private for public consumption because they indicate for whom the charade is truly meant and to whom the novel is actually dedicated. Hidden in these lines is a message of love from the author herself.

In Austen’s poem, if we look for acrostics (letters at the beginning), mesostichs (letters in the middle) and telestichs (letters at the end) in the couplet, we get TOYMEE.

Now, follow Emma’s command to leave off the “last two”—not the whole two lines but the last letter in each of these two lines, thus omitting “y” and “e” and taking “l” and “y” as the telestich letters. Now we have TOLMEY.

Recall the error in the salutation made by Emma (but deliberately made by Austen), where “For Miss—” should have been “To Miss—.” Add the extraneous letters (“for”) to the others we have gathered: TOLMEYFOR.

Finally, anagram these letters. What do you have? Austen’s “Irish friend,” Tom Lefroy.

The secret she hid in “Emma” is stunning and heartbreaking. Jane Austen fell in love with Tom Lefroy over Christmas 1795, and she loved him from then on, forever, even when all hope was gone.

In Kipling’s poem, on entering paradise, Jane was met by three archangels who offered her the command of any of heaven’s gifts. “Jane said: ‘Love.’” At once the seraphim set forth, for a time their search in vain, “whispering round the Nebulae ‘Who loved Jane?’” Then there “in a private limbo where none had thought to look, sat a Hampshire gentleman reading of a book.” The book “was called Persuasion” and in its pages told the story of their timeless love, more precious than caskets of gold.

*Ms. Sheehan is director of the graduate program of the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership at Arizona State University.*

*Appeared in the November 26, 2021, print edition.*

Copyright © 2021 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.