

A Handsome, Clever Study Guide

Austen's *Emma* (A Continuum Reader's Guide)

By Gregg A. Hecimovich.
Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008.
vi + 119 pages.
Paperback. \$16.95.

Reviewed by Marc DiPaolo.

Those who choose to read Gregg A. Hecimovich's study guide to Jane Austen's *Emma* may view the text in two vastly different ways, both equally valid. The first approach would be to judge the work on its own terms, as a pedagogical tool for college professors and an introductory text for Jane Austen neophytes. The second approach would be to consider the book as merely the latest in a long line of academic works on *Emma* that compete for the attention and admiration of JASNA's core readership of Austen experts. Judged on its own merits, the book is well-written, engaging, and perfect for its intended audience of undergraduates and professors looking for ways to bring an old book alive for a young audience. On the other hand, those who are already well-versed in the world of Jane Austen, and in literary and historical scholarship, would likely find little new or surprising in these pages. The author confines himself primarily to summarizing and synthesizing that which has come before for the benefit of budding scholars. Significantly, when Hecimovich does announce his own opinion or interpretation, it is invariably interesting, especially when it concerns Austen's use of riddles in the text, or when Hecimovich challenges popular opinion. (He is in a minority of Austen scholars who hate *Clueless*.) These moments are interesting enough that one wishes they came more frequently, but the fact that he is capable of making even a seasoned Janeite sit up and take notice while reading a text primarily designed for college undergraduates is notable.

Austen's Emma includes chapters on Austen's life, the "literary and historical context" of *Emma*; its "language, style,

and form;" key themes, "critical reception and publishing history," a discussion of the multiple film adaptations, and, finally, includes an annotated bibliography of Regency histories, Austen biographies, and *Emma* criticism. The book is part of a series of guides published by Continuum that strive to be "a practical introduction to close-reading" that is "ideal for undergraduates." One might well view these guides as functionally *Cliff's Notes* or *Spark Notes* on steroids, but those pamphlets seem primarily designed to fool teachers into believing that students have read the novels when they have not. In contrast, Hecimovich's text would not be read by a student who wants to shirk responsible reading, but by one who wants to read with a keener eye and build a general knowledge of the rich body of *Emma* scholarship. Indeed, his summarizing of key scholarly perspectives on Austen's life and works helps to make accessible to students texts that are often esoteric or not stocked by college libraries.

In synthesizing previous scholarship, Hecimovich admits that he relies heavily on John Wiltshire's interpretation of *Emma*, but he also concentrates his attention on scholarship by Anita Gorman, Jill Stevenson-Heydt, John Sutherland, and this author's *Emma Adapted*. The Gorman and Stevenson-Heydt scholarship is used especially effectively to demonstrate how hypochondria and nervous disorders play a primary role in the work, and to explain brilliantly how one sickly character may be the irredeemable villain of the novel (Mrs. Churchill) and another may be loved by the heroine (Mr. Woodhouse).

Hecimovich's text is solid and accessible enough that one could imagine a professor assigning it to students alongside the novel it comments upon. And yet, arguably much the same effect would be achieved more economically by a professor assigning an edition of Austen's novel that includes a variety of contrasting critical essays on *Emma*, be they Marxist, feminist, or New-Historicist in methodology. Hecimovich's text is more affordable

than the expensive Bedford/St. Martin's Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism edition of *Emma*, edited by Alistair M. Duckworth, but the Norton Critical Edition edited by Stephen

M. Parrish would be one inexpensive book for students to purchase instead of two. In a way, professors looking for a pedagogical handbook and a source for lectures and writing assignments would be a more likely audience for this book. They could easily assign the superb study questions and writing assignments at the end of each chapter without compelling all the students to buy the book. Though *Approaches to Teaching Austen's Emma*, edited by Marcia McClintock Folsom, is possibly a superior roadmap for teachers, Hecimovich's work is a strong alternative.

Hecimovich, an associate professor of English at East Carolina University, is a specialist in 19th century British literature, literary theory, and pedagogy who authored the monograph *Puzzling the Reader: Riddles in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Peter Lang, 2008). Given the strength of his analysis of riddles in *Emma* as presented in his study guide, experienced Austen readers might well want to consider seeking out *Puzzling the Reader* to see how he addresses a similar subject in a text geared towards veteran scholars, and not beginners.

Marc DiPaolo, author of *Emma Adapted: Jane Austen's Heroine from Book to Film* (2007) and co-editor of *The Conscious Reader* (Pearson), teaches in the English and Film departments at Oklahoma City University. He is currently writing a book about political satire in superhero narratives for McFarland and Co. and writes the blog "The Adventures of Italian-American Man" for www.i-italy.org.

