

Jane Austen's Names: Riddles, Persons, Places

By Margaret Doody

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Review by Juliette Wells

Doody's central point in *Jane Austen's Names* is that there is much, much more to notice and think about in Austen's writings than even the most dedicated re-reader or literary scholar has likely registered. According to Doody, each personal and place name mentioned by Austen, even in passing, bears significance that would have been discernible to the novelist's original readers and thereby contributes to the overall matrix of meaning in Austen's fiction.

As Doody herself scrupulously acknowledges, *Jane Austen's Names* shares some common ground (a pun Doody, with her interest in riddles, would surely excuse) with Janine Barchas's recent, acclaimed *Matters of Fact in Jane Austen: History, Location, and Celebrity* (2012). That two such books should appear within a few years is testimony to the significance of this new area of inquiry. The books complement each other much more than they overlap.

Doody's special emphasis is on the necessity, for the proper appreciation of Austen, of deepening our historical and geographical knowledge of the British Isles. To help fill in the gaps for present-day readers, Doody devotes her first three chapters to a brisk review. She points out, with admirable care, aspects of history that would still have felt very present in Austen's era, such as questions relating to Henry VIII's seizure of church lands. Her engaging writing style enlivens this section, as indeed it does her book as a whole, which is subsequently divided into sections on "names" and "places."

Revisiting Austen's novels with Doody as a guide can be a dizzying experience. Her sheer range of reference astounds: she reels off not only historical and etymological details but prior

fictional uses of names as well. Yet some of Doody's most illuminating observations are very straightforward. The name "Marianne," she contends, is "unignorably revolutionary." "No Austen character other than Darcy," she points out, "has such a double dose of Norman in their name." And she reminds us that Austen tells us the native county of each of her protagonists, with the notable exception of Lady Susan.

Admittedly, Doody's insistence on what people would have known does sometimes beg the question of whether those people—including Austen—actually did know what she claims. Readers inclined to furrow their brows at conditional statements, adverbs such as "presumably," and sweeping statements about an author's intention should be forewarned. Doody is fully persuasive, however, about what we can perceive in Austen's novels.

For instance, Doody declares that "English persons contain Celtic, Danish, Saxon, and Norman possibilities simultaneously." With her guidance, we see, for example, the unmistakably Celtic traces in the names, appearances, and history of Mary and Henry Crawford. Mary's harp-playing, Doody asserts, is less a London accomplishment than a link to the Celtic music-makers of other Romantic novels. Persuasively, Doody argues that the Crawfords, like Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris, are "foreign to their position and are continuously required to adjust to a more or less alien culture."

Some of the most thought-provoking moments in *Jane Austen's Names* are interpretive rather than explanatory. In Austen's handling, "Bath is a place of transition and metamorphosis." The story of *Mansfield Park* "combines the maximum of movement with the maximum of restriction." And Doody demonstrates wonderful mastery of the irreverent aside: apropos of Austen's comments to her family on the afterlives of the characters in *Emma*, Doody remarks, "[a]s for Frank—who cares?"

Doody's decision to structure the central portion of her book according to "names" and "places" separately does result in some



repetition in treatments of individual works. Given the overall length and density of this study, readers might best be advised, anyway, to take it a little bit at a time, much as Doody observes regarding a historical source on British geography: "Few readers of Britannia will have gone from start to finish, but it is an excellent book for dipping into."

In her conclusion, Doody hails Austen's genius in enriching her realistic fiction with complex, unstable layers of meaning that, in Doody's conception, attain the status of the "surreal." She exhorts us to see, as she herself has come to do, that this rich and unsettling aspect of Austen's mature writing grows out of the boldness of Austen's juvenilia—boldness that, as Doody influentially argued earlier in her career, was tamped down substantially in the completed novels. In a sense, the concept of "riddles"—which Doody foregrounds in her subtitle but does not stress nearly as much in her text as she does "names" and "places"—comes fully to fruition here. According to Doody, all of Austen's mature fiction is riddled with associations, and therefore the fiction itself riddles us all.

To read *Jane Austen's Names* is to appreciate Austen's writings anew in the company of a peerlessly learned, delightfully opinionated scholar—an opportunity not to be missed.

Juliette Wells, Associate Professor and Chair of the English department at Goucher College, is the author of *Everybody's Jane: Austen in the Popular Imagination*. Her new, reader-friendly annotated edition of *Emma* is now available from Penguin Classics.