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## Review of Janine Barchas, *Matters of Fact in Jane Austen: History, Location, and Celebrity*

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JANINE BARCHAS. *Matters of Fact in Jane Austen: History, Location, and Celebrity*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. Pp. 336. \$45.00 (cloth).  
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Janine Barchas's thought-provoking study of Austen's naming practices unearths a wealth of historical antecedents for Austen's characters and posits an Austen whose gamesmanship with the names of persons and places rivals the knowingness and playfulness of James Joyce. In earlier decades, such a highly ambitious and wide-reaching work could not have been accomplished except through protracted antiquarian research. Web scholarship, however, has made it possible for Barchas to uncover in a relatively short time a remarkable array of the many interconnected historical figures bearing such names as Wentworth, Darcy, Vernon, Ferrars, Allen, and Dashwood whose heroic exploits, political machinations, tragic romances, inheritances, bankruptcies, and (in one noteworthy case) obscene horticulture all point to Austen's intensity of naming with a purpose. Donald Greene's essay "Jane Austen and the Peerage" (*PMLA* 68 [1953]: 1017–31) broke the ground for such a study by demonstrating Austen's interest in the great Whig peers from the Wentworth family (including William Wentworth Fitzwilliam [1748–1833], Robert D'Arcy [1718–78], and Charles Watson Wentworth, Lord Rockingham [1730–1882; prime minister, 1765–66 and 1782]—note the names of the heroes of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*). However, as Barchas explains, for many reasons Austen scholarship has been slow to follow Greene's lead, especially in any systematic way. And even Barchas's study does not fully account for what might be uncovered. As she is the first to note, she has so much to say about the historical substrates of names and places in the juvenilia (particularly *Evelyn* and *Lady Susan*) and in three of the novels, *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Persuasion*, that *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Sanditon* enter into her analysis only here and there. Barchas leaves for her afterward the tempting possibility that *all* of Austen's work may be undergirded by a saga-like tapestry of ironic parallels and inversions of British history, in which the real Wentworths, Dashwoods, and Darcys intermingle in a dance of echoes.

Barchas begins by justifying her method, which in part requires explaining the many reasons such an approach has not been popular among Austen scholars heretofore. First, the many writers on Austen of the last sixty years or so have tended to study the nineteenth rather than the eighteenth century; second, by the time Austen became widely read and valued (around 1850), knowledge of eighteenth-century celebrities had dissipated. Most important, however, seems the reluctance of academia to acknowledge an Austen who was obsessively interested in the titles, lineage, estates, inheritances, and scandals of the peerage. Speaking of how Greene's essay failed to launch a broader effort to uncover further historical antecedents in Austen's work, Barchas notes what may pertain to her own work as well: "Greene documents Austen's fascination with the peerage so extensively that he confirms her psychological investment in an outmoded value system. It is ironic that, by insisting ambitiously upon Austen's wider knowledge of the world, Greene still made that knowledge appear old-fashioned" (37). Despite our modern disinclination to see Austen as invested in title bearers of yore, Barchas presents the many reasons why interpretive weight can be placed on, for instance, the name of Dashwood borne by the heroines of *Sense and Sensibility* (even if the most famous Dashwood, Sir Francis Dashwood [1708–81], earned his celebrity primarily by a form of high-art debauchery). Barchas legitimates her method by marshalling such matters as Austen's love of wordplay, particularly wordplay involving names; her commitment to describing real places such as Bath and Lyme with detailed accuracy; her interest in the celebrity culture of the day; her voracious reading of materials both high and low; and her interest in her own wide-flung family connections. In addition, because most of the name bearers in Austen's fiction have backgrounds and behave in ways almost exactly counter to their historical antecedents (Elinor Dashwood, for instance, would be horrified by Sir Francis Dashwood's

bacchanals), we may perhaps find that Austen's inversions of value take the sting out of the charge that Austen loved a lord too much.

The real test of Barchas's method comes from what she discovers, and here there is much to intrigue. For example, how it broadens our understanding of *Northanger Abbey* to learn that when John Thorpe, thinking Catherine Morland is the heir to Mr. Allen's (nonexistent) great fortune, is driving that young lady off in his carriage with a promise to visit a medieval castle, they pause to discuss Mr. Allen's wealth at the exact place in the road where before them (in Bath's real geography) lies the great estate of Ralph Allen, the magnate and philanthropist who earned the honorific "The Man of Bath," with a sham castle built by the historical Allen (called Sham Castle) immediately to view. Moreover, in the exact opposite direction, not more than seven miles away lies a real castle/abbey, Farleigh Hungerford Castle, with a Gothic past of incarcerating, poisoning, and murdering wives fully in accord with Catherine's later (and unfounded) fears about Mrs. Tilney's fate. Barchas's volume is dense with such information about the historical substrates of Austen's fictional names, and this review cannot begin to do her revelations justice. Of course, Barchas cannot fully explain the extent nor the reasons for Austen's clue setting (if the clues are indeed as dense and complex as she suggests, there are probably clues left to unravel), and it is difficult to account fully for Austen's purposes in her sophisticated name games, for her ironies are replete and complicated. What exactly, for instance, are we to make of the fact that the naval names of *Persuasion* (Croft and Wentworth) come from the wealthiest and noblest of English families while the titled figures (Dalrymple and Carteret) take their names from two of Admiral Nelson's famous captains? Barchas suggests that "[b]y focusing on names that have risen, through merit and controversy, to high positions in both the Baronetage and the Navy List, Austen may point out that both systems of rank allow for promotion and change. . . . Just as these lists are not mutually exclusive, so Austen's modernity is compatible with her respect for rank and tradition" (254). This reading seems reasonable enough, but often as we discover what Barchas has to tell us of the complex history of Austen's fictional namesakes we are left in sheer wonderment about Austen's purposes—the pattern is so dense that untangling the meaning of her allusions seems freighted with difficulty. Ultimately, this exceptionally interesting volume only begins what is sure to be an ongoing venture of detection for Austen scholars, both to find the full array of her allusive tricks with history and to discern what she meant by them.

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