

Imagining Austen's fictional worlds

Jane Austen's Possessions and Disposessions; The Significance of Objects.

By Sandie Byrne.

Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. vii + 293 pages.

Hardcover. \$81.36.

Review by Andre van Loon.

Even though Jane Austen's world can still be glimpsed in some of England's towns, houses, and fields today, it is also in many ways remote. Austen lived in a time without electricity, reliable running water, motorways, or wind farms cutting through the countryside and in which many houses stood in hard-to-reach locations. This radical difference from our world extends to the people living then. They would be more recognizable, yet the way they dressed or transported themselves, to name but two examples, is very different from today's fashion and habit. We may assume that we know Austen's physical world quite intimately, yet we would probably be in for a surprise in seeing the real thing.

One of the stranger aspects of reading Austen is that the novels say so little about things—objects as big as a house or as small as a hat—and yet in her fiction the feeling of being quite grounded is common. We are typically not told what characters are wearing, what size or color specific objects are, where they are in a room, and what shape or size that room itself is. A typical descriptive passage gives enough indication of time

and space—it is the afternoon, we are in a particular room, these people have just come in—before the focus shifts to what is being said, or indeed, what is left unsaid. It would probably come as a surprise to most readers, if they were asked a series of questions about the objects referenced by one of Austen's narrators, to find themselves unable to answer many of them. And yet, we have done the work of imagining the way things look ourselves, guided by sufficient detail and a certain unobtrusive elegance on the part of the narrator.

Sandie Byrne, a lecturer at the University of Oxford, discusses Austen's fictional worlds in her new *Jane Austen's Possessions and Disposessions*. On the one hand, she notes that many apparently finely narrated scenes are in fact quite general.

They gradually ascended for half-a-mile, and then found themselves at the top of a considerable eminence, where the wood ceased, and the eye was instantly caught by Pemberley House, situated on the opposite side of a valley, into which the road with some abruptness wound.

Quoting the moment Elizabeth Bennet first sees Darcy's property, Byrne notes that she sees "just 'woods', not oak woods or beech woods; a handsome stone building, not a Palladian or a Jacobean building." Along with Elizabeth, we experience a sense of excitement in seeing where Darcy lives. In that moment, we implicitly feel that the fact that the house is large and well-situated is all we need to know. Darcy could be, in plain terms, a good catch, whether the trees are oak or beech, or something else.

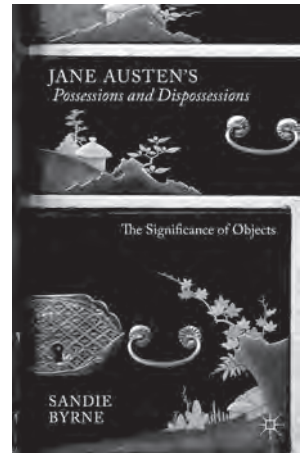
Byrne goes further in her study, however, discussing the social and psychological significance of certain objects. The ways in which clothes, food, and properties are talked about, traded or ignored are often indicative of character. Elizabeth Bennet is interested in clothes, but not as frivolously as her mother or sister Lydia. Darcy's management of Pemberley is noted for its respect of nature—he has

changed some things, but not so much as to change the house's natural charm—highlighting his own essential good nature. Emma Woodhouse has begun

but then abandoned several tasteful drawings. Various men fall below a certain level of virtue by the alacrity with which they inquire about contracts, inheritances, properties, and other material interests. Women, notably the Dashwood sisters, are legally dispossessed of objects they have long loved and viewed as their own. Austen's novels are incessantly driven, Byrne notes, by the question of who gets what, which can differ sharply from who deserves it.

Byrne is a knowledgeable guide to a fascinating topic. Her study is well-informed and has a well-stocked bibliography to peruse. She is traditional in her focus—her critical outlook is not particularly cognisant of the latest literary theories—but she always discusses interesting aspects of Austen's novels. One slight, if not disruptive, surprise is her relative coolness: she does not seem highly appreciative of Austen's wit or skill at verbal wounding. Mr. Wickham, for example, is politely but roundly condemned for his materialism, which culminates in the way he marries Lydia Bennet. Overall, however, Byrne has a solid contribution to make to a rich field of study. The most interesting conclusion from her study is that we, Austen's readers, have done so much work in imagining her fictional worlds, without feeling particularly strained or even aware of it.

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