

## A Guide for Readers and Re-readers

### The Cambridge Companion to *Emma*

Peter Sabor, editor.

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#### Review by Laurie Kaplan.

Jane Austen's *Emma* often challenges first-time readers, who find the novel's heroine snobbish, the plot convoluted, the setting claustrophobic, and the social codes confusing. Voracious re-readers, Janeites regularly return to Highbury and to the domestic and social conflicts of village life, and they are always rewarded. No matter how many times they have read the novel, they find something new—a new theme, joke, motif, or instance of rudeness. Perusal of Austen's text raises questions—about Regency society, for example, or Austen's word choice. In *The Cambridge Companion to Emma*, Peter Sabor brings together twelve insightful essays that will appeal to first-time readers as well as to re-readers, for each author presents a detailed analysis that contributes to a deeper appreciation of *Emma*.

High school teachers as well as university professors—and all students and general readers—will especially appreciate the essays that contextualize aspects of the novel's social, economic, and literary milieu. Robert Hume untangles the money, rank, and precedence codes that often confuse readers. In his consideration of the novel's "hybrid society" Hume probes the economic connections between occupations and social responsibilities, and he looks at how those connections affect personal interactions in Highbury. Focusing on the historical context, Jonathan Sachs explores some of the writers who figure in the late eighteenth-century "Revolutionary Controversy," namely, Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, and Mary Wollstonecraft, whose political treatises shaped the spirit of the times. He examines how in *Emma* Austen

dramatizes "the relationship between poverty and gender and the problems of action and obligation." Bharat Tandon examines the literary context, pointing out that Austen "became a writer by, in effect, seeing through, with preternatural sharpness, pretty much every cliché and convention of eighteenth-century fictional plotting and rhetoric."

Readers will also enjoy the essays that explicate Austen's use of allusions and her meticulous construction of thematic unity. In "Setting and community," Janine Barchas excavates the social and economic networks that shape the novel, and she discusses the way "leading names (such as George, Knightley, and Fairfax) populate a symbolic Highbury that functions as a microcosm of a nation." Highbury is a musical town, Ruth Perry says, and she demonstrates how Austen uses music to "evoke class and gender status and as a pointer to moral character." Perry examines how the "musicality" of the novel "comes from the way many of its chapters are staged like operatic scenes," and she examines the details of the pianoforte that mysteriously arrives at Mrs. Bates's house. John Wiltshire, exploring the concept of "the heroine," scrutinizes Emma's character, her "purposeful mischief," her scheming, her kindness, her naughtiness. In "Style, structure, language," Linda Bree examines how Austen constructs the novel through her "economical use of ordinary words and phrases," "the versatility of [her] elliptical style," and the "binding force" created by the "leitmotif of triplets" which shape the plot of the novel. Three, she says, is a "'particularly unlucky' number for Hartfield and Highbury generally." Bree's explications of individual words and sentences constitute a master class in close reading.

This collection of essays offers insight into conventions and reader expectations at the turn of the century. Jan Fergus explores the literary marketplace during the Regency and, in particular, the negotiations involved as Austen sought publication. Edward Copeland writes

about contemporary responses to and reviews of *Emma*—including Austen's own compilation of the "Opinions of *Emma*." Traversing the British

Channel, Gillian Dow examines the international contemporary response: in March 1816, just three months after John Murray published the first edition of *Emma*, the bookseller Arthus Bertrand published *La Nouvelle Emma* in Paris. In 1817, an abbreviated edition of *La Nouvelle Emma* was published in Vienna. Interestingly, it was only in 1945 that the first Spanish translation of *Emma* appeared; and the same year saw the publication of two Italian translations. Translators working in the twenty-first century, Dow notes, face a significant problem: "They must serve as editor and interpreter of Regency England for an audience that is both culturally and temporally increasingly remote." In the final essay of the volume, Deidre Shauna Lynch considers the quality of screen adaptations of *Emma*. This is a helpful essay for many readers, and especially for students who come to the study of Austen's texts having seen the films rather than having read the novels.

The essays in *The Cambridge Companion to Emma* form a supplement that will sit comfortably on the shelf next to Austen's novels. As Bree says, "attentive reading raises questions." This companion will guide readers and re-readers to many answers.

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