

## What Became of Jane Austen? *Mansfield Park*

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“*What became of Jane Austen?*”<sup>1</sup> As most of you are aware, generations of scholars, novelists, and general readers have turned in bewilderment from the famously “light, and bright, and sparkling” *Pride and Prejudice* to the dense, and dark, and dour *Mansfield Park* and asked, with Kingsley Amis, what went wrong, what became of Jane Austen. Appalled to find that the author who “set out bravely to correct conventional notions of the desirable and virtuous” only to become in *this* novel “their slave,” Amis suggests towards the end of his essay that the *good* Jane Austen—the humane critic of dullness and complacency—may never have existed to begin with, that she was always this bad, and that the moral “defects” which are “incidental elsewhere” in her novels simply become “radical in *Mansfield Park*” and hence more visible.<sup>2</sup> But Amis’s attempt to settle the question in effect by dismissing it is offered parenthetically and tentatively, almost as if he himself were still baffled by the novel’s anomalousness. But many other critics have averred that something is wrong with *Mansfield Park* after all, and have sought the cause. Did Austen undergo a conversion to Evangelicalism, and thus on the grounds of religious principle dramatize the triumph of seriousness over levity, duty over desire? Or, elaborating this answer psychologically, did she suffer some inner compulsion to revenge herself upon her own imagination, to scourge her wit, to punish the saucy Elizabeth Bennet by recasting her as the worldling-siren Mary Crawford? Or, did she suffer some other sort of “crisis” which, with its attendant fatigue, made her yearn for stasis, submerging personality in principle, and foregoing energy for repose?<sup>3</sup>

Over and against these readers, of course, there has also been a sizable body of those who have felt that *Mansfield Park* does not stand out, and therefore that nothing in particular needs accounting for. Scholars as distinguished as Alistair Duckworth and Marilyn Butler judge *Mansfield Park* Austen’s most characteristic work insofar as it posits stability, authority, custom, sobriety, and staunch morality as values cultivated in the country-houses of the Tory gentry. And biographers as different as Park Honan and John Halperin insist that Fanny and Edmund are self-evidently the attractive, sensible, and sympathetic good guys, that the Crawfords are patently unfeeling, amoral, and materialistic bad guys, and that the novel is altogether reassuringly normal in meting out its rewards to the deserving and its punishments to the undeserving.

For the first part of this paper, I shall be interested not in attempting to resolve this conflict but rather in pondering the suspicions about Austen that motivate it. What went wrong in *Mansfield Park* has been one way of asking what’s *wrong* with Jane Austen. Austenian reception has been marked by two traditions. One of these I have termed the normative school, and for adherents of it, nothing at all is wrong with Jane Austen, ever.<sup>4</sup> Ever since

Archbishop Whately claimed in 1821 that Austen was “evidently a Christian writer,”<sup>5</sup> a substantial number of readers have been pleased or infuriated to read her and her novels as repressed and repressive—given over to strict morality, reactionary politics, and strenuous propriety, and altogether licensing what Eve Sedgwick has memorably termed the punitive, “Girl Being Taught a Lesson” mode of interpretation, whereby Austen’s narratives are understood, formally as well as morally, as bringing about the correction of her heroines.<sup>6</sup> This view is emphatically not the property of any particular school of literary criticism, of any particular national tradition, or of any particular political persuasion. Many critics working squarely within the camps of feminism, deconstruction, and gender studies, for example, have viewed Austen as the prosiest, most normal writer imaginable. During the past few months—amidst the media hype over the movies *Clueless*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Persuasion*, and about Terry Castle’s review of Deirdre Le Faye’s new edition of Austen’s letters in *The London Review of Books*—I have been reminded again and again that a profound nostalgia motivates many assumptions about Austen, who is so often imagined to have lived a serene life, well *before* the advent of industrialization, world war, dubiety, the unconscious, and all manner of bad manners or unseemly sentiments. More recently, we have included such phenomena as feminism and multiculturalism to the list of ills Austen is imagined to have had the good fortune of pre-dating, and we have turned to her fiction with renewed yearning for a time when everyone knew what to do, men were gentlemen, women were ladies, where fathers and their families were benign, and where everybody spoke wittily to one another and liked it this way.

But nostalgia for cultural intelligibility has led many readers not only to overlook the often unsettling complexity of Austen’s novels, but also the contention that has marked peoples’ notions about them and Austen from the get-go. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, readers have disagreed with Archbishop Whately about the orthodox Austen, and have opined that she is actually an amoral, even a perverse writer. Ever since Margaret Oliphant praised the “feminine cynicism” and “quiet jeering” of her fiction,<sup>7</sup> another set of readers has felt that Austen is not in the least committed to the values of her neighborhood or to any values *qua* values at all, that she is fundamentally disengaged from dominant moral and political norms, particularly as these are underwritten by the institutions of heterosexual love and marriage, and that she gives the world its due only on such terms as devalue it in the proffering. Such readers have been variously pleased or put off by this perceived detachment. When Reginald Farrer writes “She is, in effect, the most merciless, though calmest, of iconoclasts; . . . For Jane Austen has no passion, preaches no gospel, grinds no axe;”<sup>8</sup> or when D. W. Harding remarks that she excels at dramatizing the “eruption of fear and hatred into the relationships of everyday social life,”<sup>9</sup> each man is describing a quality he admires. Conversely, when Marvin Mudrick wrote that Austen “was interested in a person, an object, an event, only as she might observe and recreate them free from consequences, as performance, as tableau,”<sup>10</sup> he was

complaining about Austen's coldness even though he granted the artistic brilliance of her irony.

Because received opinion nowadays seems—to me, at least—to adhere mostly to the elegiac, normative tradition of Austenian reception, it is worth recollecting these earlier, nineteenth- and twentieth-century readers who have considered Austen to run against, rather than with, the grain of conventional values. It is worth noting, further, that although many readers today may vigorously and willfully deny it, Austen was suspected of specifically emotional/sexual eccentricity of one sort or another almost as soon as her reputation spread, and that this supposed abnormality was used to account for the salient properties of her fiction. As this weekend's discussions of Austen's portrait have suggested, there were evidently some in Austen's immediate family who were uneasy with the kind of energy, penetration, and independence it took to write these novels, and sought to prettify, soften and above all domesticate her image for posterity.

But not every one has been prepared to believe that Austen was a regular gal. Charlotte Brontë is perhaps the first and most famous to link the perfection of Austen's novels—her attention to “the surface of the lives of genteel English people”—to a reprehensible sexual chilliness, to not only an ignorance, but even worse, to a disinterest in “what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through.”<sup>11</sup> She continues, “Jane Austen was a complete and most sensible lady, but a very incomplete, and rather insensible (*not senseless*) woman.”<sup>11</sup> Citing the animosity of Brontë, Twain, Emerson, and R. W. Garrod, Lionel Trilling wondered whether Austen's novels did not arouse “man's panic fear at a fictional world in which the masculine principle, although represented as admirable and necessary, is prescribed and controlled by a female mind.”<sup>12</sup> But as Trilling's own inclusion of Brontë suggests, this explanation represents the problem of the hostility to Austen as emerging from a conflict between the sexes (i.e., men vs. women), when it is really a conflict about sexuality (certain men and women vs. certain others whose sexuality or sexual feelings they deplore). It is not because she is a woman with a woman's point of view that Lawrence and Brontë deplore her, but because she is a woman whose novels do not reverence the representation of sexual passion for virile men in her fiction. Thus Lawrence decried “this old maid” for typifying “the sharp knowing in apartness” rather than the “blood connection” between the sexes,<sup>13</sup> and George Sampson complained “In her world there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage, but just the make-believe mating of dolls. . . . Jane Austen is abnormal . . . because [her characters] have no sex at all.”<sup>14</sup> Clearly, on the score of sexuality, some have feared that Austen had too much, too little, or none at all.

Considered in the context of this tradition of fundamental disagreement about Austen's normativity, her normality, and indeed her sexual disposition itself, the debate about *Mansfield Park* and the problems it poses takes on renewed urgency. “Is she queer?—Is she prudish?” (*MP* 230). This question, which is apt to sound curiously anachronistic in the context of Austenian studies, is posed by none other than the rakish Henry Crawford, as he

wonders about the nerdiest of heroines, Fanny Price. For some reason, the erotic charm that makes married and unmarried women in that novel yield, one after another, to Henry's desire fails to make a dent on this withdrawn, intently observant, and intensely dutiful girl. Stymied, Henry attempts to determine Fanny's "character" (MP 230), and he wonders whether pathology or propriety can best account for her indifference to his allure. Is she "queer"? Is something *wrong* with her (is she odd, out of sorts, cold, and thus abnormally resistant to normal heterosexual seduction)? Or is she prudish? Is something "wrong" with him (are his multiple and serial flirtations really rather immoral after all, and thus altogether deserving of the censure this unusually but not abnormally upright young lady levels against them)?

It is in large part due to Fanny's perceived resistance that *Mansfield Park* has so often been deemed the exception in Austen's canon, her oddest work. Anne Elliot, we all know, remarked that because men have had the advantage of education and the privilege of the "pen," what they say about women in their "books" must be viewed as partial. In literary criticism this partiality is often seen in the underlying assumption that novels by women are stand-ins for women themselves, and that a heroine worth her salt must be attracted by and attractive to men; and if she isn't, then something is wrong. In Austen's time, the demand was sometimes vehement, and woe to the female novelist who failed to deliver. When Austen's esteemed contemporary Frances Burney attempted in her last novel *The Wanderer* to create not a charming sweet thing like Evelina, the heroine of her first novel, but a troubled and ambivalent grown-up woman, F. W. Croker damned both her and her novel as an "old coquette" out to seduce him by the "wild tawdriness" of its plotting. "The Wanderer has the identical features of Evelina," he writes, "but of Evelina grown old; the vivacity, the blooms, the elegance, the 'purple light of love' are vanished; the eyes are there, but they are dim; the cheek, but it is furrowed; the lips, but they are withered."<sup>15</sup> In *Mansfield Park*, many male reviewers, even those who adore Austen, have felt that they have not quite gotten their money's worth. As if Austen's job were somehow to create a heroine he would like to marry, Reginald Farrer complains that Fanny is a "prig-pharisee";<sup>16</sup> and one after another reviewers have termed her detestable, a monster of complacency and pride, a bore, and have debated in solemn tones whether any man, let alone a man of Henry Crawford's appetites, could actually like her well enough to marry her. To be sure, some adherents of the normative school were ready to step forward in defense of Fanny's sweet comeliness, but these efforts notwithstanding, the effort to claim that Fanny can hold a candle to Elizabeth Bennet has always seemed like a losing battle.

I agree that Fanny Price is odd; what I don't agree with is thinking that her oddity and that of the novel she occupies is somehow a problem. *Mansfield Park* is obviously very different from Austen's previous works, and to deny the differences seems to be underreading to a puzzling degree. Jane Austen knew how to make the country estate, and the masters and mistresses of it, look good when she wanted to, and if nothing else is clear, it is that *Sotherton* and *Mansfield Park* are not *Pemberley*. Austen in my view is a profoundly

experimental novelist. Reversing the formula of *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen in *Mansfield Park* divorces the *mode* of the novel from the *mood*. The novel is, in other words, comic in form and structure (i.e., it is shaped by a heterosexual love plot, where the sexual desire of the young couple is vindicated, albeit contained, by marriage, that wished-for outcome promising not only personal fulfillment but renewed social stability as well). But *Mansfield Park* is not comic in mood (for Fanny, sexual desire and not its unnatural blockage, has been a problem, and pleasure itself is suspect). At the height of her powers, Austen in *Mansfield Park* undertook the considerable challenge of creating, with great sympathy, a profoundly withdrawn heroine who spends the vast majority of the novel feeling out-of-step with the sorts of sexual development and sentiment that people expect of her as a matter of course, as inevitable, as normal.

For Fanny, then, sexuality is the sphere of pain and dejection, not of pleasure and fulfillment. Of course, *Pride and Prejudice* has pain aplenty too. Take a look at any page, and the words, "pain," "mortification," "embarrassment," "shame," "punishment," and the like jump out at our eyes. But *Pride and Prejudice* is finally a euphoric novel not simply because everything works out in the end, but because characters' accessibility to pain, punishment, shame, and abjection actually conduce to their pleasure. Elizabeth's desires for Darcy begin to become intelligible to herself when she is dying with embarrassment over the scandalousness of her family. Pain brings clarity and self-understanding. And for his part, Darcy learns what he desires and whom he loves precisely because he is susceptible to the pain of Elizabeth's disapproval. The heroine and the hero of this novel each take and give correction, and I daresay that the scenes in which Darcy and Elizabeth mortify each other with insults and accusations are more thrilling and intimate than the scenes devoted to their reconciliation, which seem to me a bit more formal and remote. Written squarely within the comic mode, confirming rather than critiquing heterosexual love, *Pride and Prejudice* treats pain as something which enlarges and intensifies the pleasures of its best characters. Note that the most obnoxious characters in the novel (Lydia and Mr. Collins) are not only beyond amendment but also beyond the fullness of pleasure because they cannot be penetrated by pain. Lydia will be Lydia still because she feels no shame, and Rev. Collins is eternally himself because he is absolutely inhumiliable.

Fanny is not so lucky, for in her erotic life pain rarely conduces to pleasure. Desire here is thwarted, beaten down, denied, frustrated. For Fanny, occupying a sexually mature body, more often than not, is a source of shame. In *Pride and Prejudice*, when Darcy invites Miss Bingley and Elizabeth to take their stroll without him, so that he might enjoy their figures to greater advantage, Elizabeth obliges without batting an eyelash. But in *Mansfield Park* Edmund inadvertently torments Fanny by relating to her how he and Sir Thomas had together discussed Fanny's "figure" (*MP* 198), which in context means her recent development into womanhood, a maturation which transpiring during his journey to Antigua, evidently strikes and pleases Sir Thomas forcibly. "Nay, Fanny," Edmund chides, watching her

squirm with embarrassment without really fathoming her discomfort, “do not turn away about it—it is but an uncle. . . . You must really begin to harden yourself to the idea of being worth looking at” (*MP* 198). When Fanny’s own father looks at her for the first time, he calls attention to the same bodily development, remarking that she will be wanting a husband soon, and he later notices her only “to make her the object of a coarse joke” (*MP* 382). Such sections of *Mansfield Park* indeed seem unusual because they problematize feelings and relationships—in this case familial ones—that we would like to think are “naturally” benign. In depicting the bodily and affective anxiety and vulnerability that come along with being a woman, and further in locating that anxiety *within* the family, the novel defies our nostalgia for a time when men were gentlemen, women were ladies, and everything made sense, everyone got along.

It seems to me that Austen is really quite daring in her willingness to broach the possibility that the family doesn’t always feel “safe.” Edmund’s misguided comfort—“it is but an uncle”—fails in this context, as might the similarly constructed “it is but a father.” For while Fanny would like to believe that the parental gaze is asexual, and that it might therefore permit her to remain invisible in her body, unregarded, unsolicited, in a word “safe,” the fact is that the gazes of uncle and father both register her identity as a sexed being, and bring her into a world of sexual exchange she does not wish to enter. Convinced that Sir Thomas is discerning, honorable, and good, she is later shocked to discover that he has no intention whatsoever of accepting her “dislike” as a legitimate reason for refusing Crawford’s proposal, and though Sir Thomas himself scolds “You cannot suppose me capable of trying to persuade you to marry against your inclinations” (*MP* 330) we, Jane Austen, and Fanny all know that this is exactly what he is trying to do. In his lexicon, the word “advise,” as the narrator clearly states, pertains to the “advice of absolute power” (*MP* 285), a power that need never tout its strength or recognize its violence, because it can always count on cheerful—or at worst dutifully uncomplaining—compliance. If Sir Thomas’s violence is psychological, Mr. Price’s is more blatant, and when he announces that if his niece, the adulterous Maria Rushworth, “belonged to me, I’d give her the rope’s end as long as I could stand over her” (*MP* 428)—a statement certainly not without lurid elements—Fanny realizes that women pay a steep price if they consider themselves independent subjects, rather than dependent objects, in the business of sexual exchange.

Nor, I might add, is the maternal gaze much more comforting for the inhibited girl who wants to withhold herself from the sexual converse that everybody else undertakes so effortlessly, so reflexively. Having given up on her uncle Sir Thomas, Fanny hopes that Lady Bertram will be on her side: “My dear aunt, *you* cannot wish me to marry; for you would miss me, should not you?” (*MP* 333). But Lady Bertram, alas, replies: “I should not think of missing you, when such an offer as this comes in your way. I could do very well without you, if you were married to a man of such good estate as Mr. Crawford” (*MP* 333). It would be hard to accuse Lady Bertram of the violence discernible in Sir Thomas’s thinly veiled efforts of coercion, but I

still find this an excruciating passage, for while Lady Bertram considers it a matter of course that daughters leave the parental abode and find husbands to undertake the expense of their maintenance, while forming families of their own, her words *I won't miss you; I can do very well without you* spell betrayal to one who wants to embrace an honorable career of spinsterhood and stay home.

But as we all know, Fanny does not desire to stay at home because sexual desire is absent from her. Perhaps one of the stubbornest myths about Fanny Price—a myth we must resist if for no other reason than because it makes her a lot less interesting than she really is—is that she is a good girl by conventional standards. For it is by conventional standards that she is a bad girl indeed. When Crawford decides to make Fanny fall in love with him, he fully expects to take possession of a virgin heart: “It would be something,” he muses, “to be loved by such a girl, to excite the first ardours of her young, unsophisticated mind!” (MP 245). But the narrator stings Crawford’s male vanity. “All those fine first feelings”—that is to say erotic feelings—“of which he had hoped to be the excitor,” Austen writes, “were already given” (MP 242). Fanny’s “ardours” have been excited by cousin Edmund for quite some time, although the realization is so painful to her that it can only be registered fleetingly, as the following absolutely brilliant passage makes clear:

[Fanny] wondered that Edmund should forget her, and felt a pang. She could not turn her eyes from the meadow, she could not help watching all that passed. At first Miss Crawford and her companion made the circuit of the field, which was not small, at a foot’s pace; and then, at *her* apparent suggestion they rose to a canter; and to Fanny’s timid nature it was most astonishing to see how well they sat. After a few minutes, they stopped entirely, Edmund was close to her, he was speaking to her, he was evidently directing her management of the bridle, he had hold of her hand; she saw it, or the imagination supplied what the eye could not reach. She must not wonder at this; what could be more natural than that Edmund should be making himself useful, and proving his good-nature by any one? She could not but think indeed that Mr. Crawford might as well have saved him the trouble; that it might be particularly proper and becoming in a brother to have done it himself; but Mr. Crawford, with all his boasted good nature, and all his coachmanship, probably knew nothing of the matter, and had no active kindness in comparison to Edmund. She began to think it rather hard upon the mare to have such double duty; if she were forgotten the poor mare should be remembered. (MP 67-68)

A *tour de force* of free indirect discourse, this passage represents Fanny’s coming upon the spectacle of Edmund and Mary riding as though it were a primal scene, responding with fascination (she could not turn her eyes, she could not help watching); with stunned incredulity at a woman’s pleasure in it (the pair start cantering at *Mary’s* suggestion); with an overpowering compulsion registered in a sequence of run-ons (they stopped, Edmund was close, he was speaking, he was directing, he had hold of her hand, she saw it, all of which formulations convey the velocity of Fanny’s heartbeat); with horror-stricken recognition that these lessons in horsemanship are erotic instructions (Fanny’s imagination supplies that “it” which her eyes do not

see); and finally with immediate denial (Edmund is just being good-natured); with a displacement of her anger at him onto Henry Crawford, involving a substitution of the spousal for the fraternal (why didn't *Crawford* do the brotherly thing?); and deflection of her own sense of injury (it is not herself but the mare who is being wronged).

But why does Fanny put herself through these agonies? Not simply, I would suggest, because her passion for Edmund is unreciprocated. Fanny's erotic life is inflected by shame because she regards her love as illicit, off-limits, as beyond what is proper for her. *Mansfield Park* devotes a lot of artistic energy to over-determining the ostensible "wrongness" of the passion Fanny bears for Edmund, to piling on diverse prohibitions which only underscore the irrepressible power of Fanny's love. That love is wrong (1) because Sir Thomas expressly doesn't want it: attentive to the fortunes of his family—fortunes which are patently on the skids—he wants his son to marry "well." It is wrong (2) because, as Mrs. Norris (licensed by Sir Thomas himself) reminds her, she must always regard herself as the last and the lowest, and because Fanny herself, rating "her own claims to comfort as low even as Mrs. Norris could" (*MP* 233), regards Edmund as infinitely above her. It is wrong (3) because it is unsolicited. Sir Thomas angrily charges Fanny with an "independence of spirit" which is *offensive* and *disgusting* in women particularly, and though he is referring to Fanny's refusal of Henry Crawford, but he might just as well have been referring to Fanny's forwardness and independence in falling in love *first*, perhaps the biggest stricture in all tracts on female modesty and propriety, tracts setting standards Fanny herself (as distinct from Austen) appears to take quite seriously.

But finally, of course, Fanny's love is wrong (4) because from the start it is linked with incest. Now the word itself is not used in the novel. Instead, Mrs. Norris says that marriage between Edmund and Fanny is "morally impossible" because the two would always be together "like brothers and sisters" (*MP* 6), and when the sensible Sir Thomas for his part concurs in the "truth" (*MP* 7) of what Mrs. Norris says, we know that even though legally it is not incest, the relationship between the cousins feels too close emotionally. Rightly or wrongly, then, Fanny struggles against feelings which she has been taught all-too-well she ought not to nourish. Mary Crawford assumes that the cousinly, rather than downright fraternal, bond between Fanny and Edmund is quite enough to place them beyond the pale of erotic involvement, and on that account she judges that Fanny will be able to read Amelia's lines in *Lovers' Vows* without self-consciousness: "he is your cousin, which makes all the difference" (*MP* 168). No wonder, then, given all these reasons, that we often see Fanny resolve feelings of injury and neglect into moralized aggression, lashing out in her reflections at the naughty Mary Crawford because she cannot lash out at the beloved Edmund; no wonder she retreats to the solitary pleasure of her cold little East Room, furnished with fetishes of Edmund, determined in a course of self-denial, which has a little kick all its own; no wonder, as she is struggling with her feelings of jealousy which ought not to exist to begin with, she looks pale and frazzled.



Austen's depiction of family life was immensely daring in *Mansfield Park* insofar as it is shown to be a place not free from but sometimes actually uncomfortably saturated in erotic feeling, and one of the most unsettling features of *Mansfield Park*, at least to judge from the relative silence about the subject in literary criticism, is the way familial love (presumed to be asexual and pure) is used to carry and promote sexual love. When Henry Crawford and Maria Bertram are pursuing their hot flirtation while rehearsing *Lovers' Vows*, after all, they are acting the part of mother and son. And of course, the spectacle of Fanny's love for her own brother, William, is erotically charged to at least one onlooker: "The sensibility which beautified her complexion and illumined her countenance, was an attraction in itself. . . . She had feeling, genuine feeling" (*MP* 235-36), Henry Crawford remarks. In pursuing Fanny, Henry hopes to transfer Fanny's sensibility to himself, and he actually succeeds in making headway in Fanny's heart, somewhat against her better judgment, by helping her brother's career.

Not that everyone in the novel feels this connection between sexual and fraternal love. At the outset at least, Edmund's fraternal feelings are as pure as driven snow, so much so indeed that Fanny is mortified more than once. He surveys her body with evident pleasure, and with "the kind smile of an affectionate brother" (*MP* 222). But if preclusion of erotic love here seems benign to us, it is less than happy for Fanny: "Your gown seems very pretty. I like these glossy spots," he says, no doubt gratifying to poor Fanny's aching heart, only to twist the knife a moment later by adding "Has not Miss Crawford a gown something the same?" (*MP* 222).

Fanny in short is never permitted to think that the love she bears for Edmund is a love that can dare to speak its name. For this reason, she appears to my mind disproportionately squeamish in response to the news that Crawford and Mrs. Rushworth have committed adultery:

A woman married only six months ago, a man professing himself devoted, even engaged, to another—that other her near relation—the whole family, both families connected as they were by tie upon tie, all friends, all intimate together!—it was too horrible a confusion of guilt, too gross a complication of evil, for human nature, not in a state of utter barbarism, to be capable of!

(*MP* 441)

Noteworthy here, I think, is Fanny's intense sense of contamination, a sense one might more plausibly expect from transgressions against the incest taboo itself, criminal because too close, barbaric because involving the shameful sexualization of "tie upon tie."

But the liaison between Crawford and Maria which Fanny so deplores, whatever else it might be, is at least exogamous, and in light of the fact that Fanny's own love partakes of that same closeness and intimacy she denounces here, her eventual marriage to Edmund seems highly problematic. It requires no particular ingenuity to notice this, for Austen if anything, foregrounds Fanny's inconsistency. After Maria and Julia, having lost their reputations, are lost forever to Edmund as siblings, he presses Fanny to his heart and cries, "My Fanny—my only sister—my only comfort now" (*MP* 444). The perfect happiness we are told—albeit quite sketchily—that

Edmund and Fanny enjoy as spouses comes upon us bizarrely as the “moral impossibility” of incest, only now no one seems to mind. This inattention to what has been a major problem in the foregoing pages unsettles our satisfaction with the ending, leaving us in doubt as to whether the fraternal character of their love is to be commended as spousal but blissfully asexual; as sexual but very tepidly and thus safely so; or quite simply as perverse and illegitimate as the other sexual shenanigans of the novel, only not recognized for what it is, much as Sir Thomas himself never notices how his “advice” is actually “absolute power.” And like Fanny though I do, it is hard for me to imagine how erotic feelings—“ardours,” as they are termed in the novel—that have so habitually and pitifully been involved in shame, denial, displacement, and frustration can so readily become sunny and cheerful and straightforward once her cousin/“brother” turns to her.

In other ways as well Austen makes *Mansfield Park* odd by calling attention to how the conclusion of the novel is a problem rather than a solution. In lines that have always reminded me of *Northanger Abbey*, where the winking Austen alludes to the tell-tale compression of pages that assure us that the novel is about to be tidied up and dispatched, plausibility be damned, she makes no effort to invest Edmund’s erstwhile brotherly but now lovelier attachment to Fanny with credibility: “I purposely abstain from dates on this occasion. . . . I only intreat every body to believe that exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier, Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford” (*MP* 470). To make matters even worse, Edmund’s change of heart itself is not described as a lightning bolt of illumination about what his true feelings have been all along (as they are, say, with Emma when she realizes she has long loved Knightley), but as a somewhat enervated and even accidental replacement of one set of features that are absent for another set that are there in front of him: emerging from his depression, Edmund substitutes Fanny’s “soft light eyes” for Mary Crawford’s “sparkling dark” ones (*MP* 470) in his imagination, and so transfers his love from one to the other. A deeply parodic writer, Austen discredits the conventional happy marriage ending by flaunting it, rather than by omitting it, in effect saying: this is how we end a novel, but this is not how their story really ends.

So what about Fanny: is she prudish or queer? a very good girl or in some not fully definable way a very bad one? I know that Fanny would decide the question in favor of the severity of rectitude, as though the good are on this side of the line, huddled together at novel’s end, and that the bad are on the other side, shunted away. But even though Fanny is a sympathetic creation—as Austen’s appellation “my Fanny” attests—her view need not be ours. I would answer the question differently, and hold that she is good girl and bad girl both, at the same time. What is so compelling and so complicated about the novel is that it insists on the very “confusions of guilt” which so disturb Fanny, and it shows how the principle spokesmen for moral rectitude are in fact its least reliable exemplars. Indeed, the very categories of good/bad we set up to organize our fictive and actual worlds are—like the incest taboo

itself, *as it is used in this novel*—not doing the work of containment, clarification, and ordering that they're supposed to.

Defying our expectations to find a charming rather than inhibited heroine, a judicious rather than mercenary father, a reliable rather than unsteady hero, a wholesome rather than unseemly family, a euphorically benign and expansive rather dysphorically menacing and occluded sense of sexuality, an ecstatically and credibly happy rather than conspicuously artificial ending, Austen in *Mansfield Park* dissociates the mode and mood of the comic English novel, as I put it earlier, writing askance rather than at the center of her narrative tradition. But his discrepancy we can only call a "failure" if we think that Austen's intention was, or should have been, to unite and affirm them to begin with, as she did in *Pride and Prejudice*.

So: What "happened" to Jane Austen, and what is wrong with *Mansfield Park*? Nothing. *Mansfield Park* is simply not the conventional novel we have taken it for: for it quietly but systematically interrogates our pieties and challenges our expectations, exposing unseemly and unsettling contradictions in the traditional love story and the values—about gender, family, and property—which that story underwrites. Only if we assume from the outset that Austen is a placid and normative author, rather than a searching and experimental one, can we believe, finally, that anything *happened* to Jane Austen. Although my conclusion will hardly come as a surprise to us, considering who and what we are, upon revisiting *Mansfield Park* during this conference, I hope we can all concur that the novel is not a failure, but Austen's most daring success.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Kingsley Amis, "What Became of Jane Austen," reprinted in *Discussions of Jane Austen*, ed. William Heath (Boston: Heath and Company, 1961), pp. 99-101. Amis's article was originally published in *Spectator*, 4 October 1957, 339-40.
- <sup>2</sup> *Discussions*, p. 99.
- <sup>3</sup> For one of the most enduring discussions of this kind, see Lionel Trilling's essay on *Mansfield Park* reprinted in *Discussions of Jane Austen* pp. 87-98. Trilling's essay was first collected in *The Opposing Self* (New York: Viking, 1955).
- <sup>4</sup> For a brief discussion of schools of Austenian reception, see my "Jane Austen: Cults and Cultures," forthcoming in *A Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster.
- <sup>5</sup> In *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. B. C. Southam (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 95. Whatley's review was originally published in 1821.
- <sup>6</sup> "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," in *Tendencies* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 125.
- <sup>7</sup> *Critical Heritage*, p. 217. Oliphant's article was originally published in 1870.
- <sup>8</sup> Reginald Farrer, "Jane Austen," in *Discussions* p. 24. Farrer's article was originally published in 1917.
- <sup>9</sup> D. W. Harding, "Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen," in *Discussions*, p. 43. Harding's essay was originally delivered before the Literary Society of Manchester University on March 3, 1939, and was published in *Scrutiny*, 8 (1940), 346-62.
- <sup>10</sup> Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 3.

- <sup>11</sup> *Critical Heritage*, p. 128. Brontë's remarks are drawn from letter to W. S. Williams, dated 12 April 1850.
- <sup>12</sup> *Discussions*, p. 88.
- <sup>13</sup> In *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage, Volume 2 1870-1940*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 107. Lawrence's remarks first appeared in 1930, in *A Propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover*.
- <sup>14</sup> *The Bookman* 288 (January, 1924), 193.
- <sup>15</sup> [John Wilson Croker,] *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>16</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>2</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>3</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>4</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>5</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>6</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>7</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>8</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>9</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>10</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>11</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>12</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>13</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>14</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>15</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>16</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>17</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>18</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>19</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>20</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>21</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>22</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>23</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>24</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>25</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>26</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>27</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>28</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>29</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>30</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>31</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>32</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>33</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>34</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>35</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>36</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>37</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>38</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>39</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>40</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>41</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>42</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>43</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>44</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>45</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>46</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>47</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>48</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>49</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>50</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>51</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>52</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>53</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>54</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>55</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>56</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>57</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>58</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>59</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>60</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>61</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>62</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>63</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>64</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>65</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>66</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>67</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>68</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>69</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>70</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>71</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>72</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>73</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>74</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>75</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>76</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>77</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>78</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>79</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>80</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>81</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>82</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>83</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>84</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>85</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>86</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>87</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>88</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>89</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>90</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>91</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>92</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>93</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>94</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>95</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>96</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>97</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>98</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.
- <sup>99</sup> *Quarterly Review*, (April 1814), 125-26.
- <sup>100</sup> *Discussions*, p. 86.