

Margaret Doody, *Jane Austen's Names: Riddles, Persons, Places* (University of Chicago Press, 2015)

Any serious reader of Austen will agree with Margaret Doody's starting point that 'Names of places and persons in Austen's novels are chosen with equal care' (4). This alone justifies a book devoted entirely to Austen's names. However, having accepted this challenge, Doody comes up with a mixed bag. Some parts of what she writes are persuasive and illuminating but others are far-fetched and unconvincing. Both the strengths and the weaknesses of the book arise from Doody's fascination with the historical significance of names, reflected in two claims at the beginning of the book: first that '[Austen's] novels display an acute attention to the shimmer of historical significance within names. Austen achieves meaning that goes down deep into layers of English history and relationship to the land' (3); and second that '[Austen] appreciates the weight of history borne by names. ... Surnames are not only remnants but conductors of history' (11).

Of course it is true that all names, for people or places, have a historical meaning. However, this does not mean that either Austen or the reader will necessarily be aware of these associations or, if they are aware of them, that it is possible to identify which particular historical associations they will be aware of. In this regard place names are easier to relate to particular historical associations than personal names because they typically refer to only one place with a finite set of associations. (A quibbler could argue that it is the characteristics of the place itself rather than its name that Austen makes use of, but Austen so frequently merely names a place without describing it that it is the name itself that carries the significance.) Thus Doody is generally helpful in presenting the historical characteristics of counties and towns in a way that helps us understand why Austen has chosen to name those particular places and what associations they bring with them. Consequently she offers an interesting reading of *Mansfield Park* starting with a description of the small county town of Huntingdon, the birthplace of the three Ward sisters who figure so prominently in the novel, before moving on to consider the significance of Portsmouth, Antigua and Mansfield Park itself.

However, while Doody deals well with some places, her interest in the deep historical associations of place names betrays her with others. At times she seems to assume that merely to reveal the origins of a name must somehow demonstrate that Austen achieved 'meaning that goes down deep into layers of English history and relationship to the land'. This is particularly implausible when recognition of the origin requires knowledge of Old English or a Celtic language. Thus Doody offers origins for the place names Windsor, Dawlish, Eastbourne, Brighton but without attempting to suggest that there is any relevance to the reading of the novels in which they appear. Sometimes when she *does* claim some possible connection with the role of the place in the novel, the suggested connection is extremely tenuous. Take, for example, her discussion of Everingham, the name of the estate of Henry Crawford in *Mansfield Park*. Earlier in the book, in a discussion of the central family of the novel, the Bertrams, Doody informs us that the name Bertram 'is ultimately of Germanic origin: *berht hraben* = "bright raven"' (127). Later she tells us that Everingham 'has a Saxon name' meaning "'the settlement of the followers of the man with the boar's head helm", or "of the man as strong as a boar"',

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before remarking that ‘the “boar’s head helm” would match with the “bright helm” of the Bertrams’ (334). Thus Doody has changed the interpretation of Bertram to ‘bright helm’ while suggesting a link between this helm and the (possible) helm of Everingham. But what reader could make this connection? And even if we accept that such tenuous connections are valid, we would want to know that Austen understood the original meanings of names of Old English or Celtic origin. Attempting to address this question, Doody points out that some versions of Camden’s *Britannia* contain lists of the components of Old English place names, but there is no evidence that Austen knew *Britannia* beyond the suggestion that her relatives at Godmersham *might* have had a copy (227-8). In any case it would not have given her the information needed to identify Doody’s ‘allusion’.

Doody’s treatment of personal names is similarly mixed. There is some pertinent commentary on the social significance of first names – for example Selina (168) and Bidley (105) – and she helpfully picks up on Fanny’s passionate association of the name Edmund with chivalry when Mary Crawford is only concerned that its presence signals Edmund is the second son (144). That Austen associated the unusual name Marianne with revolutionary France is plausible and suggestive but the further comment that the name combines those of ‘two regnant English queens’ is too much icing on the cake (109-10). Why this Mary and this Anne and not others? Doody claims that Austen’s writing ‘is dense with allusion, thick with multiple sensations and meanings’ (389) but for this to work the allusions have to be recognisable. Moreover Mary and Anne belong to the very limited set of first names normally used in Austen’s time. The only significance attachable to these names is their extreme ordinariness. As a result Doody’s attempts to find common characteristics in people named Mary (209) or John (168) are not convincing.

Surnames can also be tricky. One of Doody’s particular lines is identifying names as Norman or Saxon and drawing out the implications. However, her practice of identifying names as ‘Norman’ because they at some time were preceded by ‘de’ is misguided. De B(o)urgh might reasonably be described as a Norman name since it was borne by members of the ruling class in Norman England but the existence of a Leofric de Brandune in pre-Conquest England does not make Brandon a partly Norman name (99). Doody also associates the name with the Charles Brandon, first duke of Suffolk, but there is no convincing explanation of why this Brandon rather than others is selected. A similar arbitrariness of association affects her discussion of Ferrars (98), Jennings (96-98) and Collins (114), while her suggestion that the presence of an apothecary called Jones ‘offers the reader a light hint’ to look at Fielding’s Tom Jones as a parallel to Wickham (117) stretches the notion of allusion to breaking point.

The subtitle alerts us to Doody’s interest in wordplay, an interest she convincingly demonstrates Austen shared, even to the extent of making a sexually suggestive pun on ‘Lady Frances’ (‘Fanny’) (9). While some of Doody’s suggested puns are open to question others are more plausible, including the indecent suggestions of the name Box Hill (349) which she places in the context of a fascinating discussion of the place’s reputation as a locus of illicit sex.

There are good things in this book. However, for me too many of the objects of Doody's 'allusions' are either arbitrarily selected or rely too much on arcane information not readily available to either Austen or the reader. Consequently I cannot endorse her claim that

while Austen magnificently deploys realism, ... she is simultaneously setting up allusions and stirring them together to create an underlying surrealism *that is all her own* [my emphasis]. Here victims of Tudor beheadings may play with Civil War victors; Saxon kings and modern courtesans wander through the new shrubbery.' (392)

If we accept her 'allusions' as valid, *every* realistic novel that uses real or realistic names carries such a surreal underbelly.

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