

tentive, so serviceable, so obedient; at others, so bewildered and so weak; and at others again, so tyrannic, so beyond control!'
(pages 180-181)

'A large income is the best recipe for happiness I ever heard of. It certainly may secure all the myrtle and turkey part of it.'
(page 184)

'Human nature needs more lessons than a weekly sermon can convey.'
(page 215)

To her, the cares were sometimes almost beyond the happiness; for, young and inexperienced, with small means of choice, and no confidence in her own taste—the "how she should be dressed" was a point of painful solicitude.
(page 220)

'A sermon, well delivered, is more uncommon even than prayers well read.'
(page 295)

She saw nobody in whose favour she could wish to overcome her own shyness and reserve. The men appeared to her all coarse, the women all pert, everybody underbred.
(page 343)

The indignities of stupidity, and the disappointments of selfish passion, can excite little pity.
(page 403)

Mansfield Park



Jane Austen

*With an Introduction and Notes
by Amanda Claybaugh*

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Introduction



Mary Crawford is, or so it seems, the very model of a Jane Austen heroine. Spirited, warm-hearted, and, above all else, witty, she displays all the familiar Austen virtues, and she stands in need of the familiar Austen lessons as well. Like Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), she banters archly with the man she is falling in love with, and, like Elizabeth, she must learn to set aside her preconceptions in order to recognize that love. Like Emma Woodhouse, the heroine of *Emma* (1816), she speaks more brilliantly and speculates more dazzlingly than anyone around her, and, like Emma, she must learn to rein in the wit that tempts her at times to impropriety. But Mary Crawford is not the heroine of *Mansfield Park* (1814)—Fanny Price is, and therein lies the novel's great surprise. For Fanny differs not merely from Mary, but also from our most basic expectations of what a novel's protagonist should do and be. In Fanny, we have a heroine who seldom moves and seldom speaks, and never errs or alters.

"I must move," Mary announces, "resting fatigues me" (p. 85). Before her arrival at Mansfield, she had made a glamorous circuit of winters in London and summers at the country houses of friends, with stops at fashionable watering places in between, and at Mansfield she is no less mobile. A vigorous walker, she soon takes up riding, cantering as soon as she mounts. Fanny, by contrast, has hardly left the grounds of Mansfield since her arrival eight years before, and she is further immobilized by her weakness and timidity. A half-mile walk is beyond her, a ball, she fears, will exhaust her, and she is

prostrated by headache after picking roses. She must be lifted onto the horse she was long too terrified to approach, and her exercise consists of being led by a groom.

"Now, do not be suspecting me of a pun, I entreat," says Mary to her listeners, who have not, in fact, caught the joke at all (p. 54). So dazzling a talker is Mary that she must serve as her own best audience, amusing herself with witticisms the others cannot hear. With a keener eye and a sharper tongue than those around her, Mary sets her words dancing alongside the inanities, vulgarities, and hypocrisies that make up the other characters' speech. Fanny, by contrast, barely speaks at all, and when she does, it is in the silencing language of moral certainty. "Very indecorous," Edmund says of Mary's far more captivating discourse, and Fanny is quick to agree and contribute a judgment of her own: "and very ungrateful" (p. 56). There is little that can be said after that.

"I will stake my last like a woman of spirit," Mary proclaims in the midst of a card game that Fanny had been reluctant to play at all (p. 210). Mary wins the hand, only to find that it has cost her more than it was worth, and, in doing so, she reminds us that to act is necessarily to risk being wrong. Fanny, by contrast, is always right. "Fanny is the only one who has judged rightly throughout" (pp. 162)—this is Edmund Bertram speaking to Sir Thomas in the aftermath of the theatricals, but it could just as properly be the narrator at the novel's end. The language of Fanny's right judgment suggests, however, that her moral certainty is a function of her passivity: "No, indeed, I cannot act," she had insisted (p. 128), and the double meaning of "acting" suggests that Fanny knows not to "act" in a theatrical sense because she never really "acts" at all.

It is in the contrast between Fanny and Mary that we can most clearly see that *Mansfield Park* is, in the words of the critic Tony Tanner, "a novel about rest and restlessness, stability and change—the moving and the immovable" (*Jane Austen*, p. 145; see "For Further Reading"). *Mansfield Park* is hardly the only Austen novel to take as its subject matter a pair of opposed terms, but typically these terms stand in a dynamic relation to one another, each altering the other until a proper synthesis or

balance is achieved. In *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), for instance, the rational Elinor Dashwood and her romantic sister Marianne must each learn from the other to moderate her mode of feeling; similarly, Mr. Darcy must modify his pride and Elizabeth, her prejudice before marriage can unite them. Other of Austen's novels draw careful distinctions within a single term, as when *Persuasion* (1818) establishes a continuum from the most laudable to the most lamentable instances of conforming to the wishes of others. *Mansfield Park* stands alone in this regard, for it unequivocally endorses one set of terms and unequivocally condemns the other. Rest has, in this novel, nothing to learn from restlessness, and restlessness can in no way be redeemed.

The values that *Mansfield Park* endorses, and the certainty with which it endorses them, can best be understood when we restore the novel to its historical context. *Mansfield Park* was written at the end of one tumultuous era, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, and at the beginning of another: the industrialization and urbanization of England. Events like these might seem too large for the carefully circumscribed world of Austen's novels, and Austen's insistent modesty has done much to encourage such a view. In one letter, she identified her ideal subject matter as "3 or 4 families in a country village," and, in another, she described her novels as "those little pieces (2 inches square) of ivory." Her nephew repeated both of these statements in *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, published after her death, and they have long shaped our reading of the novels. But these are surely the most ironic statements ever made by this most ironic of novelists. For what Austen's novels in fact demonstrate is not only that world-historical events manifest themselves on the scale of the "country village," but also that such events can be represented and analyzed even within the compass of a novel only "2 inches square." Recent criticism has come to recognize the full range of Austen's subject matter, and there are now vehement debates over whether Austen was feminist or anti-feminist; capitalist or anti-capitalist; imperialist or anti-imperialist; radical, conservative, or moderate. That these debates persist unre-

solved is a sign of Austen's characteristic obliquity: It is now clear that she was, among other things, a political novelist, but it remains far from clear what her actual politics might have been.

In the rest of this introduction, I will approach the question of Austen's politics, her endorsement of stability and immobility, by following two tropes as they appear and reappear in *Mansfield Park*: the country house and improvement. The country house was a longstanding trope for authority in English literature, one that took on new significance in the years following the French Revolution. Improvement was, by contrast, a more recent term, referring to the eighteenth-century vogue for changes in all imaginable domains—agriculture, art, science, education, manufacturing, and, above all else, landscape gardening. The conservative theorist Edmund Burke, who used the improvement of the country house as a way of figuring the maintenance of authority in a world convulsed by change, first brought together these two tropes. In what follows, I will first trace the development of the country house trope from seventeenth-century poetry to such novels as *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*. I will then turn to *Mansfield Park*, which I take to be Austen's most complex depiction of the country house. Astringent and despairing at the same time, the novel insists that improvements are urgently needed, even as it registers the enormous costs that these improvements will exact. In this way, *Mansfield Park* stands as Austen's most profound treatment of politics, her richest response to the revolutions and wars of her time.

Mansfield Park is unique among Austen's novels for beginning when its heroine is still a young girl. In this way, it heralds what will become one of the nineteenth-century novel's most enduring concerns, namely the relation between our childhoods and the adults we become, and it thus serves as the precursor to novels as various as *Jane Eyre* (1847), *David Copperfield* (1850), and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). These latter novels belong to the genre of the bildungsroman, or novel of education. The critic Franco Moretti has most powerfully described the bildungs-

roman; he argues that the genre emerged in the nineteenth century because it was only then that youth became what it still remains for us, a time of possibility. Not until the advent of industrial capitalism, not until the demise of apprenticeship and feudal farming, could the young imagine that their lives might be different from those of their elders. The imagining of new possibilities offered a kind of compensation, Moretti suggests, for the shattering dislocations that came with such profound economic change, and the bildungsroman sought to make sense of what would otherwise be an overwhelming experience by positing an autonomous self, free to move through this new world at will—indeed, free to remake this new world in his or her own image, as the eponymous titles of many bildungsromane suggest (*The Way of the World*). That *Mansfield Park* is named after a place rather than a person is the first sign, then, that this novel does not fully belong to the genre.

In *Mansfield Park*, there is something that comes before even the childhood of the heroine, something that proves to be more fundamental and more determining, and that is Mansfield itself. The institution is prior to the individual, in all senses of the word. Fanny is invited to Mansfield only after her aunts and uncle have decided that whatever "disposition" she may have formed in the home of her drunken father and slatternly mother will be subdued by her new "associations" of Bertram family and Bertram estate (p. 10). And subdued she is. Once at Mansfield, Fanny is quite literally dwarfed by the house in which she now lives. "The grandeur of the house astonished but could not console her," the narrator tells us. "The rooms were too large for her to move in with ease; whatever she touched she expected to injure, and she crept about in constant terror of something or other; often retreating towards her chamber to cry" (p. 13). Rather than making her way through the world, as the protagonist of a bildungsroman would do, Fanny must learn to feel at home at Mansfield.

Mansfield comes before Fanny, then, but in order to understand all that Mansfield means, we must pause to consider the tradition of country-house writing, a literary tradition that *Mansfield Park* both enters into and alters. This tradition begins

with the genre of the "country house poem," poems written, in the seventeenth century, to pay tribute to a patron or other aristocrat by paying tribute to his ancestral house. Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst" (1616) and Andrew Marvell's "On Appleton House" (c.1650) are the most prominent instances of this genre, along with Thomas Carew's "To Saxham" (1624). In these poems, all that is good and pleasing radiates outward: from the house and its inhabitants to the lands and people surrounding it. The house itself is invariably described as ancient, well-proportioned, unpretending, as taking its forms, quite properly, from nature. "But all things are composed here," Marvell writes, "Like Nature, orderly and near." And as a reward for this imitation of the natural, the house is surrounded by an unnatural abundance. Fertile fields, blooming orchards, breeding livestock—all this we might expect, but not perhaps, as in Jonson, fish that throw themselves into the lord's nets or, as in Carew, oxen that lead themselves to slaughter. Only through such impossibilities, it seems, can the full bounty of the country house be described.

The country house is a source not only of plenty, but also of good. Jonson concludes "To Penshurst" by describing the training of the lord's children, for it is this training that projects the values of the country house both outward in space and forward in time. The children, he tells us, are taught to pray "with the whole household," and their religious education thus serves as the focal point for concentric rings of piety: the lord's family, the lord's household, all the lord's dependents. At the same time, the children are learning from their parents' noble example the "manners, arms, and arts" that will enable them to perpetuate the house and its values into the future. So perfect is the goodness of the lord's family that it obscures the economic relations organized around the country house. The tenant farmer who pays a portion of his harvest to his lord, the farm laborer who receives a cottage and a small wage for his work, both are figured, in Jonson, as carrying fruits and nuts and cheeses to the country house for no other reason than to "express their love" for their lord. And upon their arrival they find that a place has already been set for them at the lord's own

table—and set for them with the lord's own beer and meat and wine. Economic exchange is thus transformed into a fantasy of hospitality. In Carew, even more fantastically, there is no exchange at all. The lord's dependents receive his bountiful generosity, which they reciprocate only with their prayers of gratitude, prayers that ensure that the lord's table be "blest / With plenty, far above the rest." Here, the very act of giving ensures the receipt of even more.

In Austen, the country house poem is transformed into prose, most clearly in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*. While the descriptions are less extravagant in Austen, they nonetheless follow the pattern established by Jonson, Marvell, and Carew. When Elizabeth Bennet visits Pemberley, for instance, she finds that the house is "lofty and handsome" and its landscaping a judicious combination of nature and art, "neither formal nor falsely adorned." And when Emma visits Donwell Abbey, she finds that it is "just what it ought to be . . . [and] looked what it was." The grounds at Pemberley are as fertile as they are expansive, with rich stands of timber and well-stocked streams, while Donwell is impossibly fecund. Fish may not leap into nets when Emma visits, but the orchards are blossoming and the strawberry fields bursting as if it were spring and summer at the same time. The country house and its grounds are of less interest to Austen, however, than the network of social relations that they figure. After visiting Pemberley, Elizabeth can at last comprehend its owner, Mr. Darcy, in all his social roles. "As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people's happiness were in his guardianship!—How much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow!—How much of good or evil must be done by him!" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 272). Elizabeth's description is rather abstract, but *Emma* will specify the many and various duties comprised by such "guardianship." As master of Donwell, Mr. Knightley is magistrate of the local courts and head of the parish council, and landlord to his tenant farmers and manager of his family's home farm as well. He dispenses justice and plans new drains, governs parish affairs and cuts new footpaths, and the very heterogeneity of these duties demon-

strates his centrality to the community, while his patient attention to all of them confirms, for Emma as well as for Austen, his fitness for the role.

Indeed, it is no surprise that Emma falls in love with Knightley, as Elizabeth falls in love with Darcy, when she sees him in his country house; for the very purpose of the country house trope is to compel our respect, indeed our love, for those who are our guardians. The trope has endured because the country house is such a potent figure for authority: an authority that is justified, the figure implies, by the excellence of the family living within the house and ratified by the gratitude of the people and the fertility of the lands by which the house is surrounded. This is an implicitly conservative conception of authority, not simply because it enlists our support for a landed elite, but also because it inhibits us from imagining any radical change. For by law and by custom, the country house was unchanging. Primogeniture ensured that the estate was passed down in its entirety to the family's oldest son, and the estate was legally entailed so that the heir was prohibited from selling or materially diminishing what he was expected to pass down in his turn. Far from being understood as a constraint on freedom, the fact of inheritance both past and future is the very source of the country house's excellence. Darcy implies as much when he replies to praise of Pemberley by saying calmly, "It ought to be good . . . it has been the work of many generations" (*Pride and Prejudice*, p. 83). No new work, no work of a mere individual, could possibly compare.

The country house had always implied a conservative conception of authority, but it was only in the years following the French Revolution, the years immediately before Austen began writing, that this conservatism would be self-consciously theorized and explicitly named. Modern conservatism begins with Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), a text that uses the trope of the country house to represent a specifically English and specifically anti-revolutionary set of values. Against the radical Jacobins who grounded their revolutionary claims to liberty in natural law, Burke argued that whatever liberties we have come to us as an inheritance:

You will observe, that from Magna Charta to the Declaration of Right, it has been the uniform policy of our constitution to claim and assert our liberties, as an *entailed inheritance* derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity; as an estate specially belonging to the people of this kingdom without any reference whatever to any other more general or prior right (p. 119; emphasis in original).

By comparing our liberties to an entailed estate, Burke is arguing that we must bequeath them to future generations largely unchanged. Largely unchanged, but not entirely so, for Burke recognizes that we must sometimes alter to preserve. "A state without the means of some change," he famously cautions, "is without the means of its conservation" (p. 106). Conservation requires us to distinguish wise changes from unwise ones. The former, what Burke calls "improvements," are those changes that repair what is damaged in order to preserve all that is still sound. The latter, what he calls "innovations" or "alterations," are those changes that sweep aside everything in order to build anew. Against the revolution that has razed all the edifices in France, then, Burke sets the example of England's Glorious Revolution, which had preserved the principle of monarchical succession through improvements that prevented Catholics from inheriting the throne.

Whether Austen herself was a Burkean conservative is a question that has been vehemently debated in recent Austen criticism. The question was first raised by Marilyn Butler, who, in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, restored Austen's novels to their historical context by reading them alongside two forgotten genres of the 1790s and early 1800s: Jacobin novels, such as those by Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin; and anti-Jacobin novels, such as those by Maria Edgeworth and Hannah More. In Butler's account, Austen is the culmination of the anti-Jacobin tradition, the most artful of the reactionary novelists writing in opposition to the French Revolution. This account was challenged, however, by Claudia L. Johnson, who, in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*, argued that Austen was not, in fact, an anti-Jacobin novelist and, moreover, that

the very category of the anti-Jacobin novel was more complex and internally riven than it might at first seem. In Johnson's account, even the most seemingly reactionary novelists of the period were suspicious of at least some aspects of Burkean conservatism—and Austen was the most suspicious of all. While Butler and Johnson come to very different conclusions about Austen's politics, they join in emphasizing that her novels in some way engage with Burke, and thus with the central political questions of her time.

Nowhere is Burke's significance to Austen clearer than in *Mansfield Park*. For if Pemberley and Donwell are the country house ideal, Mansfield is the country house in desperate need of renovation. The natural and the architectural; the social, the moral, and the religious; the political and the economic—these disparate domains no longer combine to reflect and reinforce one another. Instead, outward appearances have become dangerously unmoored from inward realities. Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram are well-mannered, but not kind; Maria and Julia Bertram are accomplished, but not principled; and Mansfield itself, for all its beauty and expansiveness, is imperiled by precarious investments abroad and a recklessly improvident heir. The country house ideal has been hollowed out from within. Mansfield's shortcomings are symbolized by, and largely attributable to, Sir Thomas's two-year absence from home. Mrs. Norris has taken his place; high-handed meddling and intrusive attention to trivialities make her the grotesque caricature of a Darcy or a Knightley. Not only does Mrs. Norris transgress the proper limits of her authority, as when she busies herself advising the servants at a neighboring country house, but she also betrays the very values her authority is intended to preserve. She monitors the Bertram servants closely, but only to ensure that they are not wasting fabric or stealing scraps of wood, and she pays no attention at all to the far greater lapses of her nieces. Indeed, she goes so far as to encourage their mercenary marriages and illicit flirtations.

It is hardly surprising, then, that threats to Sir Thomas's authority multiply under Mrs. Norris's incompetent rule. Mary and Henry Crawford pose the first threat. Dashing and glam-

orous Londoners, the Crawfords seduce us as easily as they seduce the provincial Bertrams. It is only in the context of country-house writing that we can recognize the danger they represent. For Mary is not only contemptuous of religion, but also indifferent to nature, and she refuses to honor the seasonal rhythms of rural life. When told that no cart is available to transport her harp in the midst of harvest season, she is shocked to discover that the "sturdy independence of your country customs" will not yield to London cash (p. 52). Henry should be closer to the land than his sister, for he has inherited Everingham, the Crawford family estate. He has not settled there, however, because he is, as Fanny describes him, "so very fond of change and moving about" (p. 102). As a result, his lands have been put in the hands of an agent, who later proves to have been the cause of much suffering among the tenant farmers and hired laborers whom Henry has not troubled himself to know. Neither Mary nor Henry is prepared, then, to be the inheritor and preserver of the country house.

The theater poses the second threat. The amateur theatricals are the novel's most famous set piece because they so seamlessly join the figurative and the literal: The play itself predicts much of what will happen in the novel, while the characters' struggles over the staging of the play present each of them in a revealing light. The play, *Das Kind der Liebe*, was written in 1791 by the German August von Kotzebue; it was translated into English, as *Lovers' Vows*, by Elizabeth Inchbald in 1798 and was frequently performed throughout England for several years after that. Austen could therefore presume that her readers would know the basic outlines of the plot. The play begins twenty years after a seduction, when a peasant girl, Agatha, encounters Frederick, the illegitimate son she had long ago abandoned; the Baron Wildenhaim, now a great landowner with a daughter by a now-dead wife, had seduced Agatha. In a subplot, the Baron arranges a marriage between his daughter and a dissolute rich man, even though his daughter is already in love with a humble, but virtuous, clergyman. Frederick, driven to beg in order to support himself and his mother, at last threatens the Baron and is imprisoned. His true identity is fi-

nally revealed, however, and the Baron responds to the news by marrying Agatha and restoring Frederick to his patrimony. Having thus learned to renounce the concerns of rank, the Baron also permits his daughter to marry the man she loves. As even this brief summary suggests, the staging of *Lovers' Vows* gives rise to many ironic parallels, with the thick-headed and self-satisfied Mr. Rushworth all too pleased to be playing a man valued only for his money and the fawning Mr. Yates all too eager to play at being an aristocrat of more exalted rank. More troubling is Tom Bertram's readiness to "descend a little" and play a comic butler (p. 116), and most troubling of all, of course, is the readiness of Maria and Julia to descend even further and play the part of the fallen Agatha.

Character is revealed through these parallels, and it is further revealed through the many debates over whether the play should be staged at all. Tom, Maria, and Julia defend the theatricals as a fashionable diversion, while Fanny, and later Sir Thomas, condemn them as a grievous wrong. Austen clearly sides with Fanny and Sir Thomas. Such anti-theatricalism is remarkable enough to the present-day reader, for whom nothing could be more innocent than a group of young people amusing themselves by putting on a play. What makes it even more remarkable, however, is the fact that Austen herself had avidly participated in theatricals during her youth, writing the prologues to plays that her neighbors and siblings would perform. To be sure, social mores had changed somewhat in the years between Austen's youth and the writing of *Mansfield Park*, as a growing evangelical movement began to condemn activities that had formerly been seen as innocent, and there is reason to believe that Austen had come to view evangelicals with some sympathy. But the evangelicals condemned novels along with the theater, and this fact alone is enough to remind us that *Mansfield Park* is no evangelical tract. All this is to say that the judgments Austen will pass on the theater are quite particular: They are not the unthinking expression of custom or belief, but rather the self-conscious exploration of political ideology.

It is worth emphasizing that both the author of *Lovers' Vows* and the translator were notorious in England for being politi-

cal radicals. Moreover, the play itself was taken to be a Jacobin text. Its explicit theme, after all, was the irrelevance of rank, and its implicit theme was the priority of individual desire over custom and law. The play ends, in defiance of Burke, with the inheritance going to an illegitimate son. Austen suggests, however, that it is not merely this particular play, but acting in general, that poses a radical threat. For the conservative conception of authority is organized around stable identities or repertories of identities: the lords, laborers, and tenant farmers of "To Penshurst," or the "brother, landlord, master" of *Pride and Prejudice*. The theater, by contrast, imagines protean selves, whose various identities are assumed and cast off at will. Henry Crawford, who proves to be by far the best actor in the novel, captures the theater's dangerous possibilities when he announces himself ready to play "any character that ever was written, from Shylock or Richard III, down to the singing hero of a farce" (p. 109)—any character, that is to say, other than the one he has been given by birth, the owner of the Everingham estate. The theater thus functions in this novel as the art form of unbridled ambitions and abrogated duties, as the art form of revolution.

To put this another way, the theatricals are a threat because they transform the country house into a theater. Returning from his travels unexpectedly, Sir Thomas discovers that his study has been made into a dressing room; worse, he finds himself standing face-to-face with a feckless young man who plays baron to his own baronet. This is "taking liberties with [the] father's house" (p. 112), indeed. In response to such liberties, Sir Thomas orders that the stage be disassembled and the scene painter dispatched, and he himself burns all copies of the play. The "infection" of the theater cannot, however, be so easily contained (p. 159). The stage curtains find their way into Mrs. Norris's house, and Henry Crawford is permitted to stay. With this, we come to the second, more insidious danger posed by the theatricals: They reveal that the country house has been a theater all along. The critic Joseph Litvak, in *Caught in the Act*, has argued that with the return of Sir Thomas the novel shifts its attention from theatricals to theatricality, from a

discrete instance of acting to those forms of acting that pervade, indeed constitute, social and political life. We will later see Sir Thomas staging little theaters of power, as when he commands Fanny to leave a ball early in order to display to potential suitors her remarkable tractability. Nor does the novel, in Litvak's view, imagine any alternative to theatricality. The word "appearance," first associated with the Crawfords, soon takes over the narrator's own discourse, until it is difficult for us to distinguish the seeming from the real. Not even Fanny can escape. Her famous resistance to the theater is articulated in the theater's own language. "No, indeed, I cannot act . . . I really cannot act" (pp. 128), she says again and again, like a latter-day Cordelia in a novelistic *King Lear*.

The first volume of *Mansfield Park* thus demonstrates that Mansfield is a country house in need of improvement, seduced as it is by the glamour of mercantile London and hollowed-out by the blurring of appearance and reality. The second and third volumes of the novel will explore what improvement should entail. Austen draws our attention to this question by using the word "improvement" again and again, until it pervades the discourse of the narrator, as well as the characters. Edmund works toward the "improvement" of Fanny's mind (p. 20), while Sir Thomas commends her "improvement" in beauty and in health (p. 154). Sir Thomas hopes that his son-in-law Rushworth will "improve" in knowledge and wit (p. 174), and Edmund hopes for Mary Crawford's "improvement" in piety and morality (p. 318). At Portsmouth, Fanny seeks the "improvement" of her sister Susan's conduct (p. 346), and Henry Crawford effects some "improvement" in the way their father treats Susan and Fanny both (p. 351). Henry and Edmund approve of the "spirit of improvement" that has taken over the clergy (p. 294), while Mary, upon hearing that the custom of family chapel has been abandoned by the Rushworths, slyly remarks, "Every generation has its improvements" (p. 76).

The problem of improvement is thus raised by the novel's discourse, but it is more fully explored in the novel's other

great set piece, the day at Sotherton, the Rushworth family estate. Having visited a friend whose estate has just been "improved" by a landscape gardener (p. 46), Mr. Rushworth is suddenly filled with a desire to have his own estate be similarly improved; he invites the Bertrams and Crawfords to come to Sotherton and give him advice. Landscape gardening provides Austen with the perfect opportunity to explore what improvement requires; for not only is it the most concrete instance of making changes to the country house, but it was also an activity that was understood at the time in explicitly political terms. A generation before Austen's birth, Capability Brown had developed a gardening style whose natural forms were said to exemplify a specifically English liberty, as opposed to the rigid patternings said to exemplify the absolute monarchy in France. In Austen's lifetime, Humphry Repton (1752-1818) had taken Brown's place as the most influential landscape gardener of the day, but the politics of his gardening style are more difficult to characterize. On the one hand, Repton warned, in *An Enquiry into the Changes of Taste in Landscape Gardening* (1806), against "moderniz[ing] old places . . . and [then] alter[ing] them again on the morrow" (p. 27), a recognizably Burkean caution against excessive change; on the other hand, his actual designs tended toward rather radical "innovations." As the critic Alistair Duckworth has demonstrated in *The Improvement of the Estate*, Austen knew both sides of Repton, for she not only read widely in theories of landscape and the picturesque, but she also saw, at first hand, the changes Repton had made to Stoneleigh Abbey, the estate of her mother's cousin. Repton had, as was his wont, opened new vistas by tearing down trees and walls, even going so far as to redirect the nearby river Avon, and there is reason to believe that Austen felt that these changes had gone too far.

In the episode at Sotherton, however, Austen is less interested in judging either Repton's theories or his practices than she is in condemning those landowners who choose to hire an improver, any improver, to do work that would better be done by themselves. Sotherton, that is to say, dramatizes both the

need for the country house to be renovated if it is to remain vital and the imperative that the responsibilities of authority be borne by those who exercise its powers. In Sotherton, we see a country house that has fossilized from lack of change: The furniture is fifty years out of date, and its portraits no longer mean anything to anyone; the family chapel has fallen into disuse and the laborers' cottages into total disrepair. And in Rushworth, we see a landowner totally unequipped to make the necessary changes. His plans for Sotherton begin and end with the idea of calling in Repton, and his wish to consult with others rather than making plans himself is merely the first sign of a thoroughgoing abrogation of authority. For the failures at Sotherton can all be attributed to absent or inadequate guardians: The death of the elder Mr. Rushworth has forced his widow to turn to the family housekeeper for knowledge of the family traditions; the younger Mr. Rushworth is ready to chop down that familiar Austen trope for continuity, a flourishing stand of trees; and his future wife, Maria Bertram, rejoices that the church is far enough away from the manor house that she will not be troubled by its bells. The inheritance of the past, the requirements of the future, and the moral and religious duties of the present—all are betrayed at Sotherton. And the betrayals at Sotherton throw into relief that far subtler betrayal the Crawfords threaten at Mansfield. The day at Sotherton gives rise to much talk about improvements, and it quickly becomes clear that improving is, for Mary, something that one hires others to do, while it is for Henry a kind of hobby worth indulging until the pleasure begins to pall: The sister would have improvements undertaken only when she is away from home, and the brother would undertake them for the sheer love of "doing" (pp. 50–51). Edmund, on the other hand, would "rather have an inferior degree of beauty, of [his] own choice, and acquired progressively" (p. 50), but he alone speaks for the Burkean values of familial responsibility and incremental change.

These, then, are the values that will come under attack as the Crawfords begin seducing first one than another of the residents of Mansfield. And this is the struggle that the rest of the

novel will unfold: the struggle to preserve the local, the reciprocal, and the continuous in an increasingly cosmopolitan, cash-mad, fashion-driven world; the struggle to find a stable place in a world of restlessness. This is a struggle over the fate of the country house, but Mansfield Park suggests that the country house might have already been lost. For only once is Mansfield celebrated as Donwell and Pemberley are celebrated—and then only with significant qualifications. Toward the end of the novel, Fanny returns to Portsmouth to visit her family, and the contrast between their home and the Bertrams' prompts Fanny to recognize Mansfield's virtues at last:

The elegance, propriety, regularity, harmony, and perhaps above all the peace and tranquillity, of Mansfield, were brought to her remembrance every hour of the day, by the prevalence of everything opposite to them *here*. . . . At Mansfield no sounds of contention, no raised voice, no abrupt bursts, no tread of violence, was ever heard; all proceeded in a regular course of cheerful orderliness; everybody had their due importance; everybody's feelings were consulted. If tenderness could be ever supposed wanting, good sense and good breeding supplied its place (pp. 340–341).

Tenderness had indeed often been wanting, and Fanny's tacit acknowledgment of this fact is the loose thread that unravels the passage as a whole. It reminds us that while other country houses in Austen compel love at first sight, Mansfield can be loved only from a distance, only through a veil of faulty memory. And the more closely we look at this passage, the more clear it becomes that Mansfield remains what it had long been: a place of "propriety" from without and invidious distinctions from within, of apparent "harmony" and actual dissent, of "good sense and good breeding," but bad morality.

The failures of Mansfield seem to be beyond improvement, and it is in this context that we can best understand the novel's shift in focus from country house to parsonage. Austen famously described *Mansfield Park* as "a complete change of subject—Ordination," but the novel proves to be less of a change

in subject than we might at first expect. For what interests Austen about the duties of a clergyman is their close resemblance to the duties of a landowner; what interests her about "ordination," that is to say, is its possible implications for other forms of order. As a younger son, Edmund cannot hope to inherit Mansfield, but his understanding of what it means to be a clergyman is held up as a model for what the heir to Mansfield should and must be. And what it means to be a clergyman, for Edmund, is to settle in one's parish. Edmund must explain to the Crawfords that he will not, as they expect him to do, visit his parish church on Sundays and spend the rest of the week at Mansfield. For he understands that "a parish has wants and claims which can be known only by a clergyman constantly resident. . . . that if he does not live among his parishioners, and prove himself by constant attention their well-wisher and friend, he does very little either for their good or his own" (pp. 214–215). With this passage, Austen joins the contemporary chorus attacking the rampant abuses in the Church of England, such as the relatively common practice of clergymen hiring curates to perform the duties of a parish while themselves continuing to receive its tithes. But the passage also implies that residence is a virtue for landowners as well as clergymen, and it reminds us of the "very little good" that was done during Sir Thomas's two-year absence from home. The fact that it is Sir Thomas himself who has spoken this passage, with his customary sententiousness, further emphasizes the total separation between the appearance and reality at Mansfield.

By retreating from country house to parsonage, *Mansfield Park* acknowledges that the landed elite is often incapable, or unworthy, of upholding the country-house ideal. But the novel also suggests that this ideal is more problematic than Burkean conservatives are willing to admit.

More specifically, *Mansfield Park* critiques the landed estate in much the same terms as Austen herself is now critiqued by critics in our own day. The critic Raymond Williams, for instance, in *The Country and the City*, has famously indicted

Austen for failing to represent, or perhaps even failing to see, the agricultural labor on which the country house depends. She can be quite vague, he notes, about the number of acres in a particular estate, but far more precise about the number of pounds it is worth every year; in much the same way, she has a keen eye for timber, which can be cut down and sold, but a curious blindness when it comes to the woodmen. What this means, Williams argues, is that Austen understands the estate as both a source of wealth and a repository of legible social signs, but not as a site of labor. Indeed, the function of the country house, he suggests, is to transform working-class labor into gentry-class gentility. Williams makes this argument most elegantly through a play on the double meaning of cultivation: The cultivation of land is converted into money, which must then be converted once more into the cultivation of manners and accomplishments. What the country house does, Austen's country-house novels do as well—namely, blind us to the working classes and to the crucial labor that they do.

The critic Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, has more recently commented on an odd blindness of Williams's own, a failure to see the slave labor on the Bertram's plantations in Antigua. The fact that the novel refers to Antigua so obliquely is, in Said's account, both a sign of Austen's reluctance to acknowledge the brutal facts of imperialism and proof that the imperial project has already been achieved. For what the novel's scattered references to Antigua demonstrate most powerfully is that the colonies, and their relation to the metropolitan centers of England can be taken entirely for granted. Said goes on to argue that this presumed relation of center to periphery not only organized economic and political realities in the nineteenth century, but also underwrote the very form of the nineteenth-century novel. In *Mansfield Park*, we see the beginning of a novelistic tradition that locates value in fixity, immobility, and, above all else, centrality and that sees the periphery as "resources to be visited, talked about, described, or appreciated for domestic reason, for local metropolitan benefit."

Williams and Said are persuasive in arguing that *Mansfield Park* does not merely reflect the contemporary realities of labor and empire, but indeed helps to create structures that erase working-class and marginalize imperial subjects. What I want to emphasize, however, are the moments when Austen points to the gaps where those subjects should be. One such moment comes when Henry Crawford and Edmund debate the improvements that might be made to Edmund's parsonage. Henry's proposals are typically extravagant, involving the turning around of the house, the exchanging of meadow and garden, and the purchasing of nearby stands of timber. Edmund, by contrast, presents his own plans as properly modest. "I must be satisfied with rather less ornament and beauty," he says, and further hopes only to give the parsonage "the air of a gentleman's residence" (p. 210). In the conversation that follows, however, it soon becomes clear that what the "air of a gentleman's residence" requires is the total removal of the farmyard and all its works, including the blacksmith's shop. Austen, here, makes precisely the point that Williams will make more than a hundred and fifty years later, by cataloguing the various forms of necessary labor that her own country-house vision requires her to erase. Elsewhere, too, Austen draws our attention to otherwise forgotten forms of labor. The moment of Fanny's great ascendancy at Mansfield, the proposal of marriage she receives, is marked by Baddeley, the butler, calling her into Sir Thomas's study, the only time in the entire novel that any servant speaks. The most famous gap in *Mansfield Park*, however, is the "dead silence" that follows Fanny's questions about the slave trade (p. 171). Critics debate whether this silence would be filled by a condemnation or a defense of slavery, but surely the significance of the silence is that it could never be filled in a novel like this—and that it thus registers all that the novel cannot accommodate.

The critic D. A. Miller helps us to see that Austen understood the costs of conservatism to be finally as much formal as political. And here we return to where we began, to the opposition between Fanny and Mary. Miller begins with the claim that marriage, in an Austen novel, enacts what he calls the

"ideology of settlement" (*Narrative and Its Discontents*, p. 50), an ideology that resembles Burkean conservatism in crucial ways. Not only does marriage settle characters socially, by fixing them in their proper sphere, but it can be brought about only, he argues, by a prior settling of other domains: the cognitive, the moral, and the linguistic. A man and a woman can marry only after each has come properly to know the other, has come properly to judge the other, and, what is nearly the same thing in Austen, has found the proper language in which to speak of and to the other. It is this search for knowledge, judgment, and conversation that Austen's courtship plots narrate. But because the search must be a search, it requires that her heroines be taken in by lying suitors, be tempted by glamorous wrongs, even speak intemperately or injudiciously—all on their way to finding a proper mate. In making this argument, Miller articulates a crucial distinction between narrative and closure, between the forces that drive a story forward and the forces that bring it to an end; moreover, he draws attention to the paradoxical relationship between the two. The requirements of narrative are at odds with the requirements of closure, and Austen's novels, as a result, must contain many elements, many errors and confusions that their endings cannot endorse.

In *Mansfield Park*, Austen subjects this paradox to intense and painful scrutiny. She does so, Miller argues, by creating two possible heroines—one, Fanny, who is the embodiment of closure, and the other, Mary, who is the embodiment of narrative itself. Miller is helpful not only in making sense of our otherwise perplexing dislike of Fanny, but also in suggesting that this dislike might have been felt most strongly by Austen herself. For just as readers find themselves loving Mary despite her faults and disliking Fanny because of her virtues, so Austen must have recognized that while Fanny would have made an excellent model for a conduct book, she could never have been the author of *Mansfield Park*. It is Mary, with her energy and vivacity, her sharp eye and keen wit, who most resembles Austen, and Mary who signals Austen's lingering attraction to the mobile and the changing, perhaps, even, to the revolutionary. *Mansfield Park* may be the most obviously ideological of

Austen's novels, but it is by no means unaware of the consequences, indeed the costs, of its own ideology.

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Mansfield Park

