

Edmund Bertram: A Politically Correct Hero?

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Please note the question mark in my title. I'm not going to argue that anyone serious about political correctness now is likely to find Edmund Bertram a very satisfactory hero. I do, however, think he is intended to represent reformist rather than reactionary ideas, especially about the moral status of women, female education and partnership in marriage. So I will resist the tendency in some feminist criticism to assimilate him to the authoritarian and conservative patriarch, Sir Thomas Bertram.

I am particularly interested in Jane Austen's critical use of some key fictional tropes or configurations in *Mansfield Park*. If time permitted, I'd like to discuss Edmund as a figure in a revisionist treatment of the "Myth of Corinne," but that is too complicated for a twenty-minute talk, so I shall confine myself to considering two other configurations, which I shall call the "Guardian-Husband" and the "Tutor-Lover."

The Guardian-Husband is characteristically a titled landowner, significantly older than the ward he marries, or seeks to marry. The Tutor-Lover is a dispossessed figure, a man of education, but without property, and not much older than the heiress-pupil, for whom he is not an eligible husband. The Guardian-Husband is necessarily a figure of patriarchal authority; the Tutor-Lover may appear as rebellious son, allied with a transgressive daughter. Since Edmund Bertram functions both as a guardian and tutor to Fanny Price and eventually marries her, it is worth comparing him with other examples of these configurations.

Although Sir Charles Grandison, the "Good Man" and eponymous hero of Samuel Richardson's seminal novel (1754), is not the literal guardian of the heroine, Harriet Byron, he would have to come into any full discussion of the trope. Other Guardian-Husbands, represented with varying degrees of approval, include theatrical ones, like Heartly in David Garrick's *The Guardian* (1759), Dorriforth in Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* (1792), Clarence Hervey in Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801) and, of course, Mr. Knightley in *Emma*. Among Tutor-Lovers, Saint-Preux, the hero of Rousseau's *Julie, or the new Heloise* (1761), is pre-eminent. Were there time to consider this figure at length, we might continue beyond Jane Austen, into the mid-nineteenth century, and discuss Louis Moore in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), but here the most important figure is Anhalt in Kotzebue's *Das Kind der Liebe*, translated by Inchbald as *Lovers' Vows*.

In the time available to me today, I shall discuss only Clarence Hervey and Anhalt. Although there is no direct reference to *Belinda* in *Mansfield Park*, it is one of the novels picked out for praise in *Northanger Abbey*. Inserted a little clumsily into the closing chapters, is the cautionary tale of Clarence Hervey's relations with Virginia St. Pierre. Clarence is primarily a would-be

Guardian-Husband, but he also becomes responsible for Virginia's education, or rather lack of it, so there are elements of the Tutor-Lover as well.

Edgeworth's handling of the trope is openly hostile, and is part of a more general hostility to some of the ideas of Rousseau and his followers, about the nature of women and their education. Clarence Hervey, under the influence of Rousseau's *Emile* falls in love with the idea of marrying a girl whose nature has not been corrupted by society. Happening to meet a beautiful and apparently penniless orphan of sixteen, romantically watering rose-bushes in a cottage garden in the New Forest, he is delighted to find she has been brought up, virtually under house-arrest, by her grandmother, and has not even been taught to write, though she can read. Since the grandmother expires opportunely, Clarence takes over the girl's guardianship, changing her name to Virginia, after the heroine of *Paul et Virginie*, by Bernadin St. Pierre (1786), a sentimental romance in which Virginie's death is brought about by her excessive modesty. Clarence arranges for his Virginia to continue a secluded life, with only a kind, but poorly educated widow (Mrs. Ormond) for company, plus an elderly clergyman to read prayers to them once a week. He himself encourages her taste for painting. Unfortunately, by the time Virginia is eighteen and it has become an obligation on Clarence to make her his wife, he has fallen in love with Belinda and come to think Virginia rather empty-headed, and a little mad. He is unaware that, because of her extreme delicacy of feeling, she cannot tell him she doesn't want to marry him anyway, as she is passionately in love with a portrait of someone else. Clarence narrowly escapes a marriage that would have been disastrous for both of them and marries instead the less childish, better-educated and more intelligent Belinda. Edgeworth exposes the absurdity and cruelty of the romantic dream which nearly traps Clarence and Virginia in deep unhappiness. It does cause Virginia to go into a decline, from which she recovers only when the marriage project is abandoned.

Austen no doubt endorsed Edgeworth's censure of the sentimental fantasy in this version of the Guardian-Husband, but what she does in *Mansfield Park* is to create an ironic version of the same future, amalgamating him with an anti-sentimental version of the Tutor-Lover. It is as though she asked herself, "How could such a figure be drawn in accordance with Nature and Probability?" Let us see how Edmund Bertram compares with Clarence Hervey, and with the paradigm Guardian-Husband.

Firstly, Edmund is not Fanny's literal guardian, a role fulfilled by Sir Thomas Bertram. He comes to exercise "the kind authority of a privileged guardian" (355) only gradually and never has any formal or financial control over her. Thus the more powerful and oppressive aspects of guardianship are transferred to the truly patriarchal figure of Sir Thomas, leaving Edmund in a quasi-fraternal role, where his authority with Fanny rests primarily on her affection for him and her perception of his merits. Edmund is further weakened as a figure of patriarchal authority because, unlike Clarence, he is not, and is not to become, a wealthy owner of an estate.

Secondly, Edmund does not assume such "kind authority" as he has, as a result of a sentimental fantasy, nor is it associated with sexual design. He

initially encounters Fanny within an “ordinary” family ambience. There is no romantic encounter by a cottage in a wood, but instead, a commonplace act of kindness: He rules some lines on writing paper for the miserable little cousin who has been so suddenly uprooted from Portsmouth, and gets her letter to William sent off. Fanny is an undersized and unprepossessing ten-year-old at the time, and thus is presented as being altogether too young to excite any kind of sexual interest. Edmund’s feelings are only such as a brother might feel for a younger sister, and he continues to suffer a fraternal blindness to her sexual attractiveness, even when she matures. This makes it difficult for readers to find it entirely convincing when he eventually does take notice of Fanny as a nubile young woman, but it ensures that his previous relationship with her is free of the sexual and emotional manipulation inherent in Clarence Hervey’s relationship with Virginia. Clarence’s interest in Virginia is always coloured by the perception that she is wildly beautiful; Edmund hardly notices what Fanny looks like until page 470, when his suddenly beginning to prefer light eyes to sparkling dark ones is treated ironically.

Thirdly, Edmund is himself no more than a schoolboy of sixteen when Fanny arrives at Mansfield, and although she sees both Edmund and Tom Bertram, who are “tall of their age,” as having “all the grandeur of men” (12), Edmund will not come of age for another five years. By the time Fanny is eighteen he is only twenty-four. The inequality of age, which is at first very marked, shrinks by the end of the novel.

Lastly, Edmund is *like* Clarence Hervey, in that he is a mixed character, not a “picture of perfection” such as Sir Charles Grandison. In this Austen follows Edgeworth. Both in *Belinda* and *Mansfield Park* faults as well as virtues are shown in the hero, and this implies a need for the heroines to be capable of independent moral judgement.

I turn now to Edmund as Tutor-Lover, and here he can be compared with Anhalt as well as Clarence. Anhalt is, like Edmund, a young clergyman and is employed as tutor to Amelia, daughter of the wealthy Baron Wildenheim, who wishes her to marry a man of “birth and Fortune.” However, Amelia and Anhalt are in love with one another and by the end of the play the Baron has abandoned his worldly ambitions for his daughter and consents to a love-match. Anhalt is shown as a “picture of perfection” whom the Baron decides, somewhat implausibly, to receive as his son, telling him: “A Man of your principles, at once a teacher and an example of virtue, exalts his rank in life to a level with the noblest family.” Anhalt is thus able to marry his pupil-heiress and to do so with the blessing of her father.

Edmund is like Anhalt in that his fortune and status do not make him a suitable husband for an heiress. His position as younger son is important. Both in the family hierarchy and in his future prospects, he is strongly distinguished from his older brother who will inherit the estate and title. His position is in some ways more comparable with that of his sisters, and we notice that, in their father’s absence, Edmund must bow to Tom’s authority. He is therefore placed, like the paradigm Tutor-Lover, as a dispossessed male. A man of education, but without property, one who may, should he fall

in love with an heiress, run foul of her father or guardian, but Austen breaks up the configuration. Edmund does indeed fall in love with an heiress, but she is not his pupil and it is not her father or guardian who prohibits their marriage. Mary herself requires an estate and title to go with a husband. The “pupil” with whom he belatedly becomes enamoured is not an heiress and is seen at the beginning of the novel as unsuitable as a future daughter-in-law to Sir Thomas Bertram because of her social inferiority.

Edmund is not a “picture of perfection,” but a mixed character, in whom good qualities predominate, but not without some faults. Austen’s revisions of the trope allow Edmund’s faults to be associated with his falling in love with an heiress who does not share the romantic heroine’s disregard for money and status, while his merits are associated with his disinterested kindness to a poor relation. Sir Thomas, like Baron Wildenheim, abandons his former ambitions about his son’s marriage, recognizing in Fanny “the daughter that he wanted,” but Edmund is to remain in the “rank in life” that prevented marriage to Mary Crawford. It is Fanny, the ward-pupil whose moral excellence is rewarded not by a “great match,” like her aunt’s, but with one well above what her birth and fortune entitle her to.

Anhalt’s tutorship of Amelia, except in matters of the heart, scarcely come into *Lovers’ Vows*, but comparisons between Edmund and Clarence Hervey are instructive. The first difference to be noticed is that Edmund recognizes the intelligence of his “pupil.” Everyone else at Mansfield thinks Fanny backward if not downright stupid, but at the end of chapter 2, we read of Edmund:

He knew her to be clever, to have a quick apprehension as well as good sense, and a fondness for reading, which, properly directed, must be an education in itself. Miss Lee taught her French, and heard her read the daily portion of History; but he recommended the books which charmed her leisure hours, he encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment; he made reading useful by talking to her of what she read, and heightened its attractiveness by judicious praise. (22)

From the beginning, therefore, although at first their situations make them very unequal, Edmund shows respect for Fanny’s mental abilities and, as she grows up, comes to value her judgement as a rational creature, in a way which marks him out as *not* holding Rousseauist views about the absence, or undesirability of reason and knowledge in women. True he “corrects her judgement,” but we hear of no restrictions on her reading, only encouragement of it. Whereas Clarence keeps Virginia as ignorant and isolated as possible, Edmund encourages Fanny to read widely and to improve her physical strength and courage by riding. “Fanny must have a horse” (36). He urges her to come out of her shell in family and social situations and not to be afraid of engaging in serious conversation, even with Sir Thomas. He tells her he has noticed her question about the slave trade, “and was in hopes the question would be followed up by others” (198). We are, surely, to understand that his notion of an ideal woman is not of a still mentally infantile, or physically unexercized creature.

Answering Mary Crawford's question about Fanny's social status, by the time she is eighteen, he says: "My cousin is grown-up. She has the age and sense of a woman, but the outs and not outs are beyond me" (49). Edmund's sense of Fanny, from this time on, as an adult, with adult "powers of mind" is clear. He rebukes Aunt Norris for bullying her about acting a part in *Lovers' Vows* (cottager's wife, as it happens), with these words: "Let her choose for herself as well as the rest of us.—Her judgment may be quite as safely trusted" (147). He comes to regard *her* as capable of advising *him*, as this bit of dialogue shows:

"Can I speak with you, Fanny, for a few minutes?"

"Yes, certainly."

"I want to consult you. I want your opinion."

"My opinion!" she cried, shrinking from such a compliment, highly as it gratified her.

"Yes, your advice and opinion. I do not know what to do. . . ." (153)

Edmund's attitude to Fanny as an adult, means that their relationship changes. She is now sometimes his mentor, though she refuses to advise, and he does not act in accordance with what he knows she thinks. As must happen, if a tutor has succeeded in encouraging a pupil to think for herself, she will not always take the same view as he does. For much of the later part of *Mansfield Park* Fanny's judgment differs from Edmund's. This is, of course, largely because each is under the strong influence of being in love, with Edmund ignorant of Fanny's feeling for him, while she is all-too aware of his for Mary Crawford. Austen, despite the value she places on reason, understanding and judgment in her hero and heroine, is telling a story about "mortals," young and impassioned mortals who, however reasonable they may in time become, develop strange lapses and blindnesses while in love. Yet it is important to the ideological structure of the novel that Fanny's assessment of the Crawfords should turn out to be essentially right. In refusing to marry Henry, she has to defy Sir Thomas and disappoint Edmund, and the rightness of her judgment in doing so has to be made apparent in the end. If Edmund has had a large part in "forming her mind," it is an adult mind, capable of forming independent judgements, that she eventually reveals. Edmund's tuition has not been such that she must remain his pupil for ever. He has, we are told, "Even in the midst of his late infatuation," "acknowledged Fanny's mental superiority" (471).

Edmund Bertram is a hero to be respected, not to be admired without qualification. Part of the point of his characterization is that he is *NOT* a "picture of (male) perfection," whose virtues and power are sufficient to ensure the rights of women, without their taking moral responsibility for themselves.

We are meant to notice his faults and judge them by the same standard as we would apply to a heroine such as Emma or Elizabeth Bennet. Edmund not only neglects Fanny, while he is "infatuated" with Mary, but he becomes insensitive to her feelings. Being in love induces blindness to Mary's character and attitudes and to Fanny's misery. He agrees to take part in

theatricals he believes should not be taking place at all. And he is not above dramatising himself, as a disappointed lover in a somewhat absurd way. Pouring out his heart to Fanny, with a great deal of repetition, his thoughts are reported thus:

Time would undoubtedly abate somewhat of his sufferings, but still it was a sort of thing which he could never entirely get the better of; and as to his ever meeting with any other woman who could—it was too impossible to be named but with indignation. Fanny's friendship was all he had to cling to. (460)

One wonders how it ever came to be said that authorial irony was suspended with regard to Edmund or Fanny. Surely sympathetic laughter is called for in response to this, but their marriage, by the time it comes about, promises to be very much more equal, especially “in point of mind” than the one Sir Thomas Bertram contracted, about thirty years ago, with Miss Maria Ward. Lady Bertram, at around fifty, remains in a child-like state of mental dependence on her only *fairly* good Guardian-Husband. The Great House and the Mansfield Estate have not undergone a miraculous transformation, though there is improvement, but at the parsonage, where Fanny is now to live without painful sensations of restraint and alarm, there is hope of more. Fanny no longer needs a tutor but a lover. One wonders if Edmund will be quite as good in the second role as the first, but after all, we are assured that they are both “attached to country pleasures.” Not for the first time in *Mansfield Park* one can't quite believe the *double entendre* is deliberate, but, as Edmund says, “we all talk Shakespeare.” So perhaps it is.