

Historical Contexts for Austen's Novels

Matters of Fact in Jane Austen: History, Location, and Celebrity

By Janine Barchas.

Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. 307 pages.

48 B/W illustrations. Hardcover. \$45.

Paperback. \$24.95.

Review by Linda Troost.

Janine Barchas's well-researched and beautifully written book recovers some interesting historical contexts for once-celebrated names from Britain's historical past. She aims to "explore how wider notions of English history might further enrich an interpretation of Austen's method." Those who have heard her speak at JASNA AGMs or read her recent articles in *Persuasions* will have already encountered some of the discoveries she presents in *Matters of Fact*, a book that every reader of Austen will find profitable and delightful to peruse.

She adds much to Professor Donald Greene's discovery in 1953 about Austen's use of names from the peerage, especially names from the Wentworth family (the Strafford branch), which included Fitzwilliam, Darcy, Vernon, Watson, and a huge Yorkshire estate called Wentworth Woodhouse. She tells gripping tales about family squabbles, competitive gardening, the building of megahouses, and politics. In fact, her research narrows the date for the writing of *Lady Susan*, which she suggests probably dates to just after 1802 and alludes to particular struggles among the Vernons over the inheritance of Wentworth Castle.



roses enough to oblige her

Photo courtesy of Jane Austen's House Museum.

While many readers may know that Henry Fielding partly based Squire Allworthy in *Tom Jones* (1749) on Ralph Allen, the benevolent and extremely wealthy man of Bath, only Barchas has thought to examine what that name might have meant in Austen's time and culture. What she discovers is fascinating. While the Ralph Allen honored by Fielding may not have been foremost in the minds of her readers, the name Allen certainly would have been known: "In the late 1790s, the identity of the heir to the Allen fortune became suddenly complicated and increasingly vague" as lines of inheritance shifted from one branch of the family to another.

This explains something that has probably puzzled many a reader of *Northanger Abbey*: why John Thorpe assumes that the Allens who chaperone Catherine Moreland must be dazzlingly rich and why General Tilney would believe him. Since the new Allen heirs in Bath are not well known, Catherine's companions might well be them, a nice blending by Austen of fact and fiction. Here and elsewhere in the novel, Austen is playing with her audience's knowledge of celebrity culture in 1803, a reason she might have recognized that the passing of time had made her novel "comparatively obsolete."

Other details in *Northanger Abbey* are illuminated by other discoveries by Barchas. Farleigh Hungerford Castle, a tourist destination close to Bath, might be the source of some of Austen's gothic details for her heroine's imaginings, supplementing those found in Mrs. Radcliffe's novels. For example, a Tudor member of the Hungerford family murdered one wife and imprisoned another in a tower. The name "Catherine" that replaced the heroine's original name of "Susan" might be a nod toward Miss Catherine Tilney-Long, London's richest orphan and matrimonial prize during the early nineteenth century. The name Thorpe was that of a well-known mapmaker in Bath, ironic for a man who does not know anything about local castles.

Some contexts uncovered by Barchas are unlikely to have been common knowledge for original readers, let alone modern ones. Her study of the seveneenth-century's John Evelyn, his estate of Sayes Court in Deptford, and arboriculture seems a lot to bring to the 1792 tale "Evelyn" although it is more obviously relevant to *Sense and Sensibility* when considered alongside Marianne's effusions on trees and the felling of the walnut trees at Norland Park. At times, Barchas strains a bit to make a connection that I am not sure is always there. Is Col. Brandon's old-fashioned estate Delaford really modeled on Evelyn's Restoration-era garden at Sayes Court, which was torn down, along with the house, in 1728 or 1729, long before Jane Austen was born? It certainly hearkens in style back to a time before "improvers," but Barchas' claim that the name Delaford "echoes" Deptford, the town where Evelyn's garden and estate had been located, is not enough to go on.

Her work on *Persuasion*, on the other hand, may change our reading of the novel. Barchas finds that its naval names are drawn from the peerage and baronetage, while gentry names are drawn from the navy list. She suggests that Austen is hedging her bets in the "symbolic competition" between "the old and new order," and that the novel reveals more "balanced" and less "revolutionary" social values than we have assumed.

While some sections of this book seem inconsequential (but interesting), much is eye-opening. Barchas's engaging and well-researched book reminds us that there is still much to learn about Austen's methods.

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