

## Papas and Ha-has: Rebellion, Authority, and Landscaping in *Mansfield Park*

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The setting is Sotherton Court—the eminently “respectable,” but dark, oppressive, and moribund seat of the Rushworths. Mr. Rushworth himself calls it “a prison—quite a dismal old prison” (*MP* 56, 53). Whether from the banality of Mrs. Rushworth’s detailed enumerations of family portraits, or from Mr. Rushworth’s bumbling attempts to impress his fiancée with empty grandeur, or from the oppressing general sense of thwarted desires and unfulfilled expectations, or from simple exhaustion at the number of layers of hidden meaning and insincerity exhibited in the chapel scene, (whatever the cause,) by the end of the tour, *all* the young visitors at Sotherton Court crave escape from the ancient house. The narrator informs us that: “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” (*MP* 90). The phrasing of the long sentence itself allows the reader to experience the delayed gratification that this small escape provides. We, too, breathe in the fresh air with relief. However, the words “temptingly,” “sweets,” “pleasure,” “impulse,” and “liberty” in this passage suggest that this freedom is somehow illicit; the “Wilderness,” as their eventual destination in the Park is provocatively called, smacks, in Jane Austen’s subtle moral language, of anarchy and hedonism. The characters must literally leave the seat of patriarchal authority and ancient tradition in order to taste the sweet liberty of the Wilderness, where they are, or *think* they are, free from the burden of imposed authority as well as the demands of civility.

And although it is tempting to remember this desire for escape to the Wilderness as gratifying to only the ever-restless Crawfords and dissatisfied Miss Bertrams—that is, the less honorable characters in *Mansfield Park*—Austen carefully shows the reader that *all* the young people—even Edmund and Fanny—feel oppressed by the claustrophobic air of Sotherton Court. Later again, halfway through the novel (in Vol. II, Ch. 10), we hear in the same chapter, both that Edmund is, “worn out with civility” and even that Fanny is “drawing back from the toils of civility” (*MP* 278, 273). The demands of civility in this novel can exhaust even the dutiful hero and heroine. It is, in fact, not until the last line of *Mansfield Park* that we hear Fanny is free from the last remnants of a “painful sensation of restraint or alarm” (*MP* 473). What are we to make of this claustrophobic atmosphere that leads even the solemnest, most dutiful characters to long for a respite from civility’s authoritative demands?

I would argue that inasmuch as the characters all reveal themselves sensible of the restraints which they feel, it is the *manner* in which they respond to confinement and to authority symbols that sets the characters

apart. I will focus primarily on the female characters, who experience considerably less mobility than their male counterparts. The scene which serves as a key to the entire novel in this regard is precisely the Wilderness scene at Sotherton Court: the characters' actions in this fictional "state of Nature" reveal deeper differences in character which extend throughout the whole novel, not only foreshadowing the ending of the novel, but also revealing to us important issues about the relationship between authority, restraint, and rebellion.

Let us turn back to the scene itself. The central fixture (and central obstacle) in chapters nine and ten is a "ha-ha." It is the sight of this ha-ha and the gate belonging to it which elicits from Mary Crawford the memorable response: "I must move, resting fatigues me—I have looked across the ha-ha till I am weary. I must go and look through that iron gate at the same view, without being able to see it so well" (*MP* 96). It is worth noting here that Mary recognizes the perversity of her own desires: that what she gains in relief from a feeling of oppression, she will lose in actual view or prospect.

Christopher Hussey has credited the landscape gardener Vanbrugh with first popularizing the ha-ha in the 1730s (Hussey, 128). The symbolic significance of the curiously named device, both for *Mansfield Park* and for the eighteenth-century moral aesthetic in general, has never, in my opinion, been satisfactorily explained. A ha-ha, or a "ha!ha!" as it was also called, is a sunken fence—a fence hidden in an indentation in the ground or behind a small hill especially built for that purpose. Ha-has could keep livestock and neighboring peasant children off carefully manicured lawns, without marring the estate's picturesque scenic prospect with unsightly fences: since the ha-ha was located on lower ground, it would be hidden from sight at a distance. The ha-ha in *Mansfield Park*, for example, that separates the untamed Wilderness from the manicured Park, is visible to characters wandering in the Wilderness, but not from the central, officially picturesque views of the house and its lawns. Ha-has thus attempt to maintain order while also hiding the traces of the landscape gardener's hands. They represent a *masked*, or hidden, imposition of authority, an idea to which I'll return later. I will argue that the ha-ha in *Mansfield Park* is both an occasion for a moral dilemma and also a symbol of Austen's own ambivalence about authority.

The name of Humphry Repton, the famous landscape gardener who lived from 1752-1818, appears no less than five times in *Mansfield Park*. It is unusual for Austen to invoke repeatedly the name of a current popular figure, so we might consider what Repton signifies in this novel. Repton was a master "improver" (and "improving," as Alastair Duckworth has shown, was "the idol" of the age, a movement deeply suspicious to Austen); Repton greatly promoted the spread of English landscape gardening—not only by (re)shaping some 200 famous estates, but also by writing three major works on landscape gardening published between 1796 and 1816. Duckworth argues convincingly that Henry Crawford's suggestions regarding Sotherton are, in fact, based on Repton's plans for Harlestone Hall (*Fragments* 7). Henry is also called "such a capital improver" (*MP* 244) and is looking for new projects. As official executor of Repton's plan, Henry is closely allied

with Repton in this novel—he is his representative in more than one sense, making Repton's view doubly suspect.

Austen could easily have read and certainly must have known by name Repton's very popular *Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (published in 1803). From reading Repton's descriptions of ha-has in this work, we learn some interesting things—for one thing, we learn that, judging by the height of the ha-has, there were probably deer at Sotherton. We also learn what this master "improver" thought the *psychological effect* of ha-has (and other similar devices) might be on his viewers. In fact, what I find principally interesting in Repton's commentary, is his great concern over the viewer's dislike of confinement: his central task in landscaping, it seems, is liberating and occupying the viewer's eyes. Mary Crawford is not alone in finding the view "through the iron gate" wearying and insufferable. Repton writes that "where [a ha!ha!] is higher than the eye, as it must be against deer, the landscape seen through its bars becomes intolerable" (*Theory* 131). Like Mary, Repton emphasizes the importance of freedom understood as movement and novelty.

In another passage, Repton claims, drawing on Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, that "the mind feels a certain disgust under a sense of confinement in any situation, however beautiful . . . [even] in the happy valley of Abyssinia" (*Theory* 127). Repton's ideas, however, are very un-Johnsonian, for Repton is, after all, a master salesman, *not* a moralist. And the same human proclivity towards dissatisfaction which Johnson tries to counter by stressing the importance of patience and active participation in the present, Repton tends to encourage: He takes the human dissatisfaction with present circumstances, impatience regarding constraint, and hunger for novelty as a basis for his goals in landscape gardening, and encourages these traits in the process. Similarly, Repton's representatives in the novel emphasize their own restlessness.<sup>1</sup>

Keeping these issues in mind, let us again return to our character's reactions to the ha-ha. Upon discovering the locked gate, Maria sends Mr. Rushworth running off to retrieve the key from the house and allows Henry to seduce her into leaving the wilderness without waiting for Mr. Rushworth or his key. "But unluckily that iron gate, that ha-ha, give me a feeling of restraint and hardship," she whines, ". . . Mr. Rushworth is so long fetching this key!" Her seducer suggestively responds: "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." One can almost hear Henry hissing like the snake in the Garden of Eden. "Prohibited! nonsense! I certainly can get out that way, and I will" (*MP* 99). With Henry's help, Maria slips through the bars of the locked gate before Mr. Rushworth returns with the keys.

Julia also leaves the wilderness without waiting for Mr. Rushworth and the official sanction of his key. Unlike Maria, she is not seduced and does not deliberate over her actions. Rather than deliberately "pass[ing] round," or

slipping through, the gate, Julia, in the heat of her vexation and impatience, “immediately scramble[s] over the fence” (*MP* 101). This is not a small feat, since Repton himself suggests: “nothing is so difficult to pass as a deep sunk fence” (*Theory* 128).

Mary Crawford, whom we last left impatient, too, to trade her expansive but stationary prospect for movement, finds a third way of relieving a sense of confinement or restraint. We learn, with Fanny, that Mary and Edmund had walked alongside the ha-ha (flirting with danger) until “a side gate, not fastened, had tempted them” (*MP* 103). The suggestion seems to be that Maria is the only one that really wants to escape: Mary wants novelty and activity; Julia wants not to be excluded; and Fanny is the only one who really wants to see the park.

Insofar as the ha-ha and its gate symbolize the restraints dictated by society and Mr. Rushworth’s key symbolizes its sanctioned propriety, the three responses are very interesting: Maria and Julia Bertram both disregard even the appearance of propriety in their eagerness to satisfy their desires (and overtly insult their host in the process), and Mary Crawford manages to satisfy her desires without directly breaking any of society’s strict conventions. Fanny, meanwhile, is the only character who neither violates the ha-ha, nor feels threatened by it.

We must remember, however, that Austen explicitly chooses a ha-ha and its complex symbolism, rather than a simple fence or wall. And since, as I mentioned above, the ha-ha symbolizes hidden authority, authority that is not these three choices becomes even more interesting. The ha-ha represents a different kind of restraint than a fence, wall, or hedge of thorns represent a kind of restraint different from a fence, wall, or hedge of thorns (Repton’s most frequent alternatives). I would argue that Austen chooses the ha-ha as a symbol of her ambivalence about authority: on the one hand, she wants stability and order, while on the other, she distrusts legalism and the reliance on external constraints. Whereas the straightforward fence suggests rather than law. To be strictly proper, in society’s terms is no guarantee of *hidden* constraints, which would be the domain of conscience, or virtue, rather than law. To be strictly proper in society’s terms is no guarantee of virtue. Austen thus distinguishes between the authority and restriction that is imposed externally, with force, pomp, and circumstance, and the authority that is felt in more subtle ways—in the form of an internal conscience or sense of delicacy.

We learn of Julia, for example, that “[t]he politeness which she had been brought up to practise as a duty, made it impossible for her to escape [in this case, escape Mrs. Rushworth’s dull company and slow pace]; while the want of that higher species of self-command, that just consideration of others, that knowledge of her own heart, that principle of right which had *not* formed any essential part of her education, made her miserable under it” (*MP* 91). The suggestion is that Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram’s daughters have never learned to tolerate any externally imposed restraint, because they never learned self-restraint—they never learned to share in their own guardian-

ship. Mary, too cares only for outward politeness, although in general she is more successful in maintaining it than the Miss Bertrams.

Time and time again in the novel, we hear: Julia is “obliged to . . . restrain her impatient feet” (*MP* 90-91); Maria “bur[ies] the tumult of her feelings under the restraint of society” (*MP* 193); Maria is “less and less able to endure the restraint which her father imposed” (*MP* 202); until finally when Maria commits adultery, we learn that it was “without any restraint, without even Julia” (*MP* 450). Maria relies on yet another external barrier, the presence of Julia, to protect her from her own impulses. Without that “species of self-command,” the Miss Bertrams are slaves of their passions and of circumstance, while Fanny, though paradoxically stationary in the Wilderness scene, actually has the capacity for *greater* freedom. Rather than experiencing liberation from external restraints, their lack of internalized restraint prevents them from achieving any moral authority of their own.

Part of the blame for this the reader must lay at the feet of Sir Thomas. Even after he returns home and witnesses the theatricals, Sir Thomas still only cares about the surface—about politeness or the appearance of propriety: he restores his house to “its proper state,” and “wipe[s] away every outward memento,” dismisses the carpenter and the scene painter, hides all outward traces of the preparations, and burns “every unbound copy of ‘Lovers’ Vows’” that meets “his eye” (*MP* 190-91). He thus restores an “external smoothness,” culminating in his call for music, which the narrator informs us, “helped to conceal the want of real harmony” (*MP* 191). Thus the characters’ reactions in the Wilderness scene reveal, not only imperfect forms of rebellion, but the flawed moral education which preceded them—an education that did not provide them with self-knowledge, internal boundaries, or moral authority.

Mansfield Park is hollow at the center. For one thing, the chapters leading up to the Sotherton tour begin with a marked statement of the absence of both Sir Thomas and his heir (*MP* 52) and therefore the absence of traditional central authority at Mansfield Park. The atmosphere of *Mansfield Park*, in general, is second only to *Persuasion* in the sense that the old centralized authority is not only absent, but in a general state of decay. Sir Thomas speaks “with authority” (e.g., Ch. 25) and “in a voice of authority” (e.g., Ch. 32) throughout the novel, and authority is connected explicitly with him even in his absence. But near the end, at the moral climax of the novel, an important shift occurs: At the beginning of Volume III, Fanny confronts Sir Thomas and tells him that he is “mistaken” (*MP* 315). In his first harsh words to Fanny after she refuses to consider marrying Henry, Sir Thomas makes the following complaint: “you have shewn me that you can be wilful and perverse, that you can and will decide for yourself, without any consideration or deference for those who have surely some right to guide you—without even asking their advice” (*MP* 318). It is interesting that in this passage, Sir Thomas equates her wilfulness and perversity with a willingness to decide for [her]self *rather* than seek out an external authority figure. Sir Thomas does not realize how much internalized moral authority (the important, invisible kind) Fanny has gained in the course of the novel. Early

on we learn that, unlike her female cousins, “[Fanny’s] conscience must have restrained her” (*MP* 170), that she was capable of allowing her conscience to guide her without feeling miserable, but by the end, when Susan comes, the word authority, reserved almost exclusively for Sir Thomas, is actually used in connection with Fanny: we learn that Fanny has adopted a new “office of authority” (*MP* 396). She becomes the quiet, hidden authority, the new moral center of the novel.

This makes it doubly ironic when the Crawfords (following Repton) see in Fanny a new project for “improvement.” Fanny herself becomes a landscaping project. Allowing her to visit Mary, for example, was seen as “giving her the most important opportunities of improvement” (*MP* 205); and Henry repeatedly remarks how Fanny is “improving” and works to shape her further. Even Edmund sees Mary as a landscaping project—a wildness to be tamed. The hunger for novelty, the capacity for boredom that the Crawfords symbolize and express in their search for new Reptonian projects of improvement, place them in direct conflict with Fanny’s more organic development: “Her mind, disposition, opinions, and habits wanted no half-concealment, no self-deception in the present, no reliance on future improvement” (*MP* 471). Fanny grows organically, *not* through conscious external manipulation. As Susan Morgan writes, “the greatness of *Mansfield Park* lies in the very gentleness, the naturalness of Fanny’s change” (Morgan 165). If we readers are impatient for dramatic change in her, we, too, may be falling into Henry’s trap.

Compare this idea of gentle organic growth with Fanny’s own words about the hedgerow at the parsonage:

Three years ago, this was nothing but a rough hedgerow along the upper side of the field, never thought of as any thing, or capable of becoming any thing; and now it is converted into a walk, and it would be difficult to say whether most valuable as a convenience or an ornament; and perhaps in another three years we may be forgetting—almost forgetting what it was before. . . . (*MP* 208)

This passage metaphorically shows Fanny’s own transformation from obstacle to convenience to ornament in the course of the novel, and suggests the slow growth of nature as an alternative to Repton’s, *Rushworth’s*, and the Crawfords’s “pursuit of perfection as the crow flies.”

Henry, like the three female rebels of the Wilderness scene, never learns what it is to share in one’s own guardianship—to gain moral authority. As such he remains a self-proclaimed slave. Consider this passage.

Henry: “When you give me your opinion, I always know what is right. Your judgment is my rule of right.”

Fanny: “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.” (*MP* 412)

Austen here establishes a parallel between Henry and Maria, since Maria relied upon Julia’s and her husband’s presence to keep her out of trouble. Fanny is one version of the modern heroine Austen introduces: one, who in the midst of corruption and a decaying patriarchal order can be her own moral guide. Like Anne Elliot of *Persuasion*, Fanny learns what it means to

travel, to be a stranger, and to know one's own "nothingness," but she also learns that taking one's home, or moral center, along is the only way to achieve stability in a decaying order. Fanny feels free, not when she passes round or scrambles over all restraints to experience licence, or finds a conveniently open door that lets her rationalize her way out of a moral predicament, but when she finds ways to satisfy both what society demands and her own strict sense of propriety. The truth about Fanny and *Mansfield Park* is somewhere between Burkean conservatism and Jacobin revolutionary ideals: Fanny can and does feel oppressed, but she does not need change for change's sake, just as she does not uphold convention for the sake of conventionality. Perhaps this delicate balancing act is the secret behind Fanny's excessive love of "fresh air."

#### NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> Please note that while I've used Repton as a source about the role of ha-has, for Austen his primary association was with the notion of "improvement." One could, in fact, easily imagine Repton deciding to *rid* Sotherton of its ha-ha.

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