

Power Houses and Polite Fiction

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I would like to discuss *Mansfield Park* in terms of a novel of manners tradition. In doing so I do not want to focus on genre so much as to suggest that the novel of manners is a form of fiction whose concerns are at the center of nineteenth-century cultural debate. These are novels which are implicated in the “working out” of cultural norms as new patterns of class relationship are established. This is not a startling observation, perhaps, but what is of interest is the little-noticed pattern by means of which these novels advance their propositions.

Novels of manners convey a great deal of their meaning through the interplay of three, familiar—let us call them cultural icons or emblems. They could even be considered totems: or, as Webster has it, “objects serving as the emblem of a family or clan and often as a reminder of its ancestry.” These three are: the English country house, the code of manners, and the secret of sexuality. In all novels of manners, the three icons are woven together in ways which speak to readers of the historical moment. A reader’s understanding of how these three are configured, of how they interrelate, and especially of the meanings they bear reflect an awareness of an acquiescence to the novel’s projects concerning class membership, individual identity, and the prospective form polite society must take in a time of transformation.

These three icons appear in novels of manners across the century and beyond. Even though they are continually reinvested with new meanings for other times, their appearance, as an interconnected triad, remains remarkably consistent. And the fact that they remain meaningful for so long suggests that in English culture they are powerful emblems indeed.

Before turning to *Mansfield Park*, I want to spend a few moments looking briefly at each component of this triad. Then I will turn to our novel and suggest how it both exemplifies the novel of manners tradition as I am characterizing it, and how Jane Austen exceeds the expectations these icons might have raised for her readers.

The English country house is an architectural space which, as a real spatiality expresses group identity, from the lesser gentry to the nobility, country houses express a more or less unified field of value, and the value is power. English country houses, according to Mark Girouard, were “power houses—the houses of a ruling class.” As he puts it, “people did not live in country houses unless they either possessed power, or, by setting up in a country house, were making a bid to possess it” (Girouard 2). It was “a showplace for the display of authority” (Stone and Stone, 299). However, the country house as a fictional architectural space does not necessarily mean the same thing as its stone and mortar counterpart. The novel may reimagine power relationships, for example. And in fact, I would argue that in novels of manners the meaning of the country house is tied to a long-term merger of genteel and middle-class values.

The issue here is the history of social space, of how social spaces are conceived, constructed, and put to use. Henri Lefebvre defines “representations of space” as the ways in which a society represents social spaces to its members so as to affect social practice. That is to say, representations of space in fiction affect the way we understand real spaces and our places within them. The English country house in novels of manners participates in a kind of relational cultural knowledge, a knowledge which interacts with changes in the material world. This, I think, is Jane Austen’s aim: to change her readers’ understandings of the country house.

In novels of manners there is also a consistent interest in sexual secrets, especially those involving country houses, and in the way sexuality impinges on community relationships, self-realization, and designations of status. There are several kinds of sexual secrets in novels of manners, but two especially concern us here.

The first and most common is the illicit relationship between two people unauthorized to experience attraction or sexual activity together. Illicit sexual activity portrayed in this manner establishes the thresholds of acceptable behavior. There is also the “mystery” of individual sexual feeling which may pose difficulties of self-understanding for a person presently sexually unaware. This secret identifies sexuality as a primary component of one’s self-realization.

Our third cultural icon is the case of manners. Novels of manners present cases of manners which implicate readers in judgments of normative behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. I am indebted here to Joseph Wiesenfarth who argues that among other characteristic and definitive attributes of the novel of manners is the presentation of a “case,” or a set of specific problems posed to characters (and readers), the solution to which “allow[s] life to continue within an orderly society” (12). These novels construct juridical reviews of manners which lead us toward definitive judgments regarding propriety. The evaluations, in which characters and readers both participate, are neither arbitrary nor are they simply adjuncts to “real” issues. Defining standards of behavior, or manners, is the all important work of structuring realities.

Manners are so frequently regarded, especially today, as the artificial surfaces of society that it will be worthwhile to think about them in quite another way. Norbert Elias, writing in the 1930s, argues that manners are fundamental to changing social forms; they are crucial to what he calls the “civilizing process.” He maintains that social transformations in the west were accomplished by an increasing restraint of behavior, a concomitant “refinement” of manners, and a gradual extension of social controls down the status hierarchy—this following upon the centralization of state power and the formation of a differentiated, competitive elite class. He writes, “Social control and stratification . . . become structured around thresholds of behavior, or around manners” (*HM* 114-16).

In time, these patterns of social conduct or manners not only structure social relations but shape the psychology of the individual. External restraint is finally reproduced more or less smoothly within a person, through a self-restraint which may operate even against . . . conscious wishes” (*HM* 129).

Here, incidentally, formulated by Elias in 1939, is the substance of Foucault's theory of the "disciplinary society."

Elias writes, "Vigilant self-control and perpetual observation of others are among the elementary prerequisites for the preservation of one's social position" (*P&C* 274). And social position is the operative concept. As Girouard puts it in terms of nineteenth-century English society, the newly rich had to follow the rules, but what rules? "The elaborate code of behaviour devised by the Victorian upper classes was partly a defensive sieve or initiatory rite, designed to keep out the wrong sort of people. What to wear, when and how to address whom, the ritual of making morning calls and leaving cards—here were plenty of traps for the uninitiated, especially when most of the rules were unwritten" (268).

In fact, however, even before the Victorians the rules were written and were being rewritten in novels of manners, especially in Jane Austen's novels, since she, above all, was so often critical of the customs and conduct of polite society. While one must participate in her cases because of the powerful pull of the call to judgment, the final verdict is not always what we, much less polite society of her time, might expect.

I would like to turn now to *Mansfield Park* and discuss the interaction of the three icons in our focus text. This novel is not like *Emma* or *Pride and Prejudice*, which present images of two normative country houses, Donwell Abbey and Pemberley, intact repositories of values which the novels affirm. Rather, *Mansfield Park* presents us with a picture of a problematized great house. Even though Fanny Price continually affirms the moral status of Mansfield, it is clear that the novel finds this house adrift from its moral bearings. Unlike Donwell, whose architectural layout and moral status are what they have been since time-immemorial, Mansfield changes shape. In fact almost all of the houses in *Mansfield Park* experience or are threatened by physical change. Sotherton, Thornton Lacey, and Mansfield itself—not to mention the houses we only hear of, such as Everingham and Compton—at one time or another are associated with physical change. As Alistair Duckworth has shown, "improvement" is a theme of the novel, and this kind of change, as well as Mansfield's changes during the theater episode, are components of the novel's critical agenda. Donwell, by contrast, is resistant to change: its trees uncut, farms where they have always been, and its dinners held properly in the dining room, not out of doors.

Mansfield also fails at another primary function of country houses, as they are represented in fiction at least. It is not the normative site where relationships are harmonized, positive values promulgated, and suitable marriages brought into being, as is, say, Pemberley; it is more grand than hospitable, more imperious than accommodating, more authoritative than right.

When she first arrives at Mansfield, the "grandeur of the house" astonishes Fanny; she creeps about "in constant terror of something or other" (14, 15). To be sure, she is astonished by a dimension of architectural space, and social status, with which she is entirely unfamiliar. But even when she becomes acclimated to the space, the house seems only barely to accept her, and even

to reject or eject her. She is relegated to the attic and the east room (Wall 367n), nearly sent to Mrs. Norris's white house to live (24, 27), and finally dispatched to her family's home in Portsmouth because, according to Sir Thomas, "nine years in the abode of wealth and plenty" had "disordered her powers of comparing and judging" (369). As we know, the irony is that the "abode of wealth and plenty" has disordered the judgment of everyone *but* Fanny and she is being ejected from the house because she has judged rightly (Duckworth 76, 77): She cannot marry the morally unfit Henry Crawford. So she must go to Portsmouth. Fanny is removed from one space to another because she refuses marriage. She resists Sir Thomas's coercion no matter how veiled by duty and politeness and will not enter into a marriage relation with Henry Crawford. She has already judged his manners, his "nature, education, and habit" (327).

It is in Sir Thomas's room, the sacred patriarchal space so nearly violated by the sexual implications of the theatrical, that Fanny discovers to her shock that her uncle has left her alone with Crawford. Sir Thomas, we find, is himself complicit in altering the great house, in changing its function from a site where proper marriages come to pass to one where marriages are coerced and where rakes are provided access to its women.

Though she refuses Henry, he is relentless in pressing the "attack" on her heart—as he says: to "have the glory, as well as the felicity, of forcing her to love him" (326). Fanny has two difficulties responding to his attack: First, as she puts it, she "knew her own meaning, but was no judge of her own manner" which was "incurably gentle" and which "concealed the sternness of her purpose" (327). Second, she is in the room which represents the center of the house's power. Because her meeting with Crawford has been sanctioned by that power, she must put up with Henry's unwanted advances. She might, as she says, have "disdained him . . . in the grounds of Sotherton, or the theatre at Mansfield Park; but he approached her now with rights that demanded different treatment. She must be courteous, and she must . . . have a sensation of being honoured" (327).

In other words, the spatiality of the house participates in the barely hidden sexual attack to which Fanny is subjected. And although she knows her own mind, she cannot judge what manners might be effective in discouraging Crawford. As she experiences this distressing confluence of spatial power, secret sex, and questions of manners, she is reminded of two other sexualized locations: Sotherton and the theatre, where again we find crucial interactions of these three elements.

I do not want to take space to examine these episodes closely so perhaps just a word will do. We learn at Sotherton that there are foolish gentry whose improvements constitute a permissive and thoughtless management of the estate and of the relationships within it. In the domain of Mr. Rushworth, the two couples, Edmund and Mary and Henry and Maria, are left to engage in flirtation and illicit sexual experiment. They restlessly roam the wilderness and the park beyond the gates, while Fanny, exhausted by the subtext of their manners (McMaster 51, 54), remains seated on her bench, a fixed point in space amidst dangerously shifting conduct. Fanny, "feeling all this to be

wrong, could not help making an effort to prevent it" (99); and she tries to prevent Maria from tearing her dress on the spikes of what should be legitimate great-house authority.

During the theatrical episode, too, authoritative space is treated with disregard and rearranged to provide opportunity for sexual intrigue; we are invited to judge this episode as a dangerous circumstance for the house. The rooms are torn up for the theater and Sir Thomas's private space within the house is unsettled, an emblem of his children's *and* his own failings. Sir Thomas fails to realize the extent of the sexual secrecy and danger in his house, and moreover, does not recognize the failure of his own conduct.

Fanny has come to terms with another kind of space too—Portsmouth—in respect to which Mansfield looms large as a clean, orderly space. This is what Foucault refers to as a "heterotopia," the powerful, normative space whose order and cleanliness are distinct from but which constitute the standard for the more usual worldly, disordered spaces ("Of Other Spaces" 27).

Fanny's impression of Portsmouth is of disorder, noise, and confusion in her parental home. She was "almost stunned" by her encounter with it (382). She reflects that at "Mansfield, no sounds of contention, no raised voice, no abrupt bursts, no tread of violence was ever heard" (391-92). She may be wrong (Johnson, 116), but throughout, Fanny affirms the rightness of Mansfield in spite of its faults, which is precisely how one ought to react to the powerhouse, the heterotopia. Even Austen, critical of Mansfield throughout, eventually wants to reaffirm its status as the bearer of normative manners though only when thoroughly recreated as a new heterotopia.

The problem is that Mansfield is open to unregulated sexualities, its authority is based on inheritance and not principle, it marginalizes women and those who inhabit the borderland of the gentry, a zone with which Austen herself was all too familiar. So Fanny, the center of the novel's moral principle, a woman of declining family, is in the beginning of the novel, admitted to the potentially corrupt spaces of the country house. As sexual transgression occurs, Fanny becomes the point around which the manners of the house are renovated, averting disaster and enabling the continuance or perhaps renewal of tradition. But now, traditional principles are acknowledged and advanced by new groups in the social hierarchy. Fanny, a potentially redundant female of no standing, becomes the salvation of the powerful great house.

I have been highlighting architectural space and its interplay with manners and sexuality. If we shift our focus slightly, we can see these latter two emerge from the warp and weft of this fiction.

Novels of manners are driven by secrets of sex. One thinks, for example, of the hidden sexual relationship between Jane and Frank in *Emma*. Jane and Frank's relationship, which begins before the opening of the novel, represents a kind of pattern for many novels of manners: a pre-existent illicit sexuality which propels the narrative in occulted ways. In *Mansfield Park* we have something similar.

Henry and Mary Crawford have been raised by Admiral and Mrs. Crawford. The Admiral is a man of “vicious conduct” and thus example. With the death of Mrs. Crawford, Mary must leave because the Admiral has installed his mistress in the house. Henry cannot have Mary living in his country house because he has imbibed the lessons of the Admiral all too well and prefers his own freedom (41). Mary, therefore, goes to Mrs. Grant. With her comes Henry, the young man who would require “the address of a Frenchwoman” (42) to be enticed into marriage; Henry, has been “quite spoiled” by the “Admiral’s lessons,” as his sister says (43). The arrival of the Crawfords sets in motion a train of events which includes the day of dalliance at Sotherton, the theatrical episode, and finally the most egregiously illicit act of the novel, the elopement of Henry and Maria. This escapade brings the failings of the powerful great house to a crisis which can only be rectified by the principled conduct and loyalties of Fanny Price. In the case of Mansfield *vis a vis* Fanny Price, now she has become the standard-bearer of principle and conduct.

But Fanny is the product of the other pre-existing instance of illicit sexuality. Her mother married to “disoblige her family” (3) and “to save herself from useless remonstrance . . . never wrote to her family on the subject till actually married” (4). Presumably she and her Lieutenant of the Marines had eloped too. The breach between the Mansfield family and the Prices originates in this act, and is subsequently widened by the “natural result of the conduct of each party” (4). The houses, if you will, have no contact because their manners differ due to licit and illicit sexual alliances in the past.

The other kind of sexual narrative in *Mansfield Park* is the story of Fanny’s sexual development, understanding, and eventual fulfillment. Like Emma who discovers the deep, inner value of her identity through forms of sexual experimentation (Gross 25), eventually finding fulfillment with Mr. Knightley, Fanny Price too gradually arrives at, first, awareness, and then fulfillment. Edmund is first her protector, then unknowing object of her love, and finally her husband. Fanny’s desires, in other words, emerge from the secret realm of the self to fulfillment in the world.

This is the story of the value of the self. We see that Fanny’s desire is a deeply hidden secret, both from Edmund and, initially, from Fanny herself. And we see that it is an open and instructive tale about an individual, a woman, discovering desire, the deep-level value of the self and finding its place in the context of the world.

Secrets of sexuality, in addition to establishing thresholds of conduct, also posit this deeper realm of realization in order to inform our ideas about individuality. Transgressive sex generated out of self-interested desire is destructive. It is destructive to houses, to marriages, and to individuals, as we see in the repercussions of Admiral Crawford’s vicious example. On the other hand, sexuality which takes place within a context of love is constructive: it produces marriages and children, stabilizing the present generation and ensuring the next. By connecting the inner self at the level of sexual desire and love with a mutuality, a social world—represented by the country

house—and also with judgments about normative conduct—the cases of manners—the novel of manners places individual realization in a context of social values.

Austen's project is clarified further if we shift focus slightly to the case of manners. These cases implicate the reader in assessment and evaluation of characters' behavior. As each case of manners is developed, evidence is compiled which leads the reader to the text's wished-for final judgment. And these cases are clearly compelling; we have but to look at the care with which Fanny's case has been examined and debated. But the important thing to note is that even as we debate Fanny's case, we are acquiescing to the terms of the debate that Austen has set. If we debate the nature of propriety, we have granted that something called propriety exists; if we debate the political status of Fanny and the other women, we grant that women have political status; if we debate the case of Sir Thomas and his management of his house, we grant that he and his house may not represent norms and standards. And this is precisely Austen's strategy: to involve us in a debate whose terms she has set.

I do not want to add to all that has been said about Fanny's case, except to suggest that we are invited to share Austen's specific judgment: without Fanny, Mansfield would be far less than it is at the end of the novel; in fact, she and her siblings are the future of the great house. Their interaction with Mansfield signifies a merger of values and a reform of a tradition such that once again, though in altered form, the great house may constitute a viable standard.

In *Mansfield Park* the interplay of powerhouses, sexual secrets, and judgments of conduct eventuate in a picture of a new society. Austen subjects to harsh scrutiny the failings of a gentry too long accustomed to inherited authority. Their failures threaten social stability, especially in a period of greater pressure for power and for redistribution of wealth. But Fanny and her siblings hold out hope for Mansfield. In social terms, this hope is presented as a merger of the landed gentry with principled members of the middle classes. In terms of gender it is the acknowledgment of women's abilities and intelligence. In individual terms, it is the merger, by non-mercenary marriage, of mutually loving, sexually attracted people.

Austen's concern, in other words, is for the form of society in a time of transformation. She sees value in the traditions of the gentry insofar as they provide stability, and so she is willing, at least in this novel, to reconstitute the great house. But she also sees legitimacy in the claim of the upper middle-classes who might represent the principles and manners now abandoned by "polite society." And, she sees the necessity of granting women space in a renovated country-house system. Her solution is a ruling class more open to and more tolerant of other classes, a less exclusive, less patriarchal gentry, one concerned more about right than authority. The terms in which she has set out her project are those of all novels of manners, powerhouses, secret sex, and cases of conduct. One might argue, in fact, that by the power of her example, Austen has set both the terms and the agenda for novels of manners henceforth. These three icons, reminders of ancestry,

carry powerful messages about value. From Jane Austen to Anthony Trollope to Henry James, and beyond, the novel of manners envisions society in these terms, however redefined, problematized, or ironized. In the nineteenth century these three terms are employed to investigate the long-term problem of social dominance. The question is, what will become of the gentry and its way of life, or alternatively, what values will be affirmed by an increasingly powerful and wealthy rising class? Austen's novels of manners extend a system of values to the rising class at the same time that they improve the values of the classes above them. In one way or another, all novels of manners are engaged in this project. In them, architectural space, sexual secrets, and cases of manners are configured in ways that speak clearly of the values of the polite classes, and, depending on the writer, of the ways in which values must be reformed if those classes are to adapt to changing times . . . and to survive.

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