Jane Austen’s Emma

A Sourcebook

Edited by
Paula Byrne
Jane Austen’s Emma (1815) is at once a comedy of misunderstanding, a razor-sharp analysis of the English class system, and a classic tale of romance and moral growth that has appealed to readers and critics alike.

Taking the form of a sourcebook, this guide to Austen’s much loved novel offers:

- extensive introductory comment on the contexts and many interpretations of the text, from publication to the present
- annotated extracts from key contextual documents, reviews, critical works and the text itself
- cross-references between documents and sections of the guide, in order to suggest links between contexts and criticism
- suggestions for further reading.

Part of the Routledge Guides to Literature series, this volume is essential reading for all those beginning detailed study of Emma and seeking not only a guide to the novel, but a way through the wealth of contextual and critical material that surrounds Austen’s text.

Paula Byrne has a PhD from the University of Liverpool and is the author of a highly acclaimed study of Jane Austen and the Theatre (2002). She is now a full-time critic and biographer and is writing a life of Austen’s near contemporary, the actress, novelist and poet Mary ‘Perdita’ Robinson.

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Acknowledgements

With thanks to Duncan Wu for commissioning the book, Fiona Cairns for seeing it to press, David Leyland for word-processing assistance, Barbara Hinchcliffe for reference checking and Sandra Jones for scrupulous copy editing.
I could not sit seriously down to write a serious romance under any other motive than to save my life, and if it were indispensable for me to keep it up and never relax into laughing at myself or other people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first chapter.¹

Jane Austen’s humorous comment about the sort of novel that she emphatically did not want to write belies the seriousness with which she viewed her novels and their public reception. She described *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) as ‘my own darling child’ and considered its heroine Elizabeth Bennet ‘as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print’. *Mansfield Park* (1814) she feared would be found ‘not half so entertaining’ as *Pride and Prejudice*. And she worried that her latest novel *Emma* might fall between two stools: ‘I am strongly haunted with the idea that to those who have preferred *Pride and Prejudice* it will appear inferior in wit, and to those who have preferred *Mansfield Park* inferior in good sense’ (*Letters*, p. 306).

*Emma* appeared on 29 December 1815, although the title page is dated 1816. It was published by John Murray, who was at the height of his fame as Lord Byron’s publisher. A memorandum in Austen’s own hand has survived, recording that the novel was begun in January 1814 and completed on 29 March 1815. In that same year, she heard that the Prince Regent (later George IV) was an admirer of her work and ‘kept a set of them in every one of his residences’.²

James Stanier Clarke, the Prince’s librarian, suggested that she dedicate her next book to His Royal Highness. Jane Austen had little respect for the Prince; in particular she abhorred the shoddy way in which he had treated the Princess of Wales: ‘Poor woman, I shall support her as long as I can, because she *is* a woman, and because I hate her husband’ (*Letters*, p. 208). Nevertheless, she accepted the compliment to her work and (rather reluctantly) dedicated the novel to the Prince.

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Austen’s fears for her latest ‘child’ were to be unfounded. Though she never earned a great deal for her novels, Emma was published by John Murray on a profit-sharing basis. The initial press run was 2000 and the three volumes sold for twenty-one shillings. A note in Austen’s hand records a figure of £39 as ‘first profits of Emma’. By October 1816, 1250 copies had been sold.3 Perhaps more importantly, Emma established Austen’s literary reputation. Murray, who had founded the influential Quarterly Review, asked Sir Walter Scott, the most celebrated novelist of the age, to review Emma. As we shall see, the latter’s insights and observations have dogged Austen criticism and her legacy for two centuries.

Jane Austen remains one of the most popular and enduring English writers of all time, perhaps second only to Shakespeare. Like him, she has been perpetually remade into whatever suits the age in which she is read. She has been portrayed as a writer who is snobbish and elitist, but also as a dazzling satirist of snobbery and elitism. She has been represented as a hard-nosed capitalist, but also as an apologist for the women who suffered from the capitalist marriage market of her age. To some she is a political conservative, to others a feminist. She has been conceived as a patriotic nationalist and an ecological ‘green’. She has even become a species of gay icon. That she can be viewed in these many guises is testament to her greatness, but this can also present problems for students trying to navigate their way in a sea of complex and seemingly contradictory criticism. The aim of this sourcebook is to demonstrate how many different critical approaches can illuminate Emma, but also to suggest that the best readings of the novel are those that respond to the many layers of the novel itself rather than restrict themselves to the straitjacket of theoretical ‘isms’.

3 In the editions printed during and immediately after her death, Pride and Prejudice sold the very best of all, 4000 copies, compared with Mansfield Park, 3000, Sense and Sensibility and Emma, 2000 each, and the posthumously published joint set of Northanger Abbey and Persuasion, 2500. See Facts and Problems, pp. 156–7.