# JANE AUSTEN MANSFIELD PARK



With a New Introduction by Margaret Drabble

### JANE AUSTEN

#### CHARACTE OF

## MANSFIELD PARK

With a New Introduction by Margaret Drabble

SIGNET CLASSIC

Published by New American Library, a division of

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street,

New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto,

Ontario M4V 3B2, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2,

Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124,

Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,

New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany,

Auckland 1310, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue,

Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Published by Signet Classic, an imprint of New American Library, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

First Signet Classic Printing, August 1964 First Signet Classic Printing (Drabble Introduction), June 1996 20 19 18 17

Introduction copyright © Margaret Drabble, 1996 All rights reserved



REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 92-72351

Printed in the United States of America

If you purchased this book without a cover you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated. JANE AUSTEN was born in 1775 in Hampshire, England, to George Austen, the rector of Steventon, and his wife, Cassandra. Like many girls of her day, she was educated at home, and she began her literary career by writing parodies and skits for the amusement of her large family. Although Austen did not marry, she did have several suitors and once accepted a marriage proposal—but only for one evening. Austen never lived apart from her family, but her work nevertheless shows a worldly and wise sensibility. Her novels include Sense and Sensibility (1811), Pride and Prejudice (1813), Mansfield Park (1814), Emma (1816), and Northanger Abbey and Persuasion, published together posthumously in 1818. Austen died in 1817.

MARGARET DRABBLE is the highly acclaimed novelist, biographer, and editor of *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Her novels include *The Gates of Ivory*, *The Radiant Way*, *Realms of Gold*, and *The Needle's Eye*. She lives in London.

### JANE AUSTEN



## MANSFIELD PARK

With a New Introduction by Margaret Drabble SIGNET CLASSIC

Published by New American Library, a division of

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street,

New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto,

Ontario M4V 3B2, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2,

Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124,

Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,

New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany,

Auckland 1310, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue,

Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Published by Signet Classic, an imprint of New American Library, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

First Signet Classic Printing, August 1964 First Signet Classic Printing (Drabble Introduction), June 1996 20 19 18 17

Introduction copyright © Margaret Drabble, 1996 All rights reserved



REGISTERED TRADEMARK-MARCA REGISTRADA

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 92-72351

Printed in the United States of America

If you purchased this book without a cover you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

# Introduction by Margaret Drabble

#### CASPINATE D

Mansfield Park is the first of the three novels of Jane Mansfield Park is the first of the Austen's maturity, and has often been considered the most problematic. It divides admirers and detractors more clearly than any of her other works, and for a simple reason, although many sophisticated ones have been given. It is, in effect and intention, a deeply moral book-that is to say, it is concerned with the moral and indeed the religious life. Its detractors have found it moralistic: they have regretted the high-spirited freedom and energy of the early works, and have found here something more sombre, more ponderous and dull. If Pride and Prejudice looks back to the sparkle of Regency comedy, Mansfield Park anticipates the proprieties and pruderies of the Victorian age. Fanny Price is by them considered a tedious, self-righteous, priggish, timid character, unworthy to hold attention through the forty-eight chapters of Austen's second-longest novel-and even Lionel Trilling, who thought very highly of the work, writes, "Nobody, I believe, has ever found it possible to like the heroine of Mansfield Park." But the book has also, by its admirers, been acclaimed as profound, subtle, and sensitive, full of delicately balanced oppositions. It is, some believe, her most inward-looking, psychologically penetrating work, in which she asks her most searching questions about the survival of the self in society. A strong case has also been made for it as a defense of conservative values and the traditional social order. All, however, agree that it aims at something other than social comedy. The novel is only incidentally a comedy of manners.

By the time it was published, in 1814, Jane Austen was already known (though not, to any but a few, by name) as the author of Sense and Sensibility, published in 1811 and reprinted in 1813, and Pride and Prejudice, published in January 1813. (Another early work, Northanger Abbey, was to await posthumous publication in December 1817.) All three of these works had been started when Austen was very young, and completed when she was still only in her twen-

ties. She was disappointed, as these dates tell, in any expectations of instant acceptance and publication, and had to wait some years for public recognition. During those years, she fell for a while silent, and suffered other misfortunes, including the death of her father in 1805, which condemned her to the prospect of a life as dependent female relative and to the company of her not wholly congenial mother. Her early productivity ceased; she abandoned an unfinished novel, *The Watsons*, in 1804/5, and then appears to have written nothing new until she began *Mansfield Park* in February 1811. It would be the first that she was to complete for

more than ten years.

So one might expect the woman who wrote Mansfield Park to have much changed from her earlier self. She was now in her thirties, and well past the age at which she might expect to marry. (As marriage forms the substance of all her plots, this comment is not as impertinent as it might be if made of other writers with other preoccupations.) We see from Pride and Prejudice, written when she was twenty-one, that Charlotte Lucas thinks she is very lucky to get Mr. Collins at the age of twenty-seven "without ever having been handsome," and Mrs. Bennet (admittedly somewhat hysterical on the subject) thinks the exceptionally good-looking Jane is "quite an old maid" at "almost three and twenty"! Austen herself had, as we know, turned down at least one offer of marriage and had almost certainly been disappointed in other expectations; by now she had settled for a single life. In view of the immense stress she places on the importance of marriage, this choice or settlement assumes considerable significance.

It was to lay her open, as we shall see, to charges of writing like a soured spinster, an old maid, even a "Bitch-Monster." At the very least, such an adjustment of expectation, for a woman of her intelligence and social class, must have required self-questioning, and in her case one may reasonably presume such self-questioning provided self-knowledge. It is my contention that Mansfield Park is in part the fruit of that painfully acquired self-knowledge. During the period of its composition, she turned her back on past frustrations and false expectations, and greeted a new life as a successful professional author. On the bright side, she knew that both her published novels were selling well, and indeed reprinting; for the first time she had a little money of

her own to spend on herself. She had emerged from the dark silent tunnel, and become her adult self.

Mansfield Park is a novel about moral and social values, country and town values. That these sets of values are sometimes in conflict is not a new discovery: indeed, they form a staple antithesis in works as diverse as the fable of "The Town and Country Mouse" (treated by Horace, La Fontaine, and Beatrix Potter), Shakespeare's Arcadian comedies, and Wordsworth's The Prelude. The pastoral convention that elevates the simplicity and purity of rustic life and manners above that of the courtly world was a commonplace equally of Elizabethan poetry and of the eighteenth-century "Novel of Sensibility." The more profoundly revolutionary romantic sensibility which revered the wildness and sublimity as well as the simplicity of nature, was already a powerful influence: Wordsworth and Coleridge's Lyrical Ballads had appeared in 1798, and while Jane Austen was composing Mansfield Park the reckless Byron was already famous, and the radical Shelley was making his name. (Queen Mab, Shelley's iconoclastic and visionary poem, appeared in 1813.) This was a time of ideological turmoil, a time of deep change after many years of social stability, and Jane Austen's response to the newly unleashed currents of thought and feeling is extremely complex.

The home and estate of Mansfield Park itself clearly provides a central, complex symbol, embodying values that most have taken its creator to admire. It represents stability, tradition, continuity, safety, the old order. Its ways are contrasted with the bustle, energy, false friendships, even vices of London, as exposed through the attractive but flawed figures of Henry and Mary Crawford: its unchanging aspect is contrasted favorably with the fashionable passion for estate "improvement" which grips the stupid Mr. Rushworth, and which is encouraged by the unreliable Henry. Yet many readers have found it dull, have sympathized with the young people's desire to liven it up with amateur theatricals, and have wondered at Austen's apparently harsh condemnation of youthful high spirits—a condemna-tion considered strained or even hypocritical by those aware that she herself as a young woman had taken part with much enjoyment and without any moral ill effect in similar theatricals in the barn at home at Steventon. Such readers have felt that in praising Mansfield Park, Austen has denied some

of her own deeper self, and paid tribute, in D. W. Harding's words, to "the virtuous fundamentals of her upbringing, ranging herself with those whom she considers right on the simpler and more obvious moral issues" and allying herself with "virtues that are easy to appreciate and reasonably often met with."

This seems to me a complete misreading of Austen's portrayal of the values approved in the novel. There is nothing either "simple" or "obvious" about the moral issues raised here. If we look closely at what Mansfield Park represents, we find that it by no means gains Austen's unqualified approval. This supposed model of harmony is from the first pages disturbed by the angry voice of the officious and mean Mrs. Norris, an ever-present familiar: Lady Bertram is a model not of virtue but of indolence, Tom Bertram is an idle spendthrift, the Bertram girls are spoiled and selfish, and Sir Thomas himself will be found seriously deficient as a father. Clearly, this is no model family. When ten-year-old Fanny Price arrives at her new home from Portsmouth, she is terrified by the place. It is too grand and too large, Sir Thomas's formal manners in particular alarm (and continue to alarm) her, and it is only with time that she comes to appreciate it as home. Its attractions, in other words, are not obvious. Much is made of Fanny's continuing nervousness and diffidence, and although nobody but Mrs. Norris ever deals very harshly with her, she is still seriously lacking in confidence a third of the way through the book when Sir Thomas returns unexpectedly from the West Indies to interrupt the family theatricals. She is terrified by his arrival: all the family is alarmed, and with good cause, but she is "nearly fainting" with fear; "Her agitation and alarm exceeded all that was endured by the rest, by the right of a disposition which not even innocence could keep from suffering," and she is almost overcome by the return of her "habitual dread" of her uncle, which brings upon her an "excessive trembling." The description of the effort she has to make to enter the drawing room to greet him is very telling (and sympathetically presented)—she pauses a moment "for what she knew would not come, for a courage which the outside of no door had ever supplied to her," and then turns the lock "in desperation" to find herself in the full glare of the lights, before the assembled family.

Is this a description of the atmosphere of a happy, well-

ordered, comfortable home? Is it not merely a home that at times appears well-ordered? And as Austen insists, appearances are not all. We are told that Sir Thomas's second evening on his return home "passed with external smoothness, though almost every mind was ruffled; and the music which Sir Thomas called for from his daughters helped to conceal the want of real harmony." In fact, the house is full of the energies of discord—sibling rivalry, greed, ambition, illicit sexual passion, and vanity have had full rein during the patriarch's absence. But the patriarch himself does not bring with him either harmony or joy, and the ideal of "domestic tranquillity" he upholds is shown to be deeply dull. It is significant that it is the stupid Mr. Rushworth who ingratiates himself with his prospective father-in-law by saying that he is glad the theatricals have been banished, for "we are a great deal better employed sitting comfortably here among ourselves, and doing nothing." Of course, his motives in saying this are impure; he had disliked the play-acting because of opportunities it gave for his betrothed Maria to flirt with Henry Crawford—but nevertheless that phrase "doing nothing" strikes a chill, and we are not reassured when Sir Thomas, overanxious to approve so wealthy a son-in-law, warmly commends his speech and elaborates it to his own satisfaction into a encomium of Mr. Rushworth's good sense. Both are disingenuous: the rest of the family is right at this point to wish to indulge in a cynical smile.

The novel has more to say about the virtues of dullness and the advisability of "doing nothing." It is plain that we are not intended to admire the vacant mind, "heaviness" and slow wits of Mr. Rushworth, but the attitudes of Sir Thomas, Lady Bertram, and of course Fanny towards calm and rational enjoyment are more problematic. Lady Bertram's indolence is clearly not admired by Austen, and fun is made of her endless needlework (of which Fanny does all the difficult bits) and her fondness for her pug—but nevertheless she is less dangerous than the overactive Mrs. Norris, and in a crisis (Tom's illness) she manages to exert herself. Sir Thomas himself prefers his own domestic circle, and although we sympathize with his shock at finding his "own dear room" turned into confusion (and share his distaste for the noisy, insensitive and intrusive Mr. Yates) we are not given a very favorable impression of his own pleasures. At the beginning of Volume Two, Chapter III, we are told that

"under his government, Mansfield was an altered place ... it was all sameness and gloom compared with the past—a sombre family party rarely enlivened." This may be Edmund's perspective, as he regrets the banishing of Mary Crawford, but it is equally possible (in my view probable—remember Emma's dread of evenings alone with Mr. Woodhouse) that Austen herself speaks in her own voice here.

Fanny defends the new-old Mansfield, reminding Edmund that things had not been much fun before Sir Thomas went abroad-"There was never much laughing in his presence.... I cannot recollect that our evenings formerly were ever merry, except when my uncle was in town. No young people's are, I suppose, when those they look up to are at home." She goes on to say that she prefers listening to her uncle talking about the West Indies to "many other things," a remark that may well be taken as evidence of her priggishness, servility, or docility-but it is crucial here to remember that Fanny is delighted by the dismissal of the theatre project not only because she disapproves of its effect on others, but also because it had been alienating Edmund's affections. She is in love with Edmund, and she is glad to have Mary out of the way. Her approval of the "family evenings" without the Crawfords is not untouched by self-interest. When Edmund is there, she is not dull. (Indeed, one must bear in mind throughout Fanny's love for Edmund, which motivates some of her apparently selfless acts and protects her against the powerful attractions of Henry Crawford—and remember that Fanny gets Edmund in the end, just as the suspicious and worldly-wise Sir Thomas in the first chapter feared she might.)

Nor can we believe that Austen, even in this most serious of her novels, wholly approves a home from which all merriment is banished, and where the father's presence is felt as a blight. Indeed, as she makes clear in her denouement, she holds Sir Thomas in part responsible for his daughters' faults. He had been too aloof, too solemn, too little responsive to their needs. He has allowed too little reasonable enjoyment into their lives, and allowed them to associate (to judge him by his own terms) with too small a range of suitors for them to be allowed a proper choice. No wonder they both marry so unwisely, and both so unwisely fall in love with Henry Crawford. Sir Thomas is far from idealized as a father, and despite his high principles he is almost as inter-

ested (if with more discernment) in material and social gain as Mrs. Norris. Austen certainly does not exempt him from criticism and mockery (as she exempted Mr. Woodhouse): witness the wonderfully funny and deflating observation about him, as he gradually becomes aware that Henry is courting Fanny: "disdaining even as a littleness the being quick-sighted on such points, he could not avoid perceiving, in a grand and careless way, that Mr. Crawford was somewhat distinguishing his niece" [my italics]. That "grand and careless" is very good, and the spectacle of Sir Thomas pretending not to notice what is becoming very plain is both comic and double-edged: it humanizes, but it does not dig-

nify or endear him.

Mansfield Park, then, is far from being the model of the ideal, harmonious, patriarchal home. Fanny has to learn to love it, and she grows to love it as much for its negative virtues as for its positive ones. She loves it partly because it is the home of Edmund, to whom her attachment and devotion are entirely plausible, and she loves it because it is familiar and does not disturb or overexcite. This is not painted as a virtue in her; her recoiling from "noisy pleasures" and social display and vanity is natural, a product both of her slight physical frailty, her insecure position in the family, and her natural shyness. Unlike Maria, Julia, and Mary, she is not much tempted by the frivolities that offend Sir Thomas. Her temptation is quiet. It is no moral effort or virtue in her not to want to take part in the play, as she really hates the idea of performing in public-the effort and moral courage lie in resisting the wishes of others. She comes to love Mansfield Park because it offers her safety and protection. It allows her to feel "useful," "safe," and finally, "beloved." It ceases to frighten her, and by the end of the novel she thinks that all that comes within the view and patronage of Mansfield Park is "dear to her heart and thoroughly perfect in her eyes." Li-onel Trilling, quoting this, and rightly stating that her judgment is not ironical, then leaps to the conclusion that Mansfield Park is the Great Good Place for the author as well as for the heroine, and that it provides a radiant, Yeatsian, aristocratic vision of "custom and ceremony." But this is not quite correct; as Trilling himself proceeds to argue, it may be seen as a much more qualified, ambiguous symbol. (It is also interesting to note that although twentieth-century readers tend to see the house itself as a building of dignified

antiquity, like Mr. Rushworth's historic Elizabethan mansion at Sotherton with its James II chapel, we are specifically told

that it is "modern, airy and well situated.")

Austen herself is certainly not blind to the troubling implications of Fanny's discomfort when she is forcibly returned to the "noisy pleasures" and discontents of her own family in Portsmouth. She designs this sequence in order to trouble us. She, like Sir Thomas, knows perfectly well that material as well as moral comfort will draw Fanny back to Mansfield or push her into the arms of Henry Crawford. Fanny's alienation from the family which she left with such misgivings as a little girl is not a happy spectacle, and we are keenly aware that she has to make the hard and unsympathetic choice of turning her back on her own parents and siblings. (She is, of course, in one of the few unconvincing turns of the plot, allowed to rescue her sister Susan, who although of a bolder spirit finds herself pondering anxiously on "old vulgarisms and new gentilities" and "silver forks, napkins and finger glasses" as she approaches her new home.) Fanny, like Emma Watson in *The Watsons*, also brought up by wealthy relatives, has become too "refined" for her own kin, and she cannot bear the untidy meals and dirty tableclothes and raised voices of Portsmouth. Mansfield Park may be dull and Sir Thomas may be overbearing, but at least its rooms are large and its tables well laid. Fanny has learned to appreciate, indeed to depend on, the very things that so alarmed her as a little girl. She has been corrupted by Mansfield.

This, of course, is an overstatement, but it is at least a corrective to the view that Austen admires everything Mansfield Park stands for. What she is trying to demonstrate in this novel is that life is not simple, choices are not simple, we cannot have our cake and eat it. Each positive choice in life implies a loss. The bright world where Elizabeth Bennet can win both Darcy and Pemberley without losing her own freedom of speech is no longer seen as a possibility. And the novelist, like the heroine, must choose between the bright glitter of cruelty and the dull comfort of kindness. As Austen wrote, in a letter to her niece Fanny Knight in 1814, "Wisdom is better than Wit, and in the long run will certainly have the laugh on her side." It is clear to all readers that Mary and Henry Crawford, unlike Fanny or any of the Bertrams, are possessed of the kind of worldly wit, energy,

XIII

and vivacity that make Austen's earlier heroes and heroines so entertaining: it is also clear that she is determined not to let them win our wholehearted admiration. Some have complained that she has "stacked the cards" against them against her own will and secret sympathies (much as she allowed too much sympathy for Marianne Dashwood to unbalance Sense and Sensibility), but it cannot here be argued that she does not quite know what she is doing. On the contrary, she knows precisely what she is doing. Every good, attractive quality of Mary's is finely balanced by some revealing selfishness or lapse of taste, every cynical remark of Henry's is balanced by some act of generosity or evidence of a well-judging intellect. As readers, we are meant to be caught in a state of uncertainty, at one moment triumphing that Fanny has captured Henry's love and wishing her to accept him and do her best to reform him, at the next wishing her to retain the integrity of her own private sense of value and certainty. Neither resolution-her marriage to Henry or her marriage to Edmund—can be wholly satisfactory. The moral of this book is that choice is difficult. One cannot have both wit and wisdom.

And its narrator makes some very brave and difficult choices. Far from pandering to public morality by presenting a timid, sickly, but high-principled heroine in love with a clergyman, she is deliberately flying against the tide of her own rising popularity, which even as she was writing was demanding a reprint of the very different (and much more lastingly popular) Pride and Prejudice. The comic clergy-man Mr. Collins is much more of a stereotype than Edmund Bertram, and in trying to rescue Edmund from the raillery of Mary and Henry she is consciously tackling an almost impossible artistic problem. She could have repeated her first "bright and sparkling" success without drawing upon herself the wrath of the church or her own censorious relatives, and indeed in her next novel, Emma, she was to create a heroine who has far more in common with Elizabeth Bennet than ' with Fanny Price (and, incidentally, another very foolish clergyman). In creating Fanny Price she knows that she herself, like her stubborn heroine refusing to join in the play, will be unpopular. So what was it that led her to embark on the large project and large perspectives of Mansfield Park?
One largely biographical explanation has to do with her

own sense of the power of her own wit. This can be, as her

admirers know, devastating. She can dismiss characters in a sentence, or bring them to life to tease and torment them through the length of a novel, and her cruelty has been as much disliked as her satire has been admired. Like Elizabeth, Mr. Bennet, and Emma, she rejoices in irony and repartee, and is impatient with dullness, slowness, stupidity. Bores and fools are mercilessly exposed. Such a talent is not a comfortable gift, and it is likely to make its owner more feared than loved. When her family letters were published in 1932 they were greeted with some surprise by critics who admitted themselves shocked both by their savagery and their triviality-E. M. Forster called them the "whinnying of Harpies," H. W. Garrod described them as "a desert of trivialities punctuated by occasional oases of clever malice," Harold Nicolson described them as "old-maidish and disagreeable," evidence of a mind "like a very small, sharp pair of scissors." One of her recent (and not very indulgent) biographers, John Halperin, while reminding us that these were very private letters and attempting to defend her from what he calls the image of "Bitch-Monster," concedes that she is both malicious and cynical. (One should note the sexual abuse in most of these comments: it is significant.) Jane Austen did not expect these letters to be read by strangers, and had she done so, she would have censored them. In Mansfield Park, she censors herself, as though confronting an anticipated attack-but the attack, I would contend, is from herself. She was, by then, an "old maid," and she well knew the charges traditionally made against old maids, who had a reputation for malice and ill temper, "chagrin and pee-. vishness." As we have seen, she herself was not to escape such attacks from critics, and she may well have encountered them in person. She is a writer who arouses strong antagonisms; she inspired in Mark Twain what he called "an animal repugnance," and Emerson found her "sterile" and "vulgar." In her relatively powerless, dependent position, her sharp tongue was her defence, and one may well suspect that she feared she might be driven to indulge herself too much in sarcasm. Emerging from her silent years as a novelist (and it is perhaps significant that her correspondence also shows lengthy gaps over this period), she embarked upon a novel in which she deliberately created her most quiet, almost voiceless heroine, and contrasted her with a character whose conversation rushes and sparkles and boldly jumps from