

Jane Austen and the Real World

Matters of Fact in Jane Austen: History, Location, and Celebrity. Janine Barchas. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. 317 pp.

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<1>Jane Austen criticism of the last seventy-five years has rarely disputed Elizabeth Jenkins's observation that Austen was "quite oblivious to the associations most of us connect with names."⁽¹⁾ Jenkins's 1938 biography described an author impervious both to Cratylitic superstition and to ordinary sentimentality, one so convinced of the work of art's self-containment that no external source could affect her apprehension of her characters' names. "[N]ot only does she use the names of her brothers with complete unself-consciousness," Jenkins marveled, "but she gives her own to Jane Bennet and Jane Fairfax; even stranger, she uses a name which is consecrated by her readers to one character, for another: Elizabeth Bennet gives her name to the repulsive Elizabeth Elliot, and Jane Bennet to the even more obnoxious Mrs. Robert Watson."⁽²⁾ The theory that Austen's character names are meaningless is appealing, for on the contrary supposition, the excess of potential significance crowding in on the critic from denomination alone would feel dizzying, like trying to choose one route when you have keys to hundreds of doors. In her important new book, Janine Barchas braves that vertigo. She sets out to show that Austen's names signify, that Austen's novels do have keys (though she insists they are not "mere" *romans á clef*), and that many of those keys are to be found beyond the limits of Austen's own family and novels, in the lives and estates of the great families of England (9).

<2>One of Barchas's startling findings is the sheer number of names across Austen's juvenilia and novels that appear to derive from the rich, aristocratic, politically prominent Wentworth family. Neville, Bernard, Gowers, Watson, Vernon, Ferrars, Fitzwilliam, D'Arcy, Bertram, Woodhouse, Henrietta Wentworth, Anne Wentworth, Frederick Wentworth are names belonging to historical Wentworths, who in turn had a neighbor Baron Bingley, a family historian Rushworth, and a nemesis Fairfax. It is true that Donald Greene assembled some of these names (those from the Whig side of the family, Barchas reports, but not from their Tory cousins and rivals) in a well-known article of 1953. However, once you resolve to discard Greene's primary explanation that "when dealing with the gentry" Austen made the names *sound* right "by using the genuine article,"⁽³⁾ the list tends astonishingly to suggest that five of Austen's six full-length novels, *Lady Susan* (1871), and much of the juvenilia are, as Barchas says, intertextually connected by some kind of "Wentworth-logic" (53). Rather than supporting the novels' realism, this "logic" has just the opposite effect. As Barchas persuasively claims, "Austen routinely returned to Wentworth family history in the way that a poet willingly submits to the confines of a sonnet, finding sport in creating new utterances within a set structure" (54).

<3>What exactly the rhyme scheme of this particular formal pattern might be remains naggingly mysterious. On the question of why Austen singled out the Wentworths in particular, Barchas does not take us beyond Greene, who invoked Charlotte Brontë's "juvenile obsession" with the Duke of Wellington by way of comparison.⁽⁴⁾ Barchas agrees that Austen had a "childhood fascination" (33) and "lifetime infatuation" (232) with the Wentworth family, a characterization befitting the circumstance that, as Barchas reminds us, Austen wrote "at age ten a mock entry for the saying of marriage banns between a 'Jane Austen of Steventon' and an imaginary 'Henry Frederick Howard Fitzwilliam of London' in her father's parish registry" (32). Readers who find this account of the motive for Austen's grand artistic scheme insufficiently dignified are unlikely to be consoled by Barchas's assurances that Austen participated in the celebrity culture of her day, but they cannot fail to be intrigued. Barchas postulates both that Austen used celebrity allusions to attract contemporary readers and that Wentworth-logic was an expression of the author's own fandom. But what kind of a fan was Austen? Was it in the spirit of a preteen adorning a bedroom with Justin Bieber posters that Austen scattered Wentworths through her fictions? Further, when Austen connected two novels together at the site of a Wentworth allusion, what kind of intertextual comparisons was she inviting, if any? Through a superb piece of sleuthwork, Barchas determines that "the name D'Arcy is literally cut into the parapet wall at the exact spot along the [real-world] Cobb where Austen stages *Persuasion's* most dramatic scene" (230), Louisa Musgrove's fall. If this breathtaking link is indeed an "intentional [...] inside joke, rewarding only a Lyme-savvy reader" (231) — a point Barchas scrupulously declines to decide — should Mr. Darcy of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) be informing our reading of this scene of injury in *Persuasion* (1818)? Barchas is less interested in pursuing a single, definitive answer to such questions than in laying the groundwork for future answers by describing the facts that go into Austen's "fact-infused fiction" (25).

<4>Her description is especially compelling in two magnificent chapters linking *Northanger Abbey* (1818) not with the Wentworths but with another illustrious family, the Allens. Barchas demonstrates that when John Thorpe talks himself — and General Tilney — into believing that Catherine Morland will inherit a large bequest from her friends and chaperones, the Allens, he wrongly imagines them to be related to the Bath entrepreneur Ralph Allen, whose vast fortune was "reverting to obscure Allens living in the country" (56) just at the time of the novel's composition. Barchas ingeniously tracks the novel's carriage expeditions against Bath geography, noticing for example that John Thorpe has driven within view of the Allen estate, Priory Park, when he mentions to Catherine the wealth of "old Allen" (68). Austen's street names prove to be clues to "what the characters are looking at — or, in Thorpe's case, even thinking" (73). We had Ann Radcliffe before, and we had common sense, but now thanks to Barchas we also have a whole new ground for irony and tension: the road map of Bath. Most exciting of all is the far-off glimpse Barchas offers of an unfamiliar, Joyce-like Austen whose aims anticipate those of high modernism. Yet these chapters also owe much of their charm to the new aspects of *Northanger Abbey* they reveal from the middle distance of textual interpretation. Through the optic of Austen's "cartographic exactitude" (60), Catherine's ignorance of her surroundings looks yet more profound than it ever did before, and Barchas is able to point out a neat symmetry between the Bath and Northanger halves of Austen's novel: John Thorpe's and General Tilney's financial misconceptions about Catherine prefigure Catherine's gothic misconceptions about General Tilney.

<5>Other chapters build an even stronger case for Barchas's largest, extremely original claim about Austen's "historicist impulse" (257), the notion that Austen "buil[t] her stories out of names and locations that resonated with popular national and local history" (9), while leaving standard interpretations of the novels themselves nearly unchanged. One elegant discussion makes the case that Austen's epistolary novella about Frederick Vernon alludes systematically to a property dispute that embroiled Wentworth Castle — or, briefly, Vernon Castle — before 1803. By showing us this previously undiscovered dimension of *Lady Susan*, Barchas aims to change our dating of that work and our sense of what inspired it, but not our interpretation of its characters, events, or language. Elsewhere, Barchas has entertaining stories to tell of the ribald statues and obscene topiaries with which the debauched Dashwoods of West Wycombe spiced up their outdoor mock-Catholic drinking games. Barchas proposes that Austen evokes both Sir Francis Dashwood (1708-81), leader of the libertines of the Hell-Fire Club, and his mistress and daughter, both named Fanny, when she gives Mrs. John Dashwood the name Fanny, a choice "intended to clinch her moral character" (193). But although Barchas suggests at the outset that "the real-world Dashwoods and their history... generate an uneasy atmosphere of wealth, infamy, and illicit sexuality" (168) in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and does use the connection to find new "sexual innuendo" (170) in the novel's garden descriptions, she does not pursue the possibility that the specifics of Dashwood notoriety, lewdness in particular, could be detectable in the fictional Fanny Dashwood. A chapter showing that Austen drew the names of *Persuasion*'s aristocrats from the Navy List and the names of her sailors from the Peerage supports the rather tepid claim that instead of marking a clear allegiance to her "seafaring [or] landed gentry" (211) Austen shows "uncertainties" (206-7) and "mixed sympathies" (254).

<6>By favoring uncontroversial interpretations of the novels she discusses, Barchas evidently aims to cut down on the number of variables in her argument and thereby give her reader a feeling of stability. The tactic does not wholly succeed. Although she is an exceptionally skillful and engaging writer of historical anecdote, even Barchas cannot always keep one undaunted by her biblical strings of begets. Without an interpretive ax to grind, she lacks a principle for determining degrees of significance and certainty; a wealth of conceivable points of connection between the novels and history come forward in one tentative register of "may have" and "perhaps," and the genealogical details swirl unresolved. Barchas leaves her reader dazzled and squinting but avid to find the figure in the carpet and almost certain that there is one. This is a huge achievement.

Endnotes

(1)Elizabeth Jenkins, *Jane Austen*. (London: Sphere Books Limited, 1972), 151.(^)

(2)Jenkins, 152.(^)

(3)Donald J. Greene, "Jane Austen and the Peerage." *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Ian Watt. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), 154-65: 157. First published in *PMLA* 68.5 (1953): 1017-31.(^)

(4)Greene, 156.(^)