

Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Property, and the British Empire

KULDIP KAUR KUWAHARA

Dept. of English, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC 27412

"I suppose I am graver than other people," said Fanny. "The evenings do not appear long to me. I love to hear my uncle talk of the West Indies. I could listen to him for an hour together. It entertains *me* more than many other things I have done—but then I am unlike other people I dare say."

—*Mansfield Park*, 197

In September 1995, as Hurricane Luis lashed the shores of the islands in the Caribbean, the island of Antigua was constantly in the news with its loss of property and power. As I prepared to write this paper, I was struck by the relevance of the theme of property and powerlessness of an Antigua surrounded by a tempest-tossed sea and its subjection, at one time, to the British Empire with its stable homes and spreading seas. Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, like *Persuasion*, her last completed novel, is about landed property and adventures at sea; it is about centers of domesticity and waves of influence and authority. In *Mansfield Park*, the stability, order, and harmony of the Bertram estate in England are set off against the tempest-tossed seas Sir Thomas Bertram navigates on his journey to Antigua where he owns substantial property. In Austen's time, an English reader would have had no difficulty grasping the fact that property in England such as Mansfield Park, was maintained by the labor of the natives of a plantation in the colony of Antigua. Historically, they would have seen Britain at the center of the circle of influence, power, and authority; Antigua would have been seen as the insignificant "other" and therefore of marginal significance. But a difficulty arises when we make a shift from the perspective of an English reader to that of a native Antiguan reader. What would have been his or her experience in reading *Mansfield Park*? Did Austen write her novels for the English reader, or did she also write her novels for the Antiguan reader?

Several years ago, in her essay, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," Gayatri Spivak pointed out that, "It should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English. The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored" (798). I agree with Spivak's contention and believe that if raised in and influenced by the ideology of imperialism, even a native reader of colonial Antigua would have had no problems in reading Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. Austen, after all, makes fine moral distinctions in her fictional world. It is the late twentieth-century post-colonial readers and critics from Antigua, England, or any other part of the world who can see more contradictions and cracks in Austen's aesthetic designs than were perceived by colonial or even early post-colonial readers.

This fundamental shift in attitudes is reflected in Edward Said's reading of *Mansfield Park*. Said pushes back the fictional boundaries of *Mansfield Park* to include the historical dimension of the West Indian colony that supports it. He argues:

Sir Thomas's Antigua readily acquires a slightly greater density than the discreet, reticent appearances it makes in the pages of *Mansfield Park*. And already our reading of the novel begins to open up at those points where ironically Austen was most economical and her critics most . . . negligent. Her 'Antigua' is therefore not just a slight but a definite way of marking the outer limits of what William calls domestic improvements, or a quick allusion to the mercantile venturesomeness of acquiring overseas dominions as a source for local fortunes, or one reference among many attesting to a historical sensibility. (94)

Said further observes that through a careful reading of *Mansfield Park*, "We can sense how ideas about dependent races and territories were held both by foreign-office executives, colonial bureaucrats, and military strategists and by intelligent novel-readers educating themselves in the fine points of moral evaluation, literary balance, and stylistic finish" (95). Exploring the paradox that "Everything we know about Austen and her values is at odds with the cruelty of slavery," he goes on to point out that Fanny's question about the slave trade is met with silence "as to suggest that one world could not be connected with the other since there simply is no common language for both" (96). Said suggests that "In order more accurately to read works like *Mansfield Park*, we have to see them in the main as resisting or avoiding that other setting" (96). He concludes, "In time there would no longer be a dead silence when slavery was spoken of, and the subject became central to a new understanding of what Europe was" (96). That time is now. At this conference we do indeed have the language to discuss slavery, property, the British Empire, and Antigua and British readers of Austen's *Mansfield Park*. I would argue that if Jane Austen were writing *Mansfield Park* today, she could not have resisted or avoided making the ironic connections between Antigua and Mansfield Park of which she was so aware in 1814.

A novelist sure of the nature and purpose of her art, Austen knew what she was doing when she wrote and published *Mansfield Park* in 1814. Fanny is the only character in the novel who asks a question about the slave trade. She gets no answer, and Austen leaves it at that. She is disturbed yet is timid and lacks the energy and urgency to pursue that very important question. Fanny's question creates a pause, a momentary silence in the conversation but it does not disturb the harmony of the domestic circle of which she is a part. When her cousin, Edmund, points out to Fanny that she is "too silent in the evening circle," she asserts, referring to Sir Thomas Bertram, "But I do talk to him more than I used. I am sure I do. Did not you hear me ask him about the slave trade last night?" (198). She goes on to say how she had longed to ask her uncle more questions, but had hesitated because there had been "such a dead silence!" (198) following her question about the slave trade. Sir Thomas's inability or unwillingness to answer Fanny's question provides an ironic contrast to his general interest in talking at great length about the West

Indies. It is the ownership of property in the West Indies that makes possible the domestic comforts and tranquility of the family gathered around Sir Thomas, listening to his stories about far away lands. As Fanny tells Edmund, "The evenings do not appear long to me. I love to hear my uncle talk of the West Indies. I could listen to him for an hour together" (197). She also observes of her uncle that "the repose of his own family-circle is all he wants" (196). Questions about colonization and the slave trade would surely disturb such repose.

Austen thus leaves us with the comic awareness that though Fanny can see more, she does not go beyond a certain point. Instead, she accepts the silence and does not force it to have meaning. If she did, she would have to go against her habitually timid nature to challenge the unpleasant truth implied by the silence. A rebellious, outspoken Fanny would have to be a character in a very different novel. If Fanny were to question the silence, she would also question the foundations of *Mansfield Park*. As a rebel, she would reject any participation in a social order and domestic stability based on injustice, oppression and the harsh truths of Antiguan property taken over in the name of "civilization," "patriotism," "nationalism," and the "Glories of the Empire." Such structures must remain in place for the novel to continue.

It is a part of Austen's ironic design that Fanny, who stands at the moral center of the novel, should ask the question about slavery even though the pertinent question is left unanswered, hanging, incomplete. Austen thus teases the reader with a contradiction and chooses to leave it unresolved simply because she cannot resolve it. I disagree with Ruth Perry's assertion in "Austen and Empire: A Thinking Woman's Guide to British Imperialism" that Said sees Austen's reference to the slave trade as being morally neutral (101). Austen writes at a historical and cultural moment when, as Said reminds us, there is no language for the continuation of such a conversation. But she does disturb the surface in her characteristic vein, then quickly restores order and harmony. Finally, as Austen proceeds to wrap up the novel's happy ending, Fanny marries Edmund, Sir Thomas recognizes his faults, the stable home of *Mansfield Park* is stronger than ever in its values and occupants, but the spreading seas of influence and Empire-building lie outside the boundaries of her novel.

When Perry observes that "Fanny's silence means something" and makes a connection between colonialism and the situation of women, she makes a valid point in seeing the slave trade "as a trope for the marriage market and for the tyranny of marriage, a displacement of the subject status of captive Africans onto women" (101). However, she runs into contradictions and difficulties by giving the example of Mrs. Smith in *Persuasion* to make the point that, as in *Mansfield Park*, "In *Persuasion*, too, colonial possessions are associated with the weakest and most dependent woman in the novel, Mrs. Smith" (101). Now Mrs. Smith's situation illustrates the ironic intersection of colonialism with feminism though Austen explores the feminist, not the colonial dimension. She presents the situation of Mrs. Smith as an unfortunate one:

She had good reason to believe that some property of her husband in the West Indies . . . might be recoverable by proper measures; and this property, though not large, would be enough to make her comparatively rich. But there was nobody to stir in it. Mr. Elliot would do nothing, and she could do nothing herself, equally disabled from personal exertion by her state of bodily weakness, and from employing others by her want of money. (210)

Captain Wentworth exerts himself to help Mrs. Smith regain her property in the West Indies. "Her property" in the West Indies is apparently hers due to Britain's successful exploitation of the colonies in the West Indies. It is therefore as rightfully or wrongfully hers as is Sir Thomas Bertram's property in Antigua his. Though the colonial English reader of *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* would accept such West Indian property as rightfully owned by a Mrs. Smith or a Thomas Bertram, a post-colonial reader from Antigua, England, or any other part of the world might, or indeed would, question such "ownership." Austen presents the situation of Mrs. Smith, who has been exploited and wronged by society, as due to her helplessness as a woman. Austen focuses on that and chooses to resist references to the larger colonial context.

When Captain Wentworth's manner of being helpful to Mrs. Smith is described as "the activity and exertion of a fearless man," his character and temperament are closely associated with his naval career and fearless, confident way of life. His fortunes at sea are based on colonial "prize money" and his apparently well-deserved fortune leads to his happy marriage at the novel's close. This notion of the ideal, however, conflicts with the reality of domination and property ownership based on "successful" naval exploits. In exploring Mrs. Smith's situation and associating her happiness with the central pattern of a happy marriage well deserved by Anne and Captain Wentworth, Austen consciously chooses to avoid the colonial dimensions of the outer circle of the sea.

In her essay, Perry makes the further observation that Austen, "opposed to enslaving anyone, used the discourse of abolition to comment on the condition of women. But at the same time, because of her own class location, she recognized that the navy provided upward mobility for men without fortune, family, or connections, with nothing to rely on but themselves" (104). By conceding that Austen was limited "because of her own class location," Perry reminds us of the inherent limitations of the age of European Enlightenment and Empire, a time when the rights of man and the slogans of "liberty, equality, fraternity" were applauded even as the very upholders of human rights excluded women's rights and enslaved, colonized, and took over property with violence and brutality in other parts of the world in the name of progress.

Margaret Kirkham points out that in *Mansfield Park*, the "ideals of 'liberty, equality and fraternity' are given an English, feminist meaning. The equal moral status of women is made clear through exposure of the absurdity of any other belief. As in Wollstonecraft, the language of law and property, and the language of capture and captivation as applied to marriage and sexual relationships, is shown to be indecent" (118). However, Kirkham's

persuasive argument can be applied to Enlightenment Feminism, not to Enlightenment Colonialism. If Austen belongs to the tradition of Enlightenment Feminism, she also belongs to the tradition of Enlightenment Colonialism. Austen takes a close look at the individual in a social and political context. She operates within an accepted paradigm of patriotism, nationalism, and respect for the navy's keen sense of duty. It would be difficult to break away from this accepted social and political order without destroying the very roots of British cultural identity. Austen thus underlines ideal moral values, even ideal feminist values, without challenging all the contradictions inherent in the ideals of the Enlightenment.

When Kirkham reminds us that through Fanny's question about the slave trade, "Her moral status in England is implicitly contrasted yet also compared with that of the Antiguan slaves," (118) we are still left with unresolved questions. Was it, for instance, a part of Austen's ironic structure to implicitly contrast and compare Fanny with Antiguan slaves even as Fanny displaces Sir Thomas and occupies the moral center of a Mansfield Park that continues to depend for all its material comforts on the colonized and enslaved inhabitants of Antigua? Further, how would a post-colonial Antiguan reader of *Mansfield Park* respond to Austen's resistance to a fuller exploration of the theme of colonialism? Is there an inherent contradiction in the fact that though Fanny lives at a higher level of consciousness she echoes the rhetoric of Empire as she celebrates her brother's fortunes and adventures at sea? Is Austen a self-conscious ironist who plays with complex paradoxes or does she reveal cracks in her aesthetic designs? Like Fanny's question about the slave trade, such questions remain, but the twentieth-century post-colonial critic must ask them and hope for more than silence.

WORKS CITED

- Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park. The Novels of Jane Austen*. Vol. III, 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934, rpt. 1943.
- . *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion. The Novels of Jane Austen*. Vol. V, 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933, rpt. 1965.
- Kirkham, Margaret. *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction*. Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1983.
- Perry, Ruth. "Jane Austen and Empire: A Thinking Woman's Guide to British Imperialism." *Persuasions* 16 (1994): 95-105.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf, 1991.
- Spivak, Gayatri. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* Eds. Robyn Warhol and Diane Herndl. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991.