



Study Guide 2026

Oregon Shakespeare Festival

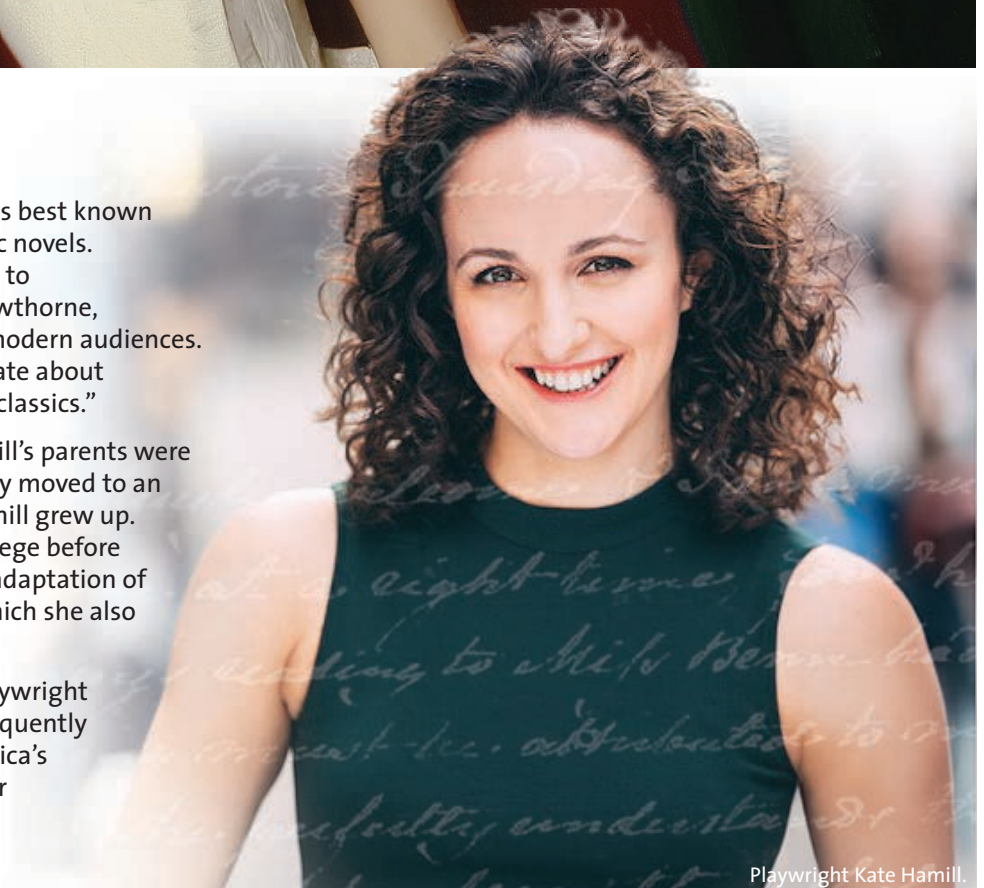


Kate Hamill

Award-winning playwright Kate Hamill is best known for her innovative adaptations of classic novels. From Jane Austen and Louisa May Alcott to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Nataniel Hawthorne, Hamill reimagines canonical works for modern audiences. She describes herself as “deeply passionate about creating new feminist, female-centered classics.”

Born in Charleston, South Carolina, Hamill’s parents were both grant writers. At age four, her family moved to an upstate New York dairy farm, where Hamill grew up. She earned a BFA in Acting at Ithaca College before finding breakout success with her 2014 adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*, in which she also played Marianne Dashwood.

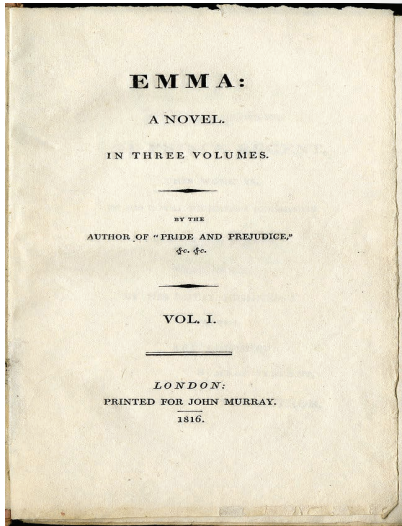
Named *The Wall Street Journal* 2017’s Playwright of the Year, Hamill continues to write frequently produced plays, making her one of America’s most-produced playwrights. *Emma* is her third play at the Festival.



Playwright Kate Hamill.

Jane Austen

Jane Austen was born on December 16, 1775, in Steventon, Hampshire, England. She had 7 brothers and sisters and was closest to her sister Cassandra. Her father was a rector, or minister, in Hampshire and after he retired, he moved the family to Bath. Jane Austen wrote about what she knew, middle- and upper-class life during the Regency Era. Her novels were full of witty social commentary and female protagonists who were navigating the societal constraints of their time.



Emma Title Page

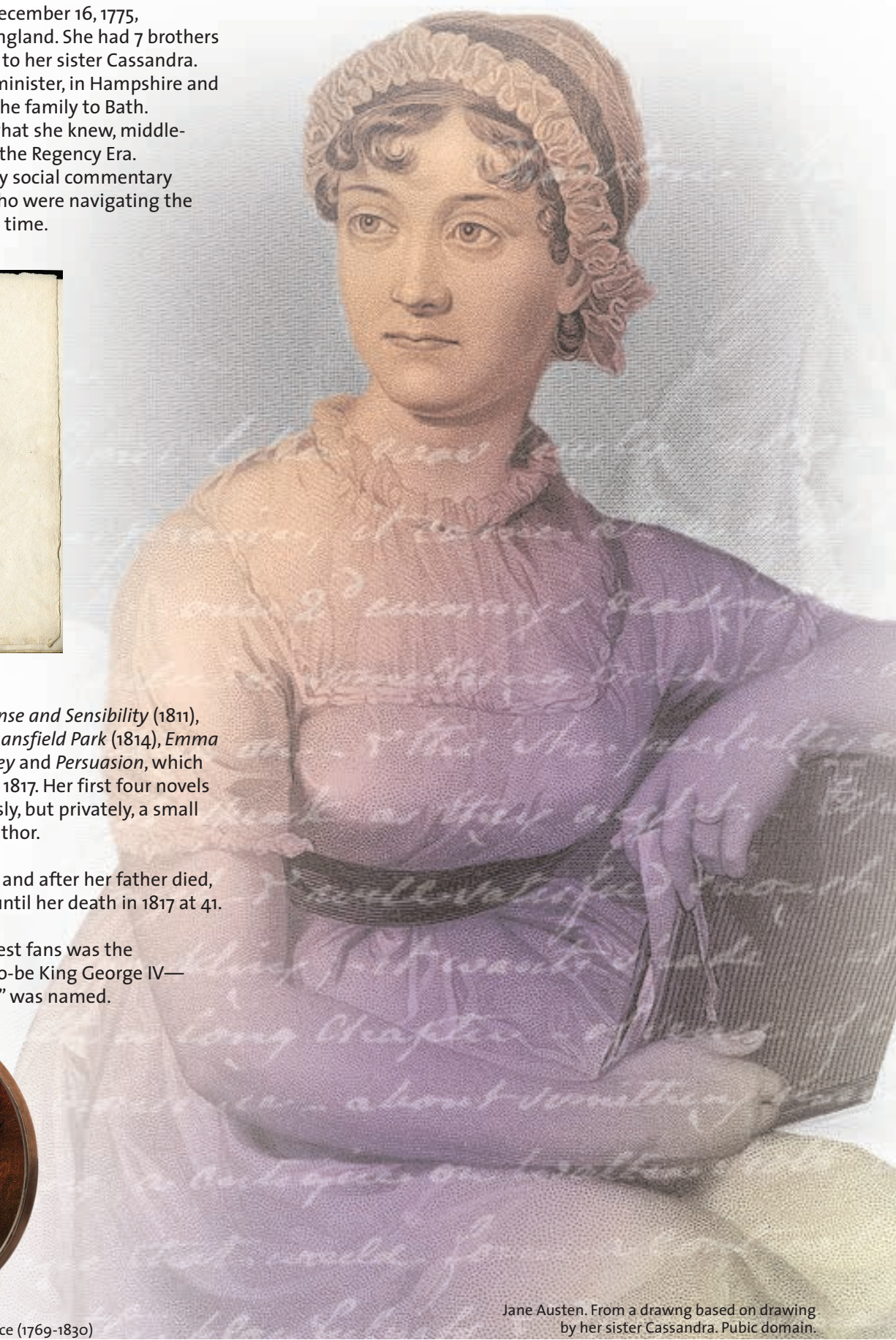
Austen wrote six novels: *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1816), and *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, which were published together in 1817. Her first four novels were published anonymously, but privately, a small group knew she was the author.

Jane Austen never married, and after her father died, she lived with her brother until her death in 1817 at 41.

Reportedly, one of her biggest fans was the Prince Regent—the soon-to-be King George IV—for whom the “Regency Era” was named.



George IV. By Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830)



Jane Austen. From a drawing based on drawing by her sister Cassandra. Pubic domain.

From “He” and “She” to “We”: Courtship in the Regency Era

During her matchmaking endeavors on behalf of Harriet Smith, Emma asks for riddles and receives one referring to courtship, which they they see as evidence of a someone’s interest in Harriet. This isn’t the only reference to courtship in our play, which says a lot about the societal level of our characters. During the Regency Era, “courtship” or “wooing” (which we would now call dating) came with entirely different expectations depending on the couple’s class. Courtship, with its focus on making an advantageous marriage, was mainly for the well-connected people of the gentry and aristocracy. The poor and working classes of the time generally married within their station and followed less formal rituals.

“As if all one had to do was throw two people into proximity over and over again, and they would pair off!”
-Emma

For those of the upper crust, courtship began with a formal introduction, usually made by an elder family member. Communication before being introduced was considered scandalous. After meeting, a respectable courtship would only move forward with the full knowledge and approval of the couple’s family and friends. Courtship was a public affair and couples could be seen at art galleries, assembly rooms, pleasure gardens, and concert halls. Chaperones were present at any outing, a way to keep the young lady’s reputation safe and to keep her from being taken advantage of. A man with a tarnished reputation could still expect to marry well, but a lady with the same reputation would not. To preserve the lady’s honor, couples were not to meet alone, although couples often tried to sneak a few moments away from watchful eyes.

Letters were a vital part of courtship. Love letters gave couples the opportunity to express themselves in ways they may not be able to in person. Love letters were not entirely private between the couple and might have been passed around among family and friends. To begin corresponding, a man had to ask the woman’s permission to begin writing to her. Accepting this offer signaled that a relationship was serious and an engagement was on the horizon.



Oh hush thee, gentle popinjay!
Lewis Carroll. Public domain.



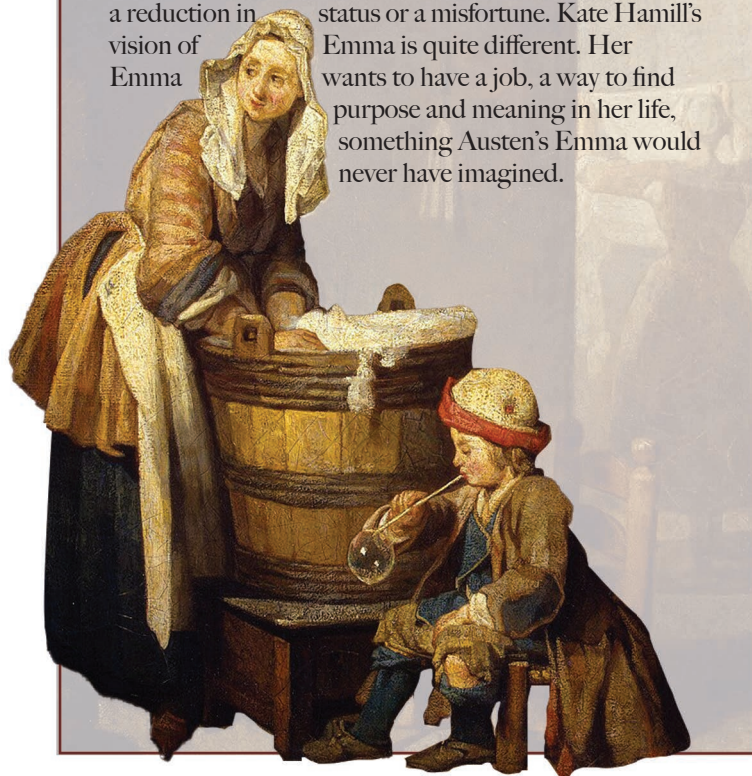
Illustration. 1896 for Macmillan’s edition of *Emma* (Jane Austen’s novel) .

Women's Work in the Regency era:

The type of work or job a woman was allowed to have during the Regency Era depended largely on her social status. Lower middle-class women found work in labor-heavy fields where hours could be long and pay was low:

- Domestic Service: These would be maids, cooks, or nursery staff found in wealthier homes.
- Healthcare: Some of the jobs in this field were nurses, midwives, or healers.
- Trades: In this field, women would work as barmaids, seamstresses, laundresses, or they would run small shops.
- Industry and Agriculture: Women would labor in fields or work in textile mills.

Jane Austen's *Emma* Woodhouse is an educated and wealthy woman who did not need a job to survive and would have been ostracized by society—and possibly her family—for working. If she needed to work, as her creator did, women of her standing would have limited options for paid jobs. Upper- and middle-class women could find work as a companion to an elderly or unmarried woman or as a governess/teacher where they would educate children in wealthy households. They may have been paid a small sum, but more likely, they would have worked for food, clothing, and housing. Some well-educated upper-class women became authors, sometimes publishing under pseudonyms, or artists or musicians. Working for wages was acceptable for the lower classes but for the upper/middle classes, being paid for work may have signaled a reduction in status or a misfortune. Kate Hamill's vision of *Emma* is quite different. Her *Emma* wants to have a job, a way to find purpose and meaning in her life, something Austen's *Emma* would never have imagined.



Before seeing/reading the play:

1. Research the life and works of Jane Austen. What are some of the major themes in her work? What were some of the impressions of the society in which she lived? These and other websites provide information:
<https://jasna.org/austen/>
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/specialfeatures/jane-austen-answers-to-the-most-frequently-asked-questions/>
2. Research Kate Hamill and her works. This and other websites provide information:
<https://www.kate-hamill.com/about>
3. The height of the Regency era of British history occurred roughly between 1811 and 1820. Research the Regency Era. These and other websites provide information:
<https://wentworthwoodhouse.org.uk/discovery/a-walk-through-the-regency-era/>
<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/regency-era>
4. Research courtship in the Regency Era a little more. What were some of the rules surrounding courtship? These and other websites provide information:
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/specialfeatures/the-real-rules-of-courtship-dating-in-the-regency-era/>
<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/inspire-me/bridgerton-dating-in-the-regency-era/>
<https://www.history.com/articles/regency-era-courtship-romance-rules>
5. Research marriage and marriage laws in the Regency Era in England. How important was it to be married legally? What options were available to women who remained unmarried? These and other websites provide information:
<https://jasna.org/publications-2/persuasions-online/vol-36no1/bailey/>
<https://mural.uv.es/asacel/womanReg.html>
6. *Emma* is considered a comedy of manners. What does comedy of manners mean? Research comedy of manners. These and other websites provide information:
<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/social-sciences-and-humanities/comedy-manners>
<https://www.britannica.com/art/comedy-of-manners>
7. Kate Hamill's adaptation of *Emma* has moments when characters are “breaking the fourth wall.” What does that mean? These and other websites provide more information:
<https://lionhearttheatre.org/breaking-the-fourth-wall-what-it-is-why-people-avoid-and-why-some-dont-trashed/>
<https://www.britannica.com/art/fourth-wall>
8. What is a popinjay? This and other websites provide more information:
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/popinjay>

After seeing/reading the play:

1. What event happens that gives Emma the self-confidence to believe she would be a good matchmaker? In what ways is Emma a good matchmaker? In what ways is she not? How is she able to spend so much time on her matchmaking? What does the business of matchmaking give Emma?
2. The characters in this play come from varying societal classes. What is Emma's position in society compared to that of Miss Bates or Harriet Smith? Compared to Mr. Elton's? Who are Emma's equals, class-wise? How does Emma treat them differently, based on their class?
3. Why does Emma befriend Harriet? Why would Emma give advice to Harriet? Why would Harriet take advice from Emma? Why does Emma want to be a matchmaker for Harriet? Emma tells Harriet that Mr. Martin is not a proper match for marriage. What reasons does she give Harriet for rejecting Mr. Martin? What is the effect of Emma's advice on Harriet?
4. What is Emma's relationship with Miss Bates? Describe Miss Bates' status in society. Why is she still able to be friends and keep company with people from higher society?
5. What is Harriet's journey in the play? What happens when Harriet finally listens to her own heart?
6. Why does Emma keep getting her matches wrong?
7. What is the difference between love and infatuation? Which feeling do you think Emma has for Frank Churchill? Which feelings does Harriet have for Mr. Elton? Mr. Knightley? Robert Martin? How do the characters realize that their feelings are infatuation or love? How do audiences?
8. Why does everyone assume that Emma and Frank Churchill are a good match? In what ways are they a good match? In what ways are they not?
9. Refer to the definition of “popinjay.” Why is Frank considered a popinjay? How does his behavior support this definition? How is he different than a popinjay?
10. How does Emma change from the beginning of the play to the end? How do her self-awareness and emotional maturity change throughout the play? What causes Emma's outburst later in the play?

Members of Oregon Shakespeare Festival Education created the “2026 Study Guide for *Emma*.” These suggestions were designed for students and teachers but may be enjoyed by audiences of all ages. They may be used without restriction for educational purposes. The Oregon Shakespeare Festival is not responsible for the content of any website listed above.

11. Who is Mr. Knightley to Emma at the start of the play? Why does he seem so comfortable in speaking his mind to her about her matchmaking and her behavior? Who else in Emma's life speaks as directly to her as Mr. Knightley does? How do Emma's and Mr. Knightley's feelings change toward each other? What occurs that makes each of them realize they love the other? In what ways are they well-suited as a match? In what ways do they not seem like a well-suited match?
12. Refer to your research on class and marriage in the Regency Era. What does this play say about the options for women of different classes regarding marriage and independence? Why is it important for a woman to marry for money? How does this need drive Emma? Harriet? Jane?

“There is no better opportunity than a party to arrange a spontaneous romantic rendezvous!”

-Emma

13. Refer to the sidebar on women and jobs in the Regency Era. What do Miss Bates, Mrs. Weston, and Jane Fairfax have that Emma does not? How does each find a way to be productive, and what effect does that have on them as individuals?
14. Refer to your research on courtship in the Regency Era. What are the clues that Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill were engaged? Why is it such a shock when the truth is discovered? Why do they keep their engagement secret? What are the rules of courtship that they failed to follow?
15. Why is breaking the fourth wall used in plays and films? In *Emma*, how did breaking of the fourth wall help move the story along, or did it not help move the story along? What is the effect of breaking the fourth wall in the play? What does it say about Emma's state of mind?
16. If you're seeing *Emma*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and/or *The Taming of the Shrew*, compare the relationship between love and marriage in these plays. In each play, how much power or input do the women have in regard to whom they marry, and whether they marry at all? Who holds the final power of choice in each play, and why?

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