

The Talkers and Listeners of *Mansfield Park*

JULIET McMASTER

Department of English, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB T6G 2E5

When Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram and their son and niece grace the table of Dr. and Mrs. Grant and the Crawfords at Mansfield parsonage, we hear, “The meeting was generally felt to be a pleasant one, being composed in good proportion of those who would talk and those who would listen” (*MP* 238-9).¹ That valuable proportion of talkers and listeners isn’t often achieved in *Mansfield Park*.

Pride and Prejudice was a novel in which the speakers shine, and we as readers rejoice in “the playfulness and epigrammatism of the general style” (*Letters* 203).² In the universe of *Mansfield Park*, however, language, and especially the characters’ speech, is treated much more severely. There are certainly plenty of characters who talk garrulously, ably, even wittily; but we don’t receive their talk with delight or admiration; more often it comes across as aggressive and self-aggrandising, or as specious and dangerous. Talking itself, viewed even apart from its content, is often loud and painful, and like Fanny on her first evening at Portsmouth, where her strident family are “all talking together, but Rebecca loudest” we are at times “almost stunned” (382). Silence is viewed not just as an absence of sound, but as a positive entity, and a highly valuable one.

For all the noise that is flying about the Prices’ home—the pointless oaths, the routine complaints, the oft-repeated news—the talk has nowhere to settle, no one to attend; and it seems as though it will keep bouncing between the thin walls, like so much offensive refuse continually accumulating, until it can be decently absorbed and attended to. Here we have no due proportion of those who would talk and those who would listen. And although Sir Thomas Bertram’s domain is somewhat better in this respect than Portsmouth, the same can be said of many of the verbal encounters in the novel.

Not all talk qualifies as conversation, as John Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey* reminds us. “All the rest of his conversation, or rather talk [we hear], began and ended with himself and his own concerns” (*NA* 66). “Conversation,” properly so called, is a civilized verbal exchange, where two or more speakers share and advance a subject, and the community is thereby benefited, its understanding enlarged. The “best” company, as we hear in *Persuasion*, is composed of “clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation” (*P* 150). Talk, by contrast, tends to go in circles, from the self to the self.³ A great deal of the speech in *Mansfield Park* is of this kind. By and large in this novel, the most confident and assertive talkers are the most morally dubious characters. And their talk echoes and reverberates, filling up spaces and banishing peace, muttering and cluttering as the variously vain and deluded characters endlessly rehearse their roles in the play, or urge suits they don’t mean, or blame those they have injured, or insistently assert what isn’t so.

Spoken language takes on almost physical force. Fanny, at least, shrinks physically from the “shock” of the verbal “attack” of Tom and the others when they want her to take part in the play (150); she is struck speechless and breathless by Sir Thomas’s address about Henry Crawford. No one would deny that Fanny suffers verbal abuse at the tongue of her aunt Norris. In Fanny’s case verbal abuse is very close to being physical abuse.⁴

When talking about the abusive tendencies of talking, Mrs. Norris is a good place to start. Mrs. Norris uses speech as her weapon, and she wields it doughtily. It’s notable that she goes in for monologues rather than verbal exchanges. For instance, although much of her speech is about Fanny, and much more is *at* Fanny, hardly any of it is *to* Fanny, although Fanny is usually present. On the subject of Fanny’s headache, Edmund initially talks gently *to* her: “Fanny, . . . I am sure you have the headache?” he asks. Mrs. Norris intervenes, changing Edmund’s attentive “you” into “she,” and thereby withdrawing Fanny’s right to speak or be heard on her own behalf. “‘Go out! to be sure she did,’ said Mrs. Norris” (71-2). Such intervention is even more bullying when Lady Bertram, stirred to a languid curiosity, asks, “What is the play about, Fanny, you have never told me?” “Oh! sister, [Mrs. Norris cuts in] pray do not ask her now; for Fanny is not one of those who can talk and work at the same time.—It is about Lovers’ Vows” (167). For all the hundreds of words her aunt Norris lashes her with, Fanny is called on to answer only once, and that is to a command to leave a decision to someone else. “Yes, ma’am, I should not think of any thing else” is the closest to an *exchange* with her aunt that she can ever achieve (221). Even characters Mrs. Norris can’t browbeat tend not to answer her harangues, knowing they are not meant to lead anywhere. After she has detailed her triumph over the carpenter’s boy, we hear, “Nobody was at the trouble of an answer” (142). Rather than feeding in to a stream of discourse in the community, her insistent speech only accumulates and unprofitably piles up.

This wicked stepmother begrudges Mansfield Park to her sister, and begrudges the Parsonage to the Grants. To Fanny she begrudges any presence or voice or life of her own. To her Fanny is not a person but a project, *her* project. And she rages that anyone should accord her a moment’s personal attention, or that Fanny should acquire any ghost of personhood. Fanny to her is like mankind to Satan; and she can’t rest till she has engineered her fall from grace, ground her down and expunged her. It is her constant effort to exclude Fanny from every pleasure and from any one’s attention. The basis of her resentment emerges most clearly when Fanny has taken a walk in the shrubbery without checking in with her first.

“There is a something about Fanny, I have often observed it before,—she likes to go her own way to work; she does not like to be dictated to; . . . she certainly has a little spirit of secrecy, and independence, and nonsense, about her.” (323)

What she can’t forgive Fanny for is her having any identity, for daring to be human.

Mrs. Norris has had to reconcile her insatiable appetite for power with her relatively powerless situation; and this conflicted position issues in her

obsessive behaviour and speech practices. She proceeds by indirection, as her power plays are conducted behind a mask of humility and devotion. Like John Thorpe's, her talk begins and ends with herself. But where he boasts about having neater gigs and faster horses than anyone else, her self-aggrandisement takes the opposite form of the moan. "Me! a poor helpless, forlorn widow, unfit for anything," she calls herself, when it is suggested her niece come to stay with her. And though she is just as good at the boast as the moan, her boasting is of the services she performs for others.

Mrs. Norris talks insistently, obsessively. When Sir Thomas comes home and reproaches her for promoting the theatricals, we hear, she "was a little confounded, and as nearly being silenced as ever she had been in her life" (188). There follows a speech that occupies nearly a whole page: evidently the experience of being *nearly* silenced produces enormous extra exertions in loquacity, until victory is hers, and "Sir Thomas gave up the point, foiled by her evasions, disarmed by her flattery" (190). She has done a snow job with her words, using them to bury and obfuscate meaning.

In Mrs. Norris, then, we see "talk" at its worst: shifty, aggressive, compulsive, damaging; used not to communicate truth and advance community, but to misrepresent and cut down others; and used, also, to excess. Her windy waste of ineffective words can become exhausting, desiccating—as much the cause of Fanny's headache, for instance, as the hot sun and the long pointless walks.

But Mrs. Norris is not the only abuser of speech in *Mansfield Park*. The Crawford siblings, Mary and Henry, the interlopers, are *specious* speakers. But at least Mary and Henry are characterised as speakers rather than mere talkers. Their speech purposefully goes somewhere, it has style, it is pointed and artful, and it engages others. They are both very good at making conversation, even if the conversations they make don't go in the right direction.

Mary Crawford specialises in speaking freely. (Edmund is distressed, in their first exchange, that she should "speak so freely of her uncle" [57]). One reason that she can indeed do conversation rather than mere talk is that she keeps her ears pricked on what engages others, and knows how to adapt to their needs. She early finds out that Fanny has a brother who is a midshipman (60), and she is the only character besides Edmund who takes any trouble to draw Fanny out in speech. When Fanny is stricken by Mrs. Norris's cruel denunciation of her as dependent, "obstinate," and "ungrateful," Mary is able to comfort her and bring her back into the social circle.

When from taking notice of her work and wishing *she* could work as well, and begging for the pattern, . . . Miss Crawford proceeded to inquire if [Fanny] had heard lately from her brother at sea, . . . and imagined him a very fine young man, . . . [Fanny] could not help . . . listening, and answering with more animation than she had intended. (147-8)

It's no mean feat to get Fanny answering with animation!—especially at such a time. And of course this is one of the great dangerous moments in *Mansfield Park*—one of many—in which we are apt to be won over by a Crawford, or accuse Jane Austen of being of the devil's party without

knowing it. We are always kept on our guard, however. We are kept aware that this negligent good humour costs her nothing, and indeed that she makes it very useful in her own cause. "The really good feelings by which she was almost purely governed [watch that 'almost'!], were rapidly restoring her to all the little she had lost in Edmund's favour" (147).

She uses her skill in character assessment and speech to wheedle and curry favour. Like Frank Churchill in *Emma*, she is a glib talker, and studies the art of compliment to butter people up. At the ball Mary carefully observes her hosts, and plies Sir Thomas with compliments on Fanny, Mrs. Norris with compliments on Julia and Maria (276-7).

Mary Crawford is a more developed version of Lady Susan: "She is clever & agreeable, has all that knowledge of the world which makes conversation easy, & talks very well, with a happy command of Language, which is too often used I beleive to make Black appear White" (*LS* 251). Mary uses language as an implement to gain power. And power for her means making someone do something against their conscious determination. Her moments of most "exquisite happiness," by her own avowal, were those of rehearsing the love scenes of *Lovers' Vows* with Edmund, and knowing that he was acting against his conscience. "His sturdy spirit to bend as it did!" she rejoices.

She is shrewd enough to understand that the best way to recommend herself to Edmund is by being kind to Fanny. But it is curious that being this shrewd she should so misinterpret them both as to show her hand so clearly. Her letter to Fanny, in which she wishes Tom Bertram dead so that the younger brother may inherit, is suicidally self-revelatory. And for all her powers of observation, she never has an inkling of Fanny's feelings for Edmund.

How can Mary be at once so sharp, and so mistaken? It seems to me she has her share of the major failing of most characters in *Mansfield Park*: she won't sufficiently *listen*. Her breezy egoism can be charming: While Fanny rhapsodises about nature and the evergreen, and the world outside herself, Mary cheerfully admits, "I see no wonder in this shrubbery equal to seeing myself in it" (209-10). But the concentration on self inhibits her full attention, and therefore her potential for rich exchange with others. In the scene in the wandering wood at Sotherton, after Edmund's careful explanation of his reasons for wanting to enter the ministry, she says, "I am just as much surprised now as I was at first that you should intend to take orders" (93). It is a damning admission. It means that she hasn't listened; won't listen; can't listen. She only wants to be listened *to*. "You really are fit for something better," she cajoles him. "Come, do change your mind. It is not too late. Go into the law" (93). It almost seems as though she opposes his taking orders not from real conviction but from a desire for the power of persuasion for its own sake—as her brother pursues the women who seem most hard to get. She wants Edmund's sturdy spirit to bend.

Not all talk is dangerous, damaging or simply wasteful noise and reiteration. The narrator sometimes pays warm though cautious tribute to the speaking powers of both Crawfords. Their learned social graces, their

developed intelligence, and their wit provide a kind of oil that promotes the smooth running of social converse and ameliorates the little rubs and bumps and creakinesses of human contact. Before the ball, the Mansfield party is dull and unawakened, and the early arrivals produce only an increase of “gravity and formality” (273). Such a gathering really needs the Crawfords, and their arrival produces “a favourable epoch.” “The stiffness of the meeting soon gave way before their popular manners and more diffused intimacies:—little groups were formed and every body grew comfortable. Fanny felt the advantage” (273). “Diffused intimacies” is a wonderful phrase for the talent both Crawfords possess, as Elizabeth Bennet does, for cutting through formality and early establishing some personal communication, even in formal surroundings. When the Crawfords come to Mansfield Park they spread an invigorating sense of things happening, minds working, society extending. It is no mean talent; and we need to remember how charming the Crawfords are, as well as how dangerous. “Diffused intimacies,” as Maria Bertram has cause to know, can lead to pain and humiliation. But they are certainly an asset at a party.

Henry has even more of this social grace than Mary; and the narrator knows how to appreciate it. He has “the happiest knack” in reading aloud in company (337). His powers as a civilizing influence are demonstrated when even the loud-mouthed Mr. Price gives over swearing in his company: “Such was his instinctive compliment to the good manners of Mr. Crawford” (402).

Crawford is characterised very much as an oral character. Whether reading, acting, or considering setting up as a preacher, he is a spouter, living in words and by them. His lovemaking to Maria happens in the process of delivering Frederick’s speeches. (He and Maria are called “indefatigable rehearsers” [169].) His courtship of Fanny is garrulous. He makes no secret of his love, but “glories in his chains” (360). And it is a telling detail of his conduct of daily affairs that on principle he never asks a question: When in doubt of his whereabouts, he says, “I never inquire. But I *told* a man mending a hedge that it was Thornton Lacey, and he agreed to it” (241). Henry creates a social identity for himself as a talker, not a listener.

Like Mary, he uses his talk not just to engage with others, but to gain power. His ready talk takes the specious form of flirtation; and he clearly derives considerable sexual satisfaction from his verbal intimacies. When we first meet the Crawfords we hear them talking to each other and their sister, Mrs. Grant, and his tone is light, ironic, unengaged. But when he talks to Maria, he takes on the earnest, weighted speech of one who would speak volumes more if he dared: “Speaking rather lower, ‘I do not think that *I* shall ever see Sotherton again with so much pleasure as I do now’” (98). She is invited to hear his innuendo, that his life will be blighted by her marriage to someone else; and she does hear and respond to it. Innuendo, however, has no contractual force, and he can walk out of the relationship unmarked by social stigma. Maria’s happiness is ruined by “listening to language, which his actions contradicted” (193).

Henry is not a particularly attentive listener. He doesn’t notice his sister’s love for Edmund, for instance, until very late in the day.⁵ But he can pay

attention when he needs to. One reason that Fanny becomes so intriguing a figure for Henry is that his talking will not avail with her. She has seen too much of it, and seen through it. Not knowing what has gone wrong, or why the usual verbal magic won't work, he is jolted into listening, into paying attention.

“Did you speak?” stepping eagerly to Fanny, and addressing her in a softened voice; and upon her saying, “No,” he added, “Are you sure you did not speak? I saw your lips move. I fancied you might be going to tell me I *ought* to be more attentive [in church], and not *allow* my thoughts to wander. Are not you going to tell me so?” (340)

Even when doing his best to listen, he must do it with a bustle; and he can't resist articulating what he thinks are Fanny's thoughts for her. But still, his intense attention works; and ultimately he extracts from her a speech that gives him a clue as to the way to her heart.

When he first begins to notice Fanny, he can't make her out. “Is she solemn? Is she queer? Is she prudish?” Being so caught up in aesthetic judgement himself, so much more guided by “moral taste” (another fine phrase!) than morality, to him Fanny with her formed principles and her habitual moral judgement is an anomaly. Once he recognizes how quietly but steadily judgemental she is, and that she has all along been watching him and judging him adversely, he learns to present himself differently. “You think me unsteady . . . easily tempted. . . . But we shall see. . . . My conduct shall speak for me” (343). When he seeks her out in Portsmouth he has found a new role. He has become the attentive and benevolent landlord to his cottager tenants at Evingham. “This was aimed, and well aimed, at Fanny,” we hear (404). To play the role of the reformed reprobate and credit the lady with the reform is a tried and true mode of seduction, as he might have learned from Richardson's *Lovelace*. “I see things differently now,” he tells her, cunningly adapting his speech to his listener. He implies that in changing him she has become responsible for him. “Your judgement is my rule of right” (344). Fanny is not immune from such tactics.

For all the narrator's concessions about Henry's verbal skills, we are constantly reminded how he uses speech artfully, to deceive and manipulate. It is notable that the moment in which our sympathies are fully enlisted on his side is one in which he is silent. On his last visit to Fanny before leaving Mansfield, we hear, “her heart was softened for a while towards him—because he really seemed to feel.—Quite unlike his usual self, he scarcely said anything” (365). In *Mansfield Park*, silence is golden.

There are other energetic talkers among the minor characters who keep before us the contrast between noisy talk, precious silence. Tom Bertram is characterized as a rattle. He goes in for anecdote (a form of speech Austen rather disapproves of, if seems), and regales the company with lively accounts of Miss Anderson and Miss Sneyd (49-51)—characters we never hear of again. Mary Crawford expects to miss this “agreeable trifling” when he leaves, when not “a single entertaining story about ‘my friend such a one’” is forthcoming (52); but finds she can do without the anecdotes

remarkably well. Real conversation with Edmund suits her better than the rattling talk of Tom (56).

As the chief promoter of the theatricals, Tom fills the stately spaces of Mansfield Park with the reverberating sounds of separate rehearsers declaiming their parts. Words here, as in the household in Portsmouth, seem to break loose from meaning and communication, and to rattle deafeningly among the walls. Tom is said to speak “so quick as to be unintelligible,” “Mrs. Grant spoilt every thing by laughing,” “Mr. Rushworth was wanting a prompter through every speech.” Mr. Yates is “*more* than talking—almost hallooing” (182). “Nobody would attend as they ought” (165), we hear. The commotion has mounted to a crescendo, with everybody “being too much engaged in their own noise” (172), when Julia, aghast, announces Sir Thomas’s arrival, and the cacophony is abruptly hushed.

Tom is no listener, either. When Fanny begs to be excused acting, “Her entreaty had no effect on Tom; he only said again what he had said before” (146). That is about as damning a condemnation as the narrator can bestow. Those who talk without listening are part of the process that lays waste the human community.

One incident in which Tom discusses other people’s verbal practices has considerable reverberation in the rest of the novel. When Fanny is without a partner at the dance, instead of becoming her Mr. Knightley, Tom picks up a newspaper, and while glancing over it says languidly,

“If you want to dance, Fanny, I will stand up with you.”—[*Of course,*] With more than equal civility the offer was declined. (118)

But when his aunt presently asks him, “My dear Tom, . . . as you are not dancing, I dare say you will have no objection to joining us in a rubber [of whist], shall you?” (119), her request makes him snatch Fanny to the floor in short order. And he is full of wrath that his aunt should have asked him. “It raises my spleen more than any thing, to have the pretense of being asked, of being given a choice, and at the same time addressed in such a way as to oblige me to do the very thing” (120). He is fulminating against Mrs. Norris for doing exactly what he has just done to Fanny—pretending to consult her preference, without any intention of letting her have it.

The incident, so sharply developed, has some relevance beyond its immediate context. It is a process that is going on all through the book. Fanny is continually being consulted, and yet hardly ever allowed a real choice. Henry Crawford asks her to marry him, and won’t take no for an answer. When Sir Thomas advises her, we hear, “‘Advise’ was his word, but it was the advice of absolute power” (280). Edmund claims, “I want to consult. I want your opinion” (153). But does he listen to Fanny’s answer? No. The talkers and askers make a noise about needing permission, or advice, or approval. But paying attention to answers is what they aren’t good at.

If Tom, Sir Thomas, Mrs. Norris, and Henry Crawford all more or less talk *at* Fanny, and are reluctant to listen to her, what of her less garrulous suitor, Edmund?

It is Edmund, early in the novel, who sets the example of listening. Finding his little cousin, crushed and homesick, crying on the attic stairs, he

is “at great pains to . . . persuade her to speak openly.” Plenty of people have spoken *to* Fanny by now, and *at* her; but Edmund is unusual in persevering to get an answer, and in paying genuine attention to *her* life, *her* home. “Let us walk out in the park,” he urges her, “and you shall tell me all about your brothers and sisters” (15).

In Austen’s novels, which study characters in their relations with one another, speech is closely related with identity. Fanny silenced and ignored is in a sense Fanny annihilated, suspended, even in her own eyes. When Edmund makes her talk to him, “her countenance and a few artless words fully conveyed all their gratitude and delight, and her cousin began to find her an interesting object” (16). Self-articulation builds self. We know how large a difference Edmund’s attention makes in Fanny’s life at Mansfield Park. “From this day Fanny grew more comfortable” (17). It is as though by lending an ear, he has enabled her to create an identity. Now Fanny has a voice. She is *somebody*—however put-upon—and she has her own space—however confined—in the stately home of her uncle and cousins. Edmund’s continued attention once she is an adult similarly keeps her from being totally silenced and crushed. There is a private communion of two within the larger and more daunting community, and that keeps her alive, makes her “an interesting object.”

Edmund makes opportunities for Fanny to talk to others, to be heard, to extend her subjectivity among others. When Mary Crawford first gets wind of Fanny’s sailor brother, and asks a question, the still timid Fanny “would rather have had Edmund tell the story, but his determined silence obliged her to relate her brother’s situation” (60)—and so she begins to be an interesting subject for someone else. Edmund’s “determined silence” can achieve more than the smooth talk of the ready speakers.

Considering that Edmund is Fanny’s mentor, however, and that he has early “formed her mind and gained her affections” (64), he can be pretty consistently and pretty resoundingly wrong on many crucial issues. Fanny is better informed than Edmund on what is going on in Mansfield Park, because although they both pay attention, she is a lot *better* at paying attention than he is. This is one of the novels in which the hero has much more to learn from the heroine than the other way around.

Although Edmund is a better listener than most other characters in the novel, he doesn’t listen well enough. Edmund is as guilty as Tom of consulting Fanny, without really intending to take her views into account.

He seeks Fanny out when he is thinking about taking the role of Anhalt. “I want to consult. I want your opinion,” he says (153). She is quite clear that he is being “drawn in to do what you had resolved against, and what you are known to think will be disagreeable to my uncle.” But he still insists, “Give me your approbation” (155); and when she doesn’t he goes ahead as though he had it.

Similarly, he seeks a heart-to-heart talk with her about her refusal of Henry Crawford. But when she explains the grounds of her disapprobation of Henry’s character—his heartless flirtation with Julia and Maria,—Edmund is “scarcely hearing her to the end” (349). It raises the spleen more

than any thing, as Fanny might say after Tom, to have the pretense of being asked, without a real chance that your answer will count.

In his relation with Mary, Edmund also tries to proceed by what he considers reasonable argument. He diagnoses her talk as “lively”—his favourite adjective for Mary. But his lingering courtship is very much a matter of mere talk that achieves no progress. At the outset he finds this delightful. In the wood at Sotherton, where they argue about the distance they have walked, “He still reasoned with her, but . . . she would only smile and assert. The greatest degree of rational consistency could not have been more engaging, and they talked with mutual satisfaction” (96). By the time of the ball, Mary’s gay unreasonableness has palled somewhat: “They had talked—. . . he had reasoned—she had ridiculed—and they had parted at last with mutual vexation” (279). The novel has carefully plotted Edmund’s and Mary’s progress through “talk” from “mutual satisfaction” to “mutual vexation.” Their *talk* has never really achieved a meeting of minds.

The fact is that Edmund makes no progress with Mary because he doesn’t want to. Just as their talk goes nowhere, so does their courtship. Look at the difference between Henry’s wooing and Edmund’s! Henry has noticed Fanny, become interested, fallen in love, proposed, proclaimed his love, made formal application to her guardian and made social progress with her parents, all while Edmund is still gearing up to pop the question. And in fact he never does propose to Mary. Except for asking Mary for the first dance at the ball, telling *Fanny* about his love for Mary is as close as he gets to formal courtship. In this sense he is like Henry: for both, talking love is making it. As Henry achieves his lubricious thrills by going again and again through rehearsals with Maria in which both are playing roles, so Edmund apparently gets some sexual satisfaction out of telling one woman about his love for another, and conflating the pair he calls “the two dearest objects I have on earth” (264). Occasionally he even confuses them visually. “Your gown seems very pretty,” he compliments Fanny. “I like these glossy spots. Has not Miss Crawford a gown something the same?” (222). Change places, and handy-dandy, which is the lover, which is the cousin?

Although Edmund has often unburdened himself to Fanny about his love for Mary, to Mary herself he says nothing explicit. Her extended stay at Mansfield parsonage comes to an end, and she heads for London; his ordination is done, and the ball is over, and still he says nothing. When Fanny is in Portsmouth he proceeds to *write* to her about his love. He is not sure if Mary would accept him. “Were I refused [he writes], I must bear it; and till I am, I can never cease to try for her. This is the truth” (422). Well, *is* it? No. He has not actually tried for her yet, and in the event he never does. He goes on to debate whether to visit her again in London, or wait till she returns to Mansfield in a few months. Or shall he write a letter? “I think I shall certainly write,” he wavers (423). Even Fanny is exasperated, and exclaims, “There is no good in this delay . . . why is not it settled?” (424). By the time he is writing his next letter to Fanny, he hasn’t made much progress: “I had actually begun a letter” to Mary, he says; but now he has decided not to write after all. His new resolution is “When Tom is better, I shall go” (430). This

may be enough to convince Fanny of his resolution to propose, but it isn't enough to convince us.

When Mary's brother elopes in an adulterous union with Edmund's sister, does Edmund, like Mr. Darcy, bravely resolve that this family scandal need make no difference in their relation? On the contrary, he rather welcomes the excuse it provides for ending it. "Perhaps it was best for me; I had less to regret in sacrificing a friendship—feelings—hopes which must, at any rate, have been torn from me now" (458).

To a considerable extent, that is, Edmund's love for Mary Crawford is a merely verbal entity, a matter of talk that takes the place of action; of talk, moreover, that is directed not to the woman he thinks he loves but to the woman he thinks is only his confidante.

What brings him round to get things straight, and to recognize that Fanny is really the one he has been making love to all along? We are given a simple answer. "Being always with her, and always talking confidentially, . . . those soft light eyes could not be very long in obtaining pre-eminence" (470). As gratitude tips Henry Tilney into love, and lecturing Emma tips Mr. Knightley, so "always talking confidentially" is Edmund's straight route to enlightened love for Fanny.

Fanny is seriously deprived in talk. If self-expression is necessary sustenance, Fanny is starved, and but for Edmund would fade away. Mrs. Norris has been crucially to blame in this matter. From the outset she silences the little girl, "talking to her the whole way from Northampton," and insisting on "how much might depend on her acquitting herself well at first"; so that the timid and exhausted child is overwhelmed on her arrival, predetermined to be a failure, and to see herself as such. Mrs. Norris has nipped her in the bud; and it takes virtually the whole of the novel for Fanny to recover from that trauma. At fifteen she states it as a fact, "I can never be important to anyone" (26).

"Few young ladies of eighteen could be less called on to speak their opinion than Fanny," we hear, still early in the novel (48). Few heroines either. In the quantitative measures I made for this paper, it emerged that Fanny, though our central character and major focalizer, and on-stage for most of the duration of the novel, has fewer lines of dialogue than the hero, the anti-hero, and the anti-heroine. She is only a few lines ahead of Mrs. Norris, who is not even present for large tracts of the time.⁶

The fact that Fanny doesn't speak much allows her to specialise in listening. Let me remind you, through a quick run-by of quotations, of her heroism in listening. "Fanny . . . had been attentively listening" about the avenue at Sotherton (56). While others maintain only "the appearance of civilly listening" to Mrs. Rushworth, Fanny "attended with unaffected earnestness" (85). As the others debate the theatricals, she "looked on and listened, not unamused" (131). When Julia reacts jealously, Fanny is "a quiet auditor of the whole" (136). For the rehearsers she is "always a very courteous listener, and often the only listener at hand" (164). When Sir Thomas returns from Antigua, and his own daughters sit by and never ask a question, Fanny says, "I could listen to him for an hour together." Mary

Crawford at her harp is “happy to have a new listener, and a listener who seemed so much obliged, so full of wonder at the performance, and who shewed herself not wanting in taste” (207). “Let me talk to you,” says Edmund characteristically. “You are a kind, kind listener” (268).

Of course Fanny is shamelessly used by all these characters. Her role as listener is cognate with her role as general dogsbody. But it is also worth noting that Fanny *likes* to be useful. And she makes out of her listening not just a cover for passivity, nor even just pleasure for herself (it is “her favourite indulgence [to be] suffered to sit silent and unattended to” [223]). She makes listening creative. In a scene where everyone is talking, everyone vying for attention, Fanny’s capacity to listen becomes a saving grace: only she is able to *receive* the accumulating talk, and so lay it to rest. For full communication, a transmission must have a receptor. Transmissions not received become mere verbiage, noise, and the human community withers like a civilization sinking under its own waste. Fanny saves Mansfield Park from that fate.

As she herself was helped to an identity by finding a listener, someone who would pay attention, so she amply repays that debt by lending an ear to those who would be attenuated without it. When Henry Crawford takes to complimenting her, he recalls her attentiveness to “Poor Rushworth and his two-and-forty speeches!” He commends her kindness “in trying to make it possible for him to learn his part—in trying to give him a brain which nature has denied—to mix up an understanding for him out of the superfluity of your own!” (224-5). Henry exaggerates, as usual. But there is some truth in his perception. Fanny does assist people to be themselves, to act themselves out.

This is most evident during the theatricals, when she becomes the communal listener, audience, and prompter. The others collectively act themselves out for her. Even Julia, hurt and out of things, is “connected only by Fanny’s consciousness” (163). Edmund and Mary, particularly, can hardly relate to each other *except* through Fanny, as we see clearly in the scene in which they each seek her out in the East room to hear their parts. They both *need* Fanny, literally and figuratively, as prompter. They can’t conduct their make-believe courtship as Amelia and Anhalt without her. And that make-believe courtship brings them as close to each other as they ever get. Their tenderest moments are those that have Fanny at the centre. When as prompter she has “turned away exactly as he wanted help,” we can infer that Edmund needs the help *because* she has turned away. She is indispensable to their courtship process.

It is the same with the necklace and chain for William’s cross. When in delivering the chain Edmund discovers Mary has already given a necklace, he is thrown into “a reverie of fond reflection” (263); when Mary hears of *his* gift, she exclaims, “No other man would have thought of it. I honour him beyond expression” (274-5). When Fanny is not present, however, as at their trying encounter at the ball, they tend to fall out. Fanny’s quiet presence, her attention, is a necessary channel for their tender communication.

Fanny, of course, would be happy *not* to promote their courtship. But in the dynamics of this relation of cousins, Edmund needs to go through a pursuit of Mary, as Fanny needs to go through being pursued by Henry. These two other connections are what enable their relationship to evolve from the fraternal to the erotic.⁷ And let us hope that after each has experienced the courtship that is much more verbal flourish and hot air than reality, *this* love will amount to more than talk. Fanny might well sing with Eliza Doolittle (not that she ever *would!*) “Don’t *talk* of love—*show* me!”

Fanny has been a quiet, almost a silenced heroine. She has had silence thrust upon her; but she also chooses it. But she makes out of her disability an oasis of quiet attention for other people. Her silence is valued, often exploited. When Henry Crawford announces his coup in getting William his lieutenantancy, “Fanny could not speak, but he did not want her to speak” (298). Her silence is for him her major attraction. When Edmund has been quarrelling on the dance floor with Mary, he tells Fanny that for his dance with her he would like “‘the luxury of silence.’ Fanny would hardly even speak her agreement” (278).

Her silent attention is of course most creative for us readers. In the hurly-burly of the comings and goings, the sayings and doings of the other characters, she is the constant quiet presence that takes it all in, understands, and makes it all morally significant, aesthetically coherent. She is the indispensable receiver. Like Julia, we too are “connected only by Fanny’s consciousness.”

In distinction to the loud and assertive talkers of *Mansfield Park*, Fanny offers her saving silence, her creative attention; and the surrounding characters can be more themselves, more completed, for the space she allows them. But we know too that Fanny is growing and developing through the novel; becoming healed of Mrs. Norris’s crippling verbal abuse, learning not only to watch and listen, but to assess and ultimately to teach. Fanny’s most effective talking and most enduring influence, we are allowed to imagine, will be after the end of the book, when she is married to an enlightened Edmund, and mistress of the Parsonage in which she was once terrorised. But within the novel too we are given sufficient signs that she is on her way to achieving “a good proportion” of listening and talking. From believing she can never be important to anyone, she becomes Susan Price’s “oracle!” (418). When she returns from Portsmouth, even Lady Bertram has learned to value her and to extend her attention. Lady Bertram has always expected “to be listened to and borne with”; but now she is longing also to “hear the voice of kindness and sympathy in return” (449). Fanny at last is accorded a *voice* in *Mansfield Park*, not just by Edmund, but by Lady Bertram, who is always the last to catch on. That may be one small step for mankind, but it’s a giant leap for Fanny Price!

NOTES

- ¹ I use R. W. Chapman's edition of *The Novels of Jane Austen*, third edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1934, 1953 reprint). References appear in the text.
- ² Letter of February 4, 1813. *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- ³ Here I touch again on ground I developed in "The Secret Languages of *Emma*," *Persuasions* 13 (1991), 119-131.
- ⁴ Barbara K. Seeber makes this point in her interesting doctoral dissertation, "General Consent: A Study of Dialogism in Jane Austen" (Queen's University, 1995).
- ⁵ At one point Mary inadvertently reveals that she expects to marry Edmund and live in Northamptonshire, and is embarrassed; but in spite of the close relation between them, her brother doesn't notice (295). Similarly, he has not registered that Fanny has a brother in the navy of whom she is very fond until long after Mary has been master of the subject (232).
- ⁶ Our count on lines of speech and written communication per character in *Mansfield Park* goes like this. Most lines, Edmund (1256); runner-up, Mary Crawford (1116 lines); 3rd, Henry Crawford (860 lines); 4th, Fanny (582 lines); 5th, Mrs. Norris (565 lines). I am grateful to Ya-Ying Zhang for her assistance in this quantitative measure. We used Tony Tanner's Penguin edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), and any speech, no matter how short, counted as at least one line. We counted only what is recorded within quotation marks, and we included letters. Without the letters, the figures alter slightly, but the order does not change.
- ⁷ Although Edmund's prolonged confidences about his love for Mary are very painful to Fanny, there are clear indications that with some part of herself she recognizes his unburdening as a kind of courtship. As Henry Crawford notices, Fanny blooms in the process: she undergoes a "wonderful improvement," and—as the imagery of her "soft skin . . . so frequently tinged with a blush" suggests—she attains sexual maturity (229).