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The Difficult Beauty of *Mansfield Park*

THOMAS R. EDWARDS, JR.

FROM THE Reverend James Stanier Clarke on, there have been those who see no problem in *Mansfield Park*; it is a pleasing tale of virtue rewarded, and this is enough. But such readers are happily rarer today than a hundred years ago; some of our best critical minds have boggled at accepting Fanny Price and Jane Austen's endorsement of her,¹ and the novel's difficulties have to be faced. Even its admirers have had to season their praise—often for “technical” successes—with uneasy confessions that its moral frame may be simpler than the fictional life it controls and judges.² Only Lionel Trilling observes that such uneasiness marks the prime virtue of the novel, whose greatness is “commensurate

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¹ For good statements of the case against the novel, see: D. W. Harding, “Regulated Hatred,” *Scrutiny*, VIII (1940), 346–362 (reprinted, with other valuable essays, in the excellent collection *Discussions of Jane Austen*, ed. William Heath [Boston, 1961], pp. 41–50); C. S. Lewis, “A Note on Jane Austen,” *Essays in Criticism*, IV (1954), 359–371 (Heath, pp. 58–64); and the pertinent chapter in Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (Princeton 1952). Mr. Mudrick's is the most uncompromising condemnation, and the most carefully analytical; my reading (and, I suspect, Lionel Trilling's too) was in large part arrived at by trying to answer his objections, and I take this to indicate how vigorous and intelligent his case is, even though I almost entirely disagree with it.

All quotations from *Mansfield Park* are from the edition of R. W. Chapman, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1926); I give page references to this edition, and (in roman numerals) chapter references to the numerous other editions which (unlike Dr. Chapman's) number the chapters consecutively, without regard for the original three-volume form.

² See, for example, Reginald Farrer, “Jane Austen,” *Quarterly Review*, CCXXVII (1917), 1–30 (Heath, pp. 85–86); Joseph M. Duffy, Jr., “Moral Integrity and Moral Anarchy in *Mansfield Park*,” *ELH*, XXIII (1956), 71–91; Charles Murrah, “The Background of *Mansfield Park*,” in *From Austen to Joseph Conrad*, ed. R. C. Rathburn and Martin Steinmann, Jr. (Minneapolis, 1958), pp. 23–34; and Andrew H. Wright, *Jane Austen's Novels*, rev. ed. (London, 1961), pp. 123–134.

³ Lionel Trilling, “*Mansfield Park*,” in *The Opposing Self* (New York, 1955) (Heath, pp. 87–98). My dissents from Mr. Trilling's views will not, of course, disguise the extent of my indebtedness to his indispensable essay.

with its power to offend.”³ One learns more about *Mansfield Park* from Mr. Trilling than from anyone else; but while I share his belief in its greatness, I must confess some doubts about his way of reading it. Although Fanny is indeed conceived ironically, I think Jane Austen likes her and wants us to like her too—and despite Mr. Trilling’s invocation of “the shade of Pamela,” I find it quite possible to do so. Nor can I accept his view of Henry and Mary Crawford; surely they are presented consistently, and with entire persuasiveness, as being more gravely flawed and less charming than he finds them, even at first reading; and in Mary, especially, Jane Austen diagnoses a moral disorder that, because less under conscious control, is both more alarming and more pitiful than the *deliberate* insincerities and impersonations with which he charges them. In short, Mr. Trilling concedes too much to the opposition, even to the extent of accepting the idea that the novel’s praise “is not for social freedom but for social stasis,” that it rejects “spiritness, vivacity, celerity, and lightness . . . as having nothing to do with virtue and happiness.” Fanny and Edmund do reject freedom and vivacity, to be sure, and they are right to do so, considering who they are, but Jane Austen’s view of the rejection is considerably more complicated and troubled than theirs. *Mansfield Park* does speak, as Mr. Trilling says, “to our secret inexpressible hopes” of escaping the “demands of personality” and secular complexity, but it warns as well that such an escape would cost us dearly.

It is first of all a singularly “beautiful” novel, one in which Jane Austen draws more than usual upon “scenic” resources.⁴ We attend more to where people are and what they are doing, and, more important, scene makes fuller contact with moral meaning. The excursion to Sotherton reveals this mingling of scene and meaning at its fullest. In contravention of Mrs. Norris’ plans for organized sightseeing,

the young people, meeting with an outward door, temptingly open on a flight of steps which led immediately to turf and shrubs, and all the sweets of pleasure-grounds, as by one impulse, one wish for air and liberty, all walked out (p. 90, ix).

The tangled syntax reflects another entanglement, of motive and

⁴ This is the point of Mr. Murrain’s essay; both he and Mr. Duffy say that the Sotherton episode is important.

evaluation, which the setting expresses too: it is good to thwart Mrs. Norris and all *calculations* about pleasure, yet the “impulse” seems too easily satisfied, the “sweets” too “immediate.” (Are not gardens “tempting” places?) Guests should wait for invitations, but more than good manners seems at issue. There follows a dance-like movement through the landscape of lawn, Wilderness, and park, in which personal groupings, and the romantic possibilities they imply, dissolve and reform; Henry and Maria slip into the locked park, jealously followed by Julia and Rushworth; Mary and Edmund rejoin a lonely Fanny and are welcomed back by Authority in an amusingly theatrical tableau: “on [their] reaching the bottom of the steps to the terrace, Mrs. Rushworth and Mrs. Norris presented themselves at the top” (p. 103, x).

Happily, it is not the novelist but the characters who seek to exploit the scene’s obvious symbolic possibilities. Mary, for one, has a lively sense of what might be done with the landscape:

“We have taken such a very serpentine course; and the wood itself must be half a mile long in a straight line, for we have never seen the end of it yet, since we left the first great path.

“But if you remember, before we left that first great path, we saw directly to the end of it. We looked down the whole vista, and saw it closed by iron gates, and it could not have been more than a furlong in length.”

“Oh! I know nothing of your furlongs, but I am sure it is a very long wood; and that we have been winding in and out ever since we came. . . .”

“We have been exactly a quarter of an hour here,” said Edmund, taking out his watch. “Do you think we are walking four miles an hour?”

“Oh! do not attack me with your watch. A watch is always too fast or too slow. I cannot be dictated to by a watch” (pp. 94–95, ix).

Mary wants the Wilderness to be a Forest of Love (or at least Dalliance); her terms—serpentine course, first great path, not seeing to the end of it—playfully hint at an allegory of possible emotional involvement. She aims at a charming “femininity,” but her projection of the scene as a Spenserian forest where time and space are suspended seems strained and coy. If Edmund (as so often) misses the point with his blundering addition of the iron gates and his inept insistence on furlongs and watches, we must

still agree that time and space do exist, both as they affect people (Fanny is tired) and in their resonances as moral metaphors—to romanticize like this is to risk losing your bearings.

The danger becomes clear when Henry and Maria stand foiled by the gate:

“Your prospects, however, are too fair to justify want of spirits. You have a very smiling scene before you.”

“Do you mean literally or figuratively? Literally I conclude. Yes, certainly, the sun shines and the parks looks very cheerful. But unluckily that iron gate, that ha-ha, gives me a feeling of restraint and hardship. I cannot get out, as the starling said.” As she spoke, and it was with expression, she walked to the gate; he followed her. “Mr. Rushworth is so long fetching this key!”

“And for the world you would not get out without the key and without Mr. Rushworth’s authority and protection, or I think you might with little difficulty pass round the edge of the gate, here, with my assistance; I think it might be done, if you really wished to be more at large, and could allow yourself to think it not prohibited.”

“Prohibited! nonsense! I certainly can get out that way, and I will” (p. 99, x).

This innuendo-ridden talk is what Edmund’s stolid belief in time and space unwittingly saved him from. Jane Austen predicts the final disaster of Maria and Henry, but the moment evokes views of obligation and licence that are more than aspects of “plot” or “character.” Freedom is tempting *because* it may be wicked. Each—Henry slyly, Maria impetuously—uses the setting to mirror improper interest in the other; since neither admits that the conversation is “figurative,” they can dally with perfect efficiency (for both, getting into the park easily becomes “getting out”) without taking any responsibility for their insinuations. People who imply that they mean more than they say, yet refuse to say what they mean, are both irritating and dishonest, and Fanny, though as usual she can’t quite say it, senses thoroughly what is at stake: “you will certainly hurt yourself against those spikes—you will tear your gown—you will be in danger of slipping into the ha-ha. You had better not go.” Setting becomes the image of moral violence.

The whole episode is beautifully drawn, but like other great moments in *Mansfield Park* it represents more than a local triumph of “technique,” to be weighed against a pervasive failure of dis-

crimination and understanding by the author. The beauty of the novel, its brilliant combining of Jane Austen's usual mastery of speech and incident with a new sense of what setting can express, serves the end of a subtler statement and development of the novelist's grasp of the fictional "life" she deals with. Though it would be hard to prove, I think we are *told* less in this novel than in her others; evaluations are less clear-cut, judgments less reliant on any moral schematism, significance more dependent on our "reading" of scenes. If we look in *Fanny* for the signs that so firmly place Jane Austen's other heroines we will not find them, nor are Edmund, Mary, and Henry so distinctly given moral location. But this blurring of the outlines of comedy of manners (or fairytale)⁵ creates not confusion but a new generosity and seriousness in the presentation of "theme."

The theme presented has to do with meddling, seeking to impose one's will on creatures entitled to wills of their own, treating other lives as though one's designs for them were their chief reason for being. Stated so broadly, this is the theme of *Emma* and, if less prominently, of the other novels too; at this level of generality, indeed, it is the theme of most classic fiction and many of our difficulties with life. But in *Mansfield Park* it gets a fullness of treatment not to be equalled until the triumphs of George Eliot and James.⁶

There is first Mrs. Norris, whose selfish meddling is the novelist's hint of deeper significance elsewhere. Miss Lascelles remarks that her favorite phrase is "between ourselves," "with its suggestions of conspiracy and wire-pulling";⁷ to this might be added the set of variations—"I perfectly comprehend you," "I entirely agree with you," "that is exactly what I think," etc.—that at least once reveals its theme: "If I were you" (p. 55, vi). Mrs. Norris, in other ways demonstrably Jane Austen's most nearly psychotic creation, yearns to merge with other existences, and she deeply resents resistance:

[Fanny] likes to go her own way to work; she does not like to be dic-

⁵ Both Mr. Harding and Mr. Lewis suggest Cinderella as a pattern for Fanny Price. But Edmund, her reward for suffering, is hardly a Prince Charming; it is the Crawfords, not Jane Austen, who impose fantasy upon truth.

⁶ Barbara Bail Collins, "Jane Austen's Victorian Novel," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, IV (1949), 175-185, recognizes that *Mansfield Park* anticipates some of the methods of Victorian fiction, but in her view it is "a forerunner of the dowdy propriety and piety which blossomed in the 'fifties."

⁷ Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art* (Oxford, 1939), p. 164.

tated to; she takes her own independent walk whenever she can; she certainly has a little spirit of secrecy, and independence, and nonsense, about her, which I would advise her to get the better of (p. 323, xxxii).

Although Sir Thomas, recently guilty of the same view, thinks this unjust, Mrs. Norris has put her finger on something. Behind her softness of manner, Fanny does indeed resist, and her aunt's sense of this impels her astounding attempt virtually to *become* Fanny:

Depend upon it, it is not you that are wanted; depend upon it it is me (looking at the butler) but you are so very eager to put yourself forward. What should Sir Thomas want you for? It is me, Baddeley, you mean; I am coming this moment. You mean me, Baddeley, I am sure; Sir Thomas wants me, not Miss Price (p. 325, xxxii).

For an appalling moment, her madness reveals itself not simply as a yearning for intimacy with Sir Thomas's power but as a desperate hunger for the identities of other people, even the most insignificant.

But the contagion is wider spread. Tom Bertram's peevish complaint about Mrs. Norris—"it raises my spleen more than any thing, to have the pretence of being asked, of being given a choice, and at the same time addressed in such a way as to oblige one to do the very thing" (p. 120, xii)—reveals, as Fanny sees, *his* will to have his own way, as when by extravagance he cheerfully deprived Edmund of half his income or tried to bully Fanny into joining the company of *Lovers' Vows* ("Let her choose for herself as well as the rest of us," Edmund had then to urge him). Lady Bertram is in her own vegetable way quite as selfish as her sister and daughters; Sir Thomas sadly comes to see that he has spoiled his family not only by indulgence but by repressing their moral freedom; even Edmund attempts to urge Fanny into Henry's arms. Robbing people of their choice lies at the heart of virtually every significant incident in the novel.

Something disturbingly more than a lack of sincerity vitiates the charm of the Crawfords. We notice that Henry is attracted to Fanny as to a puzzle:

I do not quite know what to make of Miss Fanny. I do not understand her. I could not tell what she would be at yesterday. . . . I must

try to get the better of this. Her looks say, "I will not like you, I am determined not to like you," and I say, she shall (p. 230, xxiv).

Lawrence would know what to make of this hunger for "knowing," this will to destroy another's separateness. Henry is of course more than a Lovelace, and his "moral taste" is sufficient to appreciate Fanny's capacity for feeling, but the growth of his love gets consistent qualification:

It would be something to be loved by such a girl, to excite the first ardours of her young, unsophisticated mind! (p. 235, xxiv).

[His vanity] convinced him that he should be able in time to make [her] feelings what he wished. . . . [His love] made her affection appear of greater consequence, because it was withheld, and determined him to have the glory, as well as the felicity, of forcing her to love him (p. 326, xxxiii).

His will to dominate, to recreate the world as an image of his wishes, keeps him from ever quite recognizing her reality as "another." Nor is this a matter of the narrator imposing a commentary on Henry that his speech and behavior won't support; when, for example, Mary doubts that Fanny would much appreciate their dissolute uncle, Henry can airily reply that "he is a very good man, and has been more than a father to me. Few fathers would have let me have my own way half so much. You must not prejudice Fanny against him. I must have them love one another" (p. 296, xxx). It is not moral imperception—his tone suggests some amusement about both his uncle and himself—but his determination that both Fanny and the Admiral shall be objects to manipulate that defines the irony.

Mary is a richer figure, subject to more complex attention and concern, but she too shows a corruption by will. As in her dismissal of time and space at Sotherton, she likes to imagine worlds more congenial than the real one. Edmund's simple determination to be ordained seems to her (pp. 227–228, xxiii) a deliberate insult, shattering her trust in a different, imaginary future: "It was plain now that he could have no serious views, no true attachment, by fixing himself in a situation which he must know she would never stoop to." She suffers from not being able to strike back at Sir Thomas, the presumed "destroyer" of her "agreeable fancies"—"not daring to relieve herself by a single attempt at throwing ridi-

cule on his cause" (p. 248, xxv). As for any child, what others do has always direct reference to herself, as when she equates Edmund's "adhering to his own notions" with "acting on them in defiance of her" (p. 286, xxix). This wilfulness must, to be sure, be weighed against her appreciation of Edmund himself (as well as her dream of him as a "man of independent fortune"), and against her ability to rebuke herself: "She was afraid she had used some strong—some contemptuous expressions in speaking of the clergy, and *that* should not have been. It was ill-bred—it was wrong. She wished such words unsaid with all her heart" (p. 286, xxix). The dashes indicate the difficult achievement of honesty, as she resists the tempting understatements of her fault. She engages more of our sympathetic interest than her brother, but Mary, rather more gravely than Emma Woodhouse, is prey to what Jane Austen's revered Dr. Johnson called "the dangerous prevalence of imagination."

Only Fanny recognizes the perils of will, in resisting Edmund's advancement of Henry as a fit object for her reforming powers:

"I would not engage in such a charge," cried Fanny in a shrinking accent—"in such an office of high responsibility!"

"As usual, believing yourself unequal to anything!—fancying every thing too much for you!" (p. 351, xxxv).

Edmund seldom appreciates subtlety; far from "fancying," Fanny here recognizes both the difficulty and the impropriety of disturbing the existences of other people, however bad. She comes as close as she can to explaining this when Henry seeks to draw her into intimacy by soliciting her advice:

"When you give me your opinion, I always know what is right. Your judgment is my rule of right."

"Oh, no!—do not say so. We have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be" (p. 412; xlii).

The reader who thinks Conscience a quaint concept is (as he deserves to be) in trouble here. Fanny's inner guide is her only defense against will, her own or someone else's. *Mansfield Park*, a novel without miracles, has no instance of one character converting another by sitting down for a good, serious talk. Rather, those who have a conscience, like Edmund and Sir Thomas, work out

their salvations in the quiet privacy of their own thoughts, while those who have none, like Henry and Mrs. Norris, or who cannot find the privacy to listen to theirs, like Mary and Maria, find no refuge from the desolations that the will insists on.

Indeed, had Jane Austen wanted to continue the pattern of titles begun with *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, she might have called *Mansfield Park* (inelegantly enough) *Conscience and Consciousness*. Opposed to conscience, the inner guide, is “consciousness” in a common eighteenth-century sense: “Having one’s thoughts and attention unduly centred in one’s own personality; and hence, apt to imagine that one is the object of observation by others; Self-conscious.”⁸ (C. S. Lewis, who rejects this meaning as a semantic impossibility, offers another equally relevant—having a secret which you think someone shares—and admits that being in such a state may make you be and look “self-conscious.”)⁹ In *Mansfield Park*, people are constantly watching one another, gauging their effect on their listeners, searching, as in a mirror, for signs of their own existence. The Crawfords, if not the source of the infection, are at least the agents of its spread. When Mary congratulates Lady Bertram upon the peace which, for bystanders, must follow the selection of *Lovers’ Vows*, she remarks: “‘I do sincerely give you joy, madam, as well as Mrs. Norris, and every body else who is in the same predicament,’ glancing half fearfully, half slyly, beyond Fanny to Edmund” (p. 143, xv). Such consciousness is usual in Mary’s conversation: “Miss Crawford turned her eye on [Fanny], as if wanting to hear or see more, and then laughingly said, ‘Oh! yes, missed as every noisy evil is missed when it is taken away. . . . But I am not fishing; don’t compliment me’ ” (p. 289, xxix). And even her letter-writing is tainted:

To have such a fine young man cut off in the flower of his days, is most melancholy. Poor Sir Thomas will feel it dreadfully. I really am quite agitated on the subject. Fanny, Fanny, I see you smile, and look cunning, but upon my honour, I never bribed a physician in my life (p. 434, xlv).

For her, being conscious is a way of achieving relationship—she shares with others the amusing pretence of her wickedness and thus assures them that it *is* a pretence—and so of assimilating

⁸ *OED*, “Conscious,” def. 9.

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge, 1960), p. 187.

people to the needs of her will. That we are made to see it partly as a pathetic effort to escape isolation in the self is a tribute to the fairness and compassion with which Jane Austen presents Mary.

Because less is at stake for him, Henry's more assured consciousness can be drawn with a lighter touch. In the fine comedy of chapter xxxiv, his reading of Shakespeare, his renouncing of amateur theatricals, and his discussion of preaching with Edmund are all calculated for their effect on Fanny, whom he keeps looking at and interrogating:

“. . . nineteen times out of twenty I am thinking how such a prayer ought to be read, and longing to have it to read myself—Did you speak?.” stepping eagerly to Fanny, and addressing her in a softened voice; and upon her saying, “No,” he added, “Are you sure you did not speak? I saw your lips move. I fancied that you might be going to tell me I *ought* to be more attentive, and not *allow* my thoughts to wander. Are you not going to tell me so?”

“No, indeed, you know your duty too well for me to—even supposing —”

She stopt, felt herself getting into a puzzle, and could not be prevailed on to add another word (pp. 340–341).

The strands of the theme come together. Henry's will to compel her love, however comically softened, aims at incorporating her into his performance—even to the extent of writing her lines for her—and her conscience, which again forbids her to dictate to anyone, is touchingly endangered by the whisper of imagination (“even supposing”). Henry watches Fanny, Edmund (unwittingly drawn into the mannerisms of conscious play) watches them both, and with Jane Austen we watch them all. But at the center Henry watches not Fanny but himself as her response reflects him, enjoying with some justice) his own performance for its sheer inventive gusto. And when he has finally got her alone:

“Do I astonish you?”—said he. “Do you wonder? Is there any thing in my present intreaty that you do not understand? I will explain to you instantly all that makes me urge you in this manner, all that gives me an interest in what you look and do, and excites my present curiosity” (p. 342).

But of course he can't explain, fully; involved is not simply his love as he would explain it, but a deeper self-love that can respond

to others only in proportion to their potential for becoming himself, in effect, by becoming his creatures.

Mansfield Park, with its clashes of will and consciousness, is in fact a world of children, most of them struggling not to grow up. Henry has, preeminently, the child's fascination with the idea of changing his identity, as his delight in acting suggests. If Edmund can make him yearn for the clerical life, William Price, for a moment, arouses his hitherto unrecognized love of seafaring and honest toil (pp. 236–237, xxiv). Or lacking other stimulus, his Protean interests can be absorbed by a game of "Speculation," with an opportunity to manage other hands than his own (p. 240, xxv). But play is more than a relief from boredom. The planned performance of *Lovers' Vows* is wrong, I think, because it uses the theatrical blurring of art and life in the service of calculated dalliance. Mary inquires: "What gentleman among you am I to have the pleasure of making love to?" (p. 143, xv), and as usual the joke is no joke at all for those who share her consciousness. Both Mr. Trilling's idea about the moral dangers of "impersonation" and Miss Lascelles' remark that Jane Austen disapproves of "make-believe that is *not* acting"¹⁰ are pertinent. Mary and Henry use the play to approach closer to their objects, and those objects, Maria consciously and Edmund confusedly, understand this and accept it. They are not acting but disguising emotional reality in art; but in another sense the Crawfords are *always* acting—life and art are for them not distinct, and to draw Maria and Edmund into their impersonations, for which the play is only a more or less acceptable public vehicle, is to threaten their living identities without exposing their own in return.

That they all sense this appears in their response to Sir Thomas's surprise return, which Jane Austen describes as "consternation," "a moment of absolute horror." The terms are excessive only if measured by adult values, and these are not the ones that apply:

... after the first starts and exclamations, not a word was spoken for half a minute; each with an altered countenance was looking at some other, and almost each was feeling it a stroke the most unwelcome, most ill-timed, most appalling! ... Every other heart [except Yates's and Rushworth's] was sinking under some degree of self-condemnation or undefined alarm, every other heart was suggesting "What will become of

¹⁰ Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art*, p. 68 n.

us? What is to be done now." It was a terrible pause. . . . Jealousy and bitterness had been suspended; selfishness was lost in the common cause (p. 175, xix).

This is more than idle mock-heroic fun; they respond like children who have been caught at some nasty, secret indulgence, and they know it and can only unite in their guilt. The horror is quite real and, from their viewpoint, quite justified, although they soon discover that the adult view—Sir Thomas's—is more liberal than they had supposed. It is a crucial moment when Sir Thomas steps into his billiard room and finds himself on the stage of a theater, "opposed by a ranting young man, who appeared likely to knock him down backwards"; but adult equilibrium is equal to the threat, the stage comes quietly down, and art and life momentarily get sorted out.

There is little charm in these children, whose dominant emotion seems to be malice. Mary recommends Henry to Fanny by celebrating "the glory of fixing one who has been shot at by so many; of having it in one's power to pay off the debts of one's sex! Oh, I am sure it is not in woman's nature to refuse such a triumph" (p. 363, xxxvi). One suspects she has been reading *Etherege*, but the life she observed at the Admiral's was fairly *Etheregean*, and her relish in the idea of "paying off" someone recalls her thwarted wish to hit back at Sir Thomas. Even cruder malice impels Tom's and Maria's "glee" at Edmund's descent from "that moral elevation" they have always resented, when he agrees to act in the play (p. 158, xvii), and in Maria's struggle with Julia for Henry's attentions:

Maria felt her triumph, and pursued her purpose careless of Julia; and Julia could never see Maria distinguished by Henry Crawford, without trusting that it would create jealousy, and bring a public disturbance at last.

Fanny saw and pitied much of this in Julia; but there was no outward fellowship between them. Julia made no communication, and Fanny took no liberties. They were two solitary sufferers, or connected only by Fanny's consciousness (p. 163, xvii).

In this nursery-world of aggression and spite, only Fanny has full consciousness in the better sense, sympathetic understanding of what others feel. She too is a child—witness her timid withdrawals

to her “nest of comforts” in the East room—but only in her (and to some extent, Edmund) is childhood given its happier associations of innocence and tender affection.

But while Fanny measures the profound moral disturbances in her companions, she is scarcely the monument of feckless virtue she has been taken to be. Though she lacks irony, she has a streak of disconcerting common sense that has almost equal force, as in her mild remark that “let him have all the perfections in the world, I think it ought not to be set down as certain, that a man must be acceptable to every woman he may happen to like himself” (p. 353, xxxv). Nor is she sentimentally exempted from Jane Austen’s ironic scrutiny,¹¹ as her fondness for quoting Scott warns us.¹² We hear of her “feeling neglected, and . . . struggling against discontent and envy” (p. 74, vii); we see her hardly able to suppress laughter when Tom’s rude remark about Dr. Grant is almost overheard (p. 119, xii); we see her in the grip of abysmal self-pity for having excluded herself from the play (pp. 159–160, xvii), where the proper response is not simple commiseration but a reflection that if she *will* insist on being good, she had better learn to value virtue properly, by experiencing its cost.

For all her affectionate concern for Fanny, Jane Austen keeps her distance even in the later episodes, when Fanny begins to grow up. Most notably, we see her human limitations in her reactions to Edmund and Mary. “It was barbarous to be happy when Edmund was suffering. Yet some happiness must and would arise, from the very conviction, that he did suffer” (p. 279, xxviii). Edmund’s defense of Mary provokes something close to venom:

’Tis nonsense all. She loves nobody but herself and her brother. Her friends leading her astray for years! She is quite as likely to have led *them* astray. They have all, perhaps, been corrupting one another (p. 424, xliv).

She can quite unfairly attribute Mary’s renewed interest in Edmund to his monetary prospects when Tom seems near death—Mary’s motive is surely not simple greed but the feeling that being

¹¹ I find that M. C. Bradbrook has made this point, with a different set of quotations from mine, in “A Note on Fanny Price,” *Essays in Criticism*, V (1955), 289–292; but the irony shows Miss Bradbrook that “Fanny is a goose, with more than a pliant disposition and light blue eyes in common with Harriet Smith.”

¹² Miss Lascelles (*Jane Austen and Her Art*, pp. 48–51) points out that Jane Austen is usually amused by people who quote familiar literature.

a clergyman's wife would be pleasant if one could cut a figure of style. After Edmund gives Mary up, Fanny tells him of her interest in Tom's dying—perfect delicacy might after all have spared Mary *this*; and Fanny's reaction to Edmund's misery is decidedly mixed:

She knew [he was suffering], and was sorry; but it was with a sorrow so founded on satisfaction, so tending to ease, and so much in harmony with every dearest sensation, that there are few who might not have been glad to exchange their greatest gaiety for it (p. 461, xlviiii).

This wry assessment, taken with the other revelations of her imperfection, warns us not to love her too uncritically; she may be "my Fanny" to Jane Austen, but the tone of indulgent affection confesses that there may be something in her to forgive. Far from being unreasonably "protected" by the novelist, Fanny is her most vulnerable heroine, and so her most human one.

Fanny's moral views win out, but not through any betrayal of the "life" the novel has rendered. The presentation of Henry and Mary consistently reveals the psychic weakness at the heart of their apparent vitality and strength, and virtually every incident underlines their disastrous effect on people whose weakness is less talented and skilful. Limited as it is, Fanny's morality has after all a good deal to recommend it as Mr. Trilling makes eloquently clear); to condemn *Mansfield Park* because in it "the deadly sins are passion and infidelity"¹³ is to invoke a sophistication that, with suitable subtlety in defining "passion," would have puzzled or dismayed George Eliot, James, Tolstoy, or Lawrence. But if we are chastened by Fanny's simple virtue, we are by no means invited to embrace it as some triumphant moral imperative. Jane Austen's narrative detachment in the last chapter marks not loss of interest or embarrassment about Mary and Henry, but an understanding that the union of Fanny and Edmund falls somewhat short of solving the universe. Each, for the other, represents an accepted *limit* of achievement. Fanny is what Edmund's ironically conceived sobriety of virtue has deserved, and no more.

Edmund in fact seems the most convincing of Jane Austen's heroes—convincing because he is "placed" by the reservations we are consistently made to feel about him. Both his reality and his limitations are finely secured by his account to Fanny of his final interview with Mary:

¹³ Mudrick, *Jane Austen*, p. 180.

She was astonished, exceedingly astonished—more than astonished. I saw her countenance change. She turned extremely red. I imagined I saw a mixture of many feelings—a great, though short struggle—half a wish of yielding to truths, half a sense of shame—but habit, habit carried it. She would have laughed if she could. It was a sort of laugh, as she answered, “A pretty good lecture upon my word. Was it part of your last sermon? At this rate, you will soon reform every body at Mansfield and Thornton Lacey. . . .” She tried to speak carelessly, but she was not so careless as she wanted to appear. . . .

I had gone a few steps, Fanny, when I heard the door open behind me. “Mr. Bertram,” said she, with a smile—but it was a smile ill-suited to the conversation that had passed, a saucy playful smile, seeming to invite, in order to subdue me; at least, it appeared so to me. I resisted; it was the impulse of the moment to resist, and still walked on. I have since—sometimes—for a moment—regretted that I did not go back; but I know I was right; and such has been the end of our acquaintance! (pp. 458–459, xlvii).

There is much here to respect. Edmund tries to report honestly and fairly, to sort out truth from personal bias, and his hesitations prove his own mixed feelings. But it is *his* report, and we may assume that Jane Austen sees further. Mary’s “sort of laugh” is the final victory of consciousness over both conscience and any genuine feeling; we regret it, not simply because it must banish Mary from the Mansfield world, but, more deeply, because she almost understood the issue. Her last smile even Edmund saw as possibly ambiguous, and we may find it movingly so. Is it saucy and impenitent, or is the nearest she can come to a gesture of apology and regret? Is it, even, the neurotic’s desperate plea to be understood and forgiven despite all his resistances? But if we ponder what might have been, for Edmund the door must close forever; and we needn’t scorn his inability to bear very much reality until we know we can ourselves. Mary’s complex troubled consciousness can have no place in the settled society of Mansfield but this is a criticism of that society as well as of Mary. We may trust Jane Austen to know that the price of peace is considerable simplification.

The novelist’s parting with Henry is less successful. He is called “cold-blooded” in his vanity which accords oddly with the Henry we have been made to *see* almost exuberantly enjoying his gifts; and Jane Austen seems unduly insistent about what he has missed:

Could he have been satisfied with the conquest of one amiable woman’s affections, could he have found sufficient exultation in overcoming the

reluctance, in working himself into the esteem and tenderness of Fanny Price, there would have been every probability of success and felicity for him. . . . Would he have deserved more, there can be no doubt that more would have been obtained. . . . Would he have persevered, and uprightly, Fanny must have been his reward—and a reward very voluntarily bestowed—within a reasonable period from Edmund's marrying Mary (p. 467, xlvi).

The novel totters on the brink of a miracle. Those nervous modifiers (“deserved more,” “and uprightly”) leave unsolved a problem about the Henry we know. *Could* he deserve more and yet remain Henry Crawford as the novel has defined him? His attraction to Fanny stems from her resistance, from his need to prove the strength of his will by breaking hers; his seduction of (or by) Maria is no failure in him or in the novelist, but the inevitable fulfilment of his compulsive need to dominate and his passion to change identities. Children do grow up, and (less commonly) people do change their ways, but surely more than a Fanny Price is required to change a Henry Crawford so radically. For all Jane Austen's shrewdness about how people get married, the novel's moral design quivers for a moment.

But the miracle of Henry's redemption remains subjunctive, and I see no other flaw in *Mansfield Park*. The final withdrawal of the novelist from her created world, if it smacks a little of Fielding's excessively “healthy” scorn for those who *believe* in fiction, provides a necessary perspective on the Mansfield society. Edmund and Fanny receive an affectionate but knowing farewell, in an idiom that mocks Edmund's own fussy speech:

Even in the midst of his late infatuation, he had acknowledged Fanny's mental superiority. What must be his sense of it now, therefore? She was of course only too good for him; but as nobody minds having what is too good for them, he was very steadily earnest in the pursuit of the blessing, and it was not possible that encouragement from her should be long wanting (p. 471, xlvi).

Like Fanny, he will never quite know what he missed, and we must agree with the novelist that, on the whole, it is better that they don't.

This is not to say that Fanny and Edmund are simply the butts of Jane Austen's dark comedy. She does, however, include them in

a larger field of irony that they never get out of, and thus the novel differs from her other mature works, where the heroes and heroines are either mostly exempt from irony (like Mr. Knightley or Anne Elliot), or win their release from it as the plot brings them to know what Jane Austen knows—or most of it—about life. Fanny and Edmund learn less, but that is the point; for once we are to consider how people who, like most people, have no superabundance of wit and charm and wisdom are to get along in the world. They get along, quite simply, by avoiding what they cannot understand, which in *Mansfield Park* is the struggle of tormented souls like Mary and Henry to define their own reality by denying reality to other people. Jane Austen does not forbid us to hope that integrity and liveliness of spirit may coexist in people, but she knows that when they clash, as they often will, the latter usually wins; if we are compelled to choose, *Mansfield Park* reluctantly admonishes us to opt for integrity. *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* show amply Jane Austen's preference for the union of brilliance and conscience, but they show also that it may have to be achieved by virtually miraculous means, by those changes of heart that happen lamentably more often in novels than in life. In *Mansfield Park*, virtue is its own reward, and for once Jane Austen firmly insists that it may have to make do with itself.¹⁴ This meaning, if I am right in finding it, is no failure of the novelist's integrity but its triumph, and a prediction (as *Emma*, for all its radiance, is not) of what fiction was to be for the masters of the next hundred years.

¹⁴ Mr. Trilling, who plays with this same proverb, says that virtue gets more than itself, because Fanny grows up to be the virtual mistress of Mansfield Park. Literally, of course, she becomes mistress of Mansfield Parsonage, and Jane Austen resists what must have been the sore temptation of killing Tom to make her heroine rich; Fanny gets, in effect, the life Mary could not accept, and it seems pretty minimal when we think of what Elizabeth Bennet or Emma or even Anne Elliot get. Then too, there is Edmund!