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Mansfield Park

JANE AUSTEN

MANSFIELD PARK

Jane Austen

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WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

Mansfield Park was published in three volumes by Thomas Egerton in 1814. The first edition, though it was badly printed and strewn with errors, sold out within six months. To many of the readers who had enjoyed *Pride and Prejudice* the year before, this new novel must have come as something of a shock. It still does. 'What Became of Jane Austen?' asked Kingsley Amis in the title of a much anthologised article on the book, and his question echoes the perplexity of generations of readers. To put it at its most basic, how could the same author create one heroine like Elizabeth Bennet and then go on to create another like Fanny Price?

In the first place, the sequence of composition was not quite as straightforward as this suggests. Early versions of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Northanger Abbey* and *Pride and Prejudice* were all written in the second half of the 1790s at a time when Jane Austen, born in December 1775,

was still in her early twenties. She had lived since birth with her family at Steventon Rectory in Hampshire. Her father, George Austen, was a clergyman in only moderately comfortable circumstances, but the family had wealthy connections. (Indeed, much as Fanny Price is borne off to live with her aunt's family at Mansfield Park, one of Jane Austen's older brothers had left home to be adopted by Thomas Knight, a rich cousin of their father.) The cheerful tenor of life at Steventon during these years is reflected both in Jane's surviving letters, which start in January 1796, and in the prevailing tone of the first three novels. But this period came to an abrupt end in 1801 when, to Jane's dismay, the family left Steventon and moved to Bath.

In the years that followed, first at Bath and later at Southampton, Jane Austen wrote little apart from the first stages of a novel called *The Watsons* which was never finished. This was a troubled time. As far as we can tell from the scraps of information available, she fell in love with a young clergyman in the summer of 1801 only to receive news of his death shortly afterwards. Later the same year another chance of marriage came to nothing: having accepted an advantageous proposal from a somewhat unappealing young man, she almost immediately changed her mind and withdrew the acceptance next morning. The death of her father in 1805 added to the unhappiness of these years. It was only when Mrs Austen and her family returned to Hampshire in July 1809 and settled in the village of Chawton that Jane's life recovered enough stability for her to turn back to her writing with a will. She revised the early drafts of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, arranging for them to be published in 1811 and 1813 respectively.

The two novels remain essentially the products of an earlier stage of Jane Austen's life. By contrast, *Mansfield Park*, which she had written between February 1811 and the summer of 1813, bears all the signs of an increased seriousness that had come with age, with the experience of tragedy and with what must have been a growing awareness that in her mid-thirties and without fortune she was never likely to marry. Of all her novels *Mansfield Park* is the most sober. 'Now I will try to write of something else,' she declared in a letter to her sister Cassandra, '& it shall be a complete change of subject – ordination.' Whether or not we think this is an accurate account of the novel's subject, it points to a new solemnity of purpose that has an unmistakably religious colouring. *Mansfield Park* is the one novel by Jane Austen that has been clearly influenced by the Evangelical movement, which was calling at the time for moral reform and attempting to infuse the religious life of the country with some of its own earnestness. The

author who had scoffed at Evangelicals a few years earlier can write to her niece in 1814 that she is 'by no means convinced that we ought not all to be Evangelicals'.

What are the consequences of this new seriousness? The world of *Mansfield Park* is not markedly different from that of her other novels. The focus is again on a small section of the landed gentry, their neighbours, their visitors and the social texture of their lives. But to talk of the social texture of life at Mansfield Park is at once to highlight the novel's difference from its immediate predecessor. What Jane Austen is primarily concerned with here is less the social than the moral texture of life at Mansfield Park. Or rather, she is concerned to show how the one is dependent on the other. And this concern is clearly figured in the presentation of the various characters.

Running through the central sections of the book is the tension between Henry and Mary Crawford on one side and Edmund and Fanny on the other. The Crawfords are rich, witty, socially adept; they have all the graces that make for pleasing company; they are full of life. Fanny and Edmund, on the other hand, can claim none of these graces. When Fanny is introduced at the start of Chapter 2, it is almost entirely in terms of negatives – not much in her appearance to captivate, nothing to disgust, no glow of complexion, no other striking beauty, etc. – and this emphasis continues through the greater part of the novel. Life, the physical business of living, always seems slightly too much for her, whether it is a question of gathering roses or riding a horse. Edmund fares little better. 'There is not the least wit in my nature,' he says, and few readers would be inclined to disagree. No other hero and heroine in Jane Austen have quite so little humour, quite so awkward a social presence. If she was worried that *Pride and Prejudice* had been 'rather too light & bright & sparkling', as she suggested to her sister, she has found a sufficient antidote in Edmund and Fanny.

The distance we have travelled from *Pride and Prejudice* can be measured in the repeated use of the single word 'lively'. It would be an instructive exercise to trace it through the novel. When applied to Elizabeth Bennet, it had carried the full force of the author's approval, but in the case of Mary Crawford, the connotations are altogether different. 'Your lively mind can hardly be serious even on serious subjects' (p. 70), Edmund tells her in one of several exchanges that draw attention to the conflict between liveliness and moral propriety. It comes as no surprise towards the end of the novel to hear that Maria's disastrous liaison with Henry Crawford began after she had gone to Twickenham with 'a family of lively, agreeable manners, and probably

of morals and discretion to suit' (p. 361). To have lively, agreeable manners in this novel is no recommendation. The phrase neatly sums up the opposition at the heart of *Mansfield Park* between what is socially agreeable and what is morally right.

Ranged around the central quartet are all the other characters who manifest in one form or another the besetting sin of Mansfield Park – a concern for social proprieties that is unsustained by any moral foundation. There is Lady Bertram, a picture of elegant decorum, but too enervated to have any sort of moral existence at all; Mrs Norris, surely the nastiest of Jane Austen's creations, who voices the appropriate sentiments for every occasion but whose words bear no relation to her actions; Julia and Maria, the Bertram daughters, who have acquired grace of manner but not of character. It is Sir Thomas himself, in an important passage at the end of the novel, who finally acknowledges what has been wrong with his daughters and, by implication, with his own direction of Mansfield Park. 'He feared that principle, active principle, had been wanting':

> They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice. To be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments – the authorised object of their youth – could have had no useful influence that way, no moral effect on the mind. He had meant them to be good, but his cares had been directed to the understanding and manners, not the disposition. (p. 372)

If readers end up asking what became of Jane Austen in *Mansfield Park*, it is because she has raised the uncomfortable possibility, which was to be more and more widely canvassed in the nineteenth century, that social style might be crucially at odds with moral substance. The Crawfords are *intended* to be attractive, Fanny and Edmund are *intended* to lack sparkle. That's the whole point. To choose virtue may mean choosing the less attractive option. One could divide the book's characters into those, the majority, who are governed by their wishes and those who are governed by their obligations. For Jane Austen there is an iron law of moral obligation that cuts clear across considerations of personal desire or social attraction. Again and again the book sets what people want to do against what they *ought* to do and judges them according to their response. Fanny alone consistently makes the right choice.

This is the main thematic link between two of the novel's most celebrated episodes, the visit to Sotherton and the project to put on a

play at Mansfield. There is no better example than the Sotherton outing of the way Jane Austen can charge the trivialities of commonplace social events with a weight of significance that turns them into moral drama. The couples pass through the rooms of the old house, pause for a few minutes to look at the chapel, then go out to wander in the grounds. Nothing could be more ordinary, and yet by the end of the visit Sotherton has become a moral map on which we can chart with grim precision the course of the various characters as they take a *serpentine* path through the woods, or edge round a *locked* gate into the park, or allow themselves to be *tempted* by an unfastened side-gate into the wilderness. Actions that seem the merest small change of social life resonate with moral implications.

The same is true of the theatrical fiasco. We know that private theatricals were an accepted form of entertainment at Steventon Rectory in Jane Austen's childhood, so why all the fuss about them at Mansfield Park? To some extent, no doubt, it can be attributed to changing moral fashions. Jane Austen's was an eighteenth-century childhood. By 1814 not only had she herself changed, so had the climate of the age. Though the reign of Queen Victoria was still over twenty years away, the Evangelical movement heralded many of the values that were later to be associated with Victorianism. It would hardly be surprising if Jane Austen's views had changed by the time she came to write *Mansfield Park*. But the novel is not really concerned with the rights and wrongs of private theatricals in themselves, any more than in the earlier episode with the rights and wrongs of squeezing round a locked gate into a park; it is concerned with what they mean here, to this group of characters in this particular context. In both cases they represent an attempt to bypass the permissible limits of expression, to find a way of doing what you ought not to do or saying what you ought not to say. As such, they are condemned. It is this steely refusal to countenance the pleasurable at the expense of the proper that governs the tone of *Mansfield Park*. And it is this that perhaps makes it a book more often admired than loved.

But though *Mansfield Park* stands out from Jane Austen's other novels by the sternness of its moral emphasis, there is much else that it shares with them. We have only to read the first sentence to recognise the familiar lines of force that run through each of the books:

> About thirty years ago, Miss Maria Ward of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to

> be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet's lady, with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income.

With practised economy we are given in a few lines the crucial details that define a character's place in the scheme of things: social rank, marital status, income and place of residence. It's a sentence that perfectly expresses the social contours of Jane Austen's world. Much of the criticism directed against her in later years has taken this as its starting point. When she wrote to her niece that '3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on', she summed up the aspect of her novels that has most often been attacked. The charge, in brief, is that her world is too narrow, that its interests are too petty, that it takes too little account of what was going on outside the Country Village. It's of course true that one looks in vain for much evidence of the Napoleonic Wars that were being waged on and off through most of the time she was writing her novels; but that is a naïve complaint. To those who deplore the absence of large political events in her work, there are two points to be made. First, the sort of social issues with which Jane Austen was dealing are by no means trivial. They have to do with the vital questions by which our lives are determined. Far from being unimportant, the minutiae of social behaviour are for the most part the only evidence on which we can base our judgements of other people – whom to love, whom to trust, whom to marry. If we are to chart our way through the intricacies of everyday social life, then we must know how to read the signs. And reading the signs correctly is what Jane Austen is all about.

Moreover, and this is the second point, the business of social and moral discrimination does not take place in a vacuum. Jane Austen may have nothing to say about the victories of Napoleon or the execution of Louis XVI, but this does not mean that they had no impact on her work. Given that two of her brothers were on active service in the navy and the husband of a much loved cousin was guillotined during the Terror, it would be absurd to imagine her living and writing in seclusion from the great events of the time. Her concern with manners, with propriety, with convention was intimately related to what was going on in this wider world, and much recent critical debate has centred on the question of where her political and social allegiances actually lie. She was, as Marilyn Butler has demonstrated, one of the combatants in an ideological battle, but on which side? Was she a conservative or a revolutionary? Did she offer a radical critique of women's social position or did she acquiesce in it? Do her novels

support the traditional status of landowners like Sir Thomas Bertram or do they subtly undermine it?

Butler's own arguments, persuasively put in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, suggest that if the Romantic movement and the cult of Sensibility reflect a positive response to the radical political ideas that were sweeping through Europe, Austen's social conservatism, imbued with the sort of ideas that had been expressed by Edmund Burke, reflects an equally clear negative response. Other critics have seen in her a writer whose contempt for marriage as a property market, whose stress on the precarious economic situation of women, whose insistence on their equal moral status with men, set her alongside Mary Wollstonecraft as a proponent of feminist ideals. For these critics, *Mansfield Park* embodies, in Margaret Kirkham's words, 'Jane Austen's most ambitious and radical criticism of contemporary prejudice in society and in literature' (Kirkham, p. 119).

One issue above all has focused this debate. Sir Thomas's absence from Mansfield is dictated by the need to look after business interests in Antigua, which would presumably have been related to the sugar plantations worked by slaves. Austen, it seems, has depicted Sir Thomas as a slave-owner at just the time when slavery was a highly controversial political issue. Much has been made of this by a number of critics, who see in it both an indictment of the social structure that is maintained by slavery and a caustic analogy between Sir Thomas's role as owner of a colonial slave plantation and his role as patriarch of Mansfield. More subtly, Edward Said has written in *Culture and Imperialism* about the significance Antigua would have had for a contemporary readership, arguing that Austen's choice of it as the source of Sir Thomas's income brings into play a whole web of connections between British power overseas and domestic affairs within the Bertram estate. On this reading, *Mansfield Park* becomes 'part of the structure of an expanding imperialist venture' (Said, p. 114). It's a usefully provocative argument, but Said sometimes has a cavalier way with textual detail. Take, for example, his interpretation of the 'dead silence' that greets Fanny's attempt to ask Sir Thomas about the slave trade. To Said, this is symptomatic of the novel's attempt to exclude a historical reality which its own honesty none the less prevents it from completely hiding. And yet if we go back to the scene he is referring to, the picture is surely rather different. In response to Edmund's plea that she should talk more to his father, Fanny protests that this is exactly what she has been doing:

> ' . . . Did not you hear me ask him about the slave trade last night?'
>
> 'I did – and was in hopes the question would be followed up by others. It would have pleased your uncle to be inquired of farther.'
>
> 'And I longed to do it – but there was such a dead silence! And while my cousins were sitting by without speaking a word, or seeming at all interested in the subject, I did not like – I thought it would appear as if I wanted to set myself off at their expense, by showing a curiosity and pleasure in his information which he must wish his own daughters to feel.' (p. 157)

The dead silence has nothing to do with any ideological resistance to making a connection between the two worlds – both Fanny and Sir Thomas would be keen to pursue the subject; it's simply that his daughters are making it plain that they are bored stiff by their father's conversation. In other words, the dynamics of the scene are social rather than political. It is certainly true that Austen's much loved brother Frank had returned from St Helena some years earlier with a marked dislike of slavery and that she herself had read Thomas Clarkson's *History of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade*, but what the reader must decide is how deeply these issues of slavery and colonial exploitation actually penetrate the text of *Mansfield Park*. The risk, as always, is that we end up learning more about the concerns of the critic than of the novelist.

There is clearly a case, made most recently in David Nokes's biography, for seeing Jane Austen as a much more vital, subversive figure than the traditional picture of her as everyone's maiden aunt allows, but the case for seeing her as a radical critic of social traditions and political institutions is much harder to make. Sir Thomas's management of Mansfield is explicitly criticised, but this is not the same as criticising the social order that has put him in control of it. On the contrary, he is criticised for failing to instill the necessary moral safeguards against what threatens that order. And it is in terms of these threats that the political and social context of the novel becomes so important. The preoccupation in *Mansfield Park* with stability and order has a significance that we can only understand if we set the novel against its contemporary background of war and revolution in Europe. The contrast between Fanny's passivity and the Crawfords' restlessness gains a new dimension from this context. That Henry should be hostile 'to anything like a permanence of abode, or limitation of society' (p. 32) sets him clearly, and damningly, on the side of change and commotion.

By the same token, when Fanny goes back to her family's home in Portsmouth and finds it 'the abode of noise, disorder, and impropriety' (p. 312), her revulsion is not mere priggishness; the three nouns define it as an image of everything the values of the novel stand against.

The tensions reflected in *Mansfield Park* are not only the ideological conflicts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, they are the social tensions of a country that was on the verge of tremendous change. The world of Mansfield Park over which Sir Thomas has presided is essentially an eighteenth-century world. The Crawfords who come from London to threaten it with their city ways and their passion for movement and variety are harbingers of a century of change. Mansfield Park itself resists them successfully, but they are a sign of things to come. England had just begun to see the emphasis of national life shifting decisively from the country to the city, and the nineteenth century was to usher in, thanks to the railway, the steamship and the telegraph, an age of relentless movement.

In this, as in other respects, *Mansfield Park* is poised between the two centuries. The novel's social allegiance is to the old order of the eighteenth-century landed gentry, to the values of rural tradition and stability which stand in opposition both to the radical ideas that have been hatched on the Continent and to the stirrings of social change in England. But at the same time the book's moral perspective looks forward to that strand of Victorianism which tends to oppose style to substance, to be suspicious of social charm, to respect depths rather than surfaces, to value earnestness above all. The novel's heroine, too, though she has antecedents in the eighteenth century, has more in common with the physically frail but morally righteous heroines of many Victorian novels.

Mansfield Park is in several ways a towering achievement. Its uncompromising moral vision, the clarity of its social observation, the command of tone that can keep figures as diverse as Lady Bertram, Mrs Norris and Mr Yates within the range of the author's humour and yet prevent them from escaping into a separate comic world – all this is brilliantly managed. To take one instance, Mrs Norris is a comic hypocrite of Dickensian proportions – 'but you know I am a woman of few words and professions. Do not let us be frightened from good deeds by a trifle . . . My dear Sir Thomas, with all my faults I have a warm heart: and, poor as I am, would rather deny myself the necessaries of life, than do an ungenerous thing . . . My own trouble, you know, I never regard . . . ' etc. (pp. 5–6) – and yet such is Austen's control that the comedy never prevents her from being taken seriously

either in her malignity or in the unexpected act of self-sacrifice that makes her Maria's companion at the end of the novel. That she can reflect the author's moral and social concerns while at the same time working so successfully as a figure of comedy is a measure of what Austen achieves in the book.

But has anyone ever been quite satisfied with the brisk resolution of Fanny and Edmund's love story? Reading *Mansfield Park* in 1836, the actor William Macready complained that 'it hurried with a very inartificial and disagreeable rapidity to its conclusion' (Southam 1968, p. 119). It is easy to see what he means. 'Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery,' says Austen at the start of the final chapter, confessing herself 'impatient to restore everybody, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest' (p. 370). In pursuit of this aim, she consigns Fanny and Edmund to felicity with remarkably little ceremony. The brief paragraph that announces their prospective marriage is almost dismissive.

At one level this highlights a strain of authorial ambivalence that colours the whole narrative. In Fanny Price, Austen has created the most morally impressive of her heroines but also the one who is most remote from the wit and irony of her own narrative voice. Her comments nowhere suggest the sort of personal affection she seems to have felt for the heroines of other novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*. In these two books there is a clear enough gap between the narrator and the heroines – it is the space within which we see and judge their faults – but it is not a gap that throws up any conflict of tone. In *Mansfield Park* the gap is apparently minimal, and yet we sense a vividness and bite in the narrator's tone that is quite outside the heroine's reach. The narrator who tells us that Mrs Norris 'consoled herself for the loss of her husband by considering that she could do very well without him' (p. 18) has just the sort of sardonic wit that shines through Jane Austen's letters, but if any of the characters in *Mansfield Park* could make that comment, it would be Mary Crawford not Fanny Price.

This may seem to be suggesting, as Blake did of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, that Austen is of the devil's party without knowing it. That would be quite wrong. There is indeed a sense in which Austen is of the devil's party, but she knows it all too well, and in condemning Mary Crawford she condemns those aspects of herself that are implicated in Mary's malicious wit and irreverent frivolity. Unfortunately, they are precisely the aspects responsible for much of what is most attractive in her novels, for what is 'light & bright & sparkling'. Of course she

relented again in *Emma*, giving us a heroine as different from the timid, unassuming, verbally unadventurous Fanny as anyone could wish, but in *Mansfield Park* there remains the sense of an author to some extent writing against the grain of her talent, endeavouring to suppress some of the sources of her own artistic energy. Throughout the novel Austen has been helping Fanny along, lending her a supportive commentary that is far more intrusive than anything she felt the need for elsewhere, and it is hard to believe that she does not sometimes weary of this. Could anyone with an ear as sharp as Austen's fail to be aware of the whining note of self-pity in Fanny's reflections during preparations for the play: 'She alone was sad and insignificant; she had no share in anything; she might go or stay, she might be in the midst of their noise, or retreat from it to the solitude of the East room, without being seen or missed' (p. 127)? In the end, it may be that Jane Austen found it almost as hard to love her heroine as many of her readers have done. In hurrying her into happiness, the author perhaps shows a pardonable hint of impatience.

Or should we put it down to loss of conviction rather than loss of patience? There is in most of Austen's novels (*Emma* is the obvious exception) a recurring pattern which shows us a heroine undervalued by those around her. The unfolding narrative is in one sense a Cinderella story of how her worth is recognised by the hero who, in spite of obstacles, carries her off at the end of the novel. No other of the heroines is quite so undervalued as Fanny, no other so nearly approximates to the fairy-tale paradigm. And in the final pages Jane Austen comes close to acknowledging that a fairy-tale is what it is. 'I purposely abstain from dates on this occasion,' she writes, 'that everyone may be at liberty to fix their own' (p. 378). She merely urges us to believe that all turned out exactly as it should, and that at just the natural moment Edmund 'became as anxious to marry Fanny, as Fanny herself could desire' (ibid.). Her tone playfully advertises the unreality of the conclusion. It is perhaps a final mark of the unflinching honesty of this book that Jane Austen, situated as she was and knowing what she knew, could not quite put her heart into the business of happy endings.

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