



Jane Austen, Frances  
Sheridan, and the Ha-Ha: A  
New Affiliation for *Mansfield  
Park*

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IT'S THE FLIGHTY who fall in Austen's fiction: Marianne Dashwood, Tom Bertram, Louisa Musgrove. All headstrong and thoughtless, for each, falling marks some morally-inflected failing followed, in the end, by sobering recovery. Tom Bertram's literal fall in *Mansfield Park* is soon followed by his sister's metaphorical one: news of Maria's adultery aggravates his condition, but he survives and ultimately, having "learnt to think," is "the better for ever for his illness" (534). Maria, on the other hand, can have neither social nor narrative rescue. She is too culpable to be allowed a chastening tumble, such as Tom's, from which she can learn and for which she might be thankful.

But the moral fall is signaled by the possibility of an actual one. At Sotherton, Fanny urgently cries out the possible dangers, as Henry Crawford proposes to help Maria around the edge of the gate rather than waiting for Rushworth to return with the key: "'You will hurt yourself, Miss Bertram,' she cried, 'you will certainly hurt yourself against those spikes—you will tear your gown—you will be in danger of slipping into the ha-ha. You had better not go'" (116). Maria goes, nevertheless, with Henry, as she will later fly from Rushworth when he is her husband, hurting herself irrevocably. But it is Maria herself who is alert to the ha-ha's representative potential: she feels in it and in the iron gate between the wood and the park at Sotherton the constraints of her forthcoming marriage, prompting her startling allusion to Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*: "'But unluckily that iron gate, that ha-ha, give me a feeling of restraint and hardship. I cannot get out, as the starling said'"



Launds (*ha-ha in foreground*), by Frederick Landseer Griggs (1928). © Trustees of the British Museum.

(115-16). The ha-ha holds rich figurative significance in *Mansfield Park*. The purpose of a ha-ha within a landscape was to give the impression of connectedness while enforcing, invisibly, exclusion. While offering an increase in scale, in perspective, and also in one's sense of prosperity (as marriage to Rushworth would give Maria), it also demarcates and excludes. Maria's affair with Henry is cultivated, in London, by contrast, "without any restraint" (520).

Dorothy McMillan has recently suggested that the ha-ha not only has figurative significance for Maria and her relationships but that it also tells us something about the positioning of Fanny within the Bertram household. The sinking of a fence meant that, for the viewer looking out across a stretch of land, boundaries—of separation and difference, of belonging and exclusion—would be invisible but nonetheless there. Horace Walpole in *Modern Gardening* described William Kent as having "extended the perspective by delusive comparison" (qtd. in McMillan 5). Critics of the ha-ha disliked the illusions of proprietorship that it created as it merged that which was outside with that which was within. Humphry Repton wrote of the confusions of the ha-ha, "[I]t cannot surely be disputed, that some fence should actually exist between a garden

and a pasture; for if it is invisible, we must either suppose cattle to be admitted into a garden, or flowers planted in a field; both equally absurd" (qtd. in McMillan 7). While Fanny Price is supposedly included in the Mansfield household, her separateness from the family is nevertheless reinforced; full absorption into the Bertram family, according to Mrs. Norris and Sir Thomas at least, would be absurd.

While Sir Thomas declares himself convinced by Mrs. Norris's argument that they should bring Fanny Price to Mansfield Park, he is concerned nevertheless that Fanny must know that she is not equal to her cousins: "'There will be some difficulty in our way, Mrs. Norris,' observed Sir Thomas, 'as to the distinction proper to be made between the girls as they grow up; . . . they cannot be equals. Their rank, fortune, rights, and expectations, will always be different. It is a point of great delicacy, and you must assist us in our endeavours to choose exactly the right line of conduct'" (11-12; McMillan 12). The comparison of Fanny to the Bertram children is, therefore, a "delusive" one. While living within the environs of Mansfield, she is nonetheless distinguishable by means of an invisible social "line" as an outsider. But it is Fanny's separateness (in terms of kinship) that makes her a legitimate marriage prospect for Edmund, and the possibility of her full incorporation into Mansfield, as his wife, constitutes the novel's plot. It is the resolution of "'[s]uch half and half doings'" (as Mary Crawford describes the uncertainty about whether a young woman is "out" or "not out") that generates narrative interest (59).

McMillan points to some ha-has that appear in fiction before Jane Austen's (9-11). Among these, crucially, considering Austen's reported admiration of the work, is a ha-ha in *Sir Charles Grandison*, conceived in terms of human analogy; this ha-ha allows a view of "the gardens and the lawns from the windows of this spacious house to be as boundless as the mind of the owner, and as free and open as his countenance" (McMillan 9). In Volume III of Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1761), Trim and Bridget fall into the "fosse" (McMillan 10) with the possibility of a broken limb and with bawdy implications. There is certainly consonance between Fanny's "'you will be in danger of slipping into the ha-ha'" following Maria's allusion to Sterne's caged starling and Sterne's Trim and Bridget, who indeed "unfortunately slip'd in" (171).

But Austen also evokes another novelistic tumble into a ha-ha, which is the subject of what follows. In the first volume of Frances Sheridan's *Conclusion of the Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, the dangers of falling into a ha-ha,

“the ground being slippery,” are made explicit in terms of a moral fall. Orlando Falkland’s slipping into the ha-ha issues in the novel’s plot and its principal moral dilemmas. In addition, Sheridan’s use of the ha-ha to suggest complex kinship structures strongly reinforces McMillan’s argument regarding the ha-ha in *Mansfield Park*. While making literal the social and moral fall of a principal protagonist (Orlando Falkland/Maria Bertram), in Sheridan’s novel too the ha-ha represents, quite clearly, an illusory familial connectedness at the expense of more straightforward amatory attachments (Orlando/Cecilia; Fanny/Edmund).



Sheridan’s original *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* was published in 1761 and the *Conclusion* posthumously in 1767. Sheridan’s work was still being celebrated when Austen was writing, for example, in 1810 when Anna Barbauld described in the introduction to her fifty-volume *British Novelists* how “[m]any tears have been shed” (405) over the fate of Sheridan’s protagonist. The *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* tells of Sidney’s love for (the first) Orlando Falkland. When it is discovered that he has a child by a previous liaison, she refuses to marry him and instead marries Mr. Arnold. The *Conclusion of the Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* narrates the fortunes of the next generation: Sidney has taken Falkland’s boy, the young Orlando, into her home, following the death of his father, and brought him up with her own two daughters, Dolly, the elder, who is reserved and stoical, and the lively Cecilia (rather more akin, in this respect, to the Dashwood than to the Bertram sisters).

Early in the novel, Dolly writes to her mother with some serious news about Orlando. He has fallen into the ha-ha after being encouraged to leap over it by Sir Edward Audley, whose sister is Dolly’s friend:

Mr. Falkland and he were in the garden together, and Sir Edward (unlucky creature!) proposed leaping from the haha at the end of the terrace into the meadow. Miss Audley and I were looking at them from my dressing-room window. Sir Edward took his leap first, and came on his feet at the other side. Orlando followed him; we saw him fall, and that even with the assistance of his companion he seemed not able to rise. . . . Sir Edward told us that the ground being slippery (for we have had a good deal of rain lately) had occasioned him to miss his step, and having leaped just on the edge of the steep, he had tumbled down and dislocated his shoulder. (4:52)

The ditch being full of water, Orlando catches a fever that results in Dolly's inadvertent, anxious disclosure to Miss Audley of her love for the man she has been made to call "brother" (4:20). That the love she feels for him is more amorous than amicable is signaled in the hesitation that Miss Audley gives her transcription: "We have been brought up together, said she (her voice faltering as if in an ague-fit) I have been taught——to love him from my infancy" (4:59).

Orlando, through the manipulations of Edward Audley, declares his love for Dolly though he is really in love with Cecilia; Orlando and Cecilia too have emotionally strayed beyond the kinship structure that Sidney sought to establish. Eventually, Orlando deserts Dolly for Cecilia, and this prospective marriage is accepted, reluctantly, by Sidney and her more socially-ambitious brother, Sir George. Things get worse for Dolly: abandoned and despairing, she is abducted by Audley, and though she escapes, she loses her mind. Nor do the others prosper: Orlando loses Cecilia when she discovers his betrayal of her sister, and he kills Edward in a duel when he learns of his friend's full culpability. Sidney ultimately forgives Orlando shortly before she dies, and Orlando describes to her "who had been more than a mother to him" the "gulph" into which Edward led him: "yet I cannot help observing, that . . . the unfortunate man, whose life I have to answer for, was the primary cause of my departure from right, and led me as it were step by step to the gulph in which I am now swallowed up" (5:268). In doing so, he evokes his early attempt to jump the ha-ha: "Sir Edward took his leap first, . . . Orlando followed him; we saw him fall."

Inger Sigrun Brodey has read the ha-ha in *Mansfield Park* in terms of an ambivalence regarding authority: the ha-ha acts, on the one hand, as a form of authority that relies on external constraint—"restriction that is imposed externally," against which the young inhabitants of Mansfield rebel—but also more desirably in "the authority that is felt in more subtle ways, in the form of an internal conscience or sense of delicacy" (93), which Fanny possesses. Orlando is a sympathetic character—he cannot leap across restraints as easily as Edward Audley—but he is weak, shown repeatedly to lack a guiding sense of moral correctness. Orlando has inadequate principles to resist the manipulations of Audley. The ha-ha that is part of Sidney's garden—her domestic terrain—marks out, territorially and in terms of kinship, belonging and not-belonging. Orlando's suggestibility in attempting to leap across the ha-ha into the meadow to reach Audley determines him as fatally in-between, as he is the child of a noble, exemplary father and a vicious mother. He clearly falls betwixt one thing and another familiarly (being both brother and outsider) but

also morally (falling between the virtuous Arnolds and the reprehensible Edward Audley).

The literal and moral fall of Orlando Falkland is caused by the active influence of the Audley siblings, “this intriguing brother and sister” (4:143); as Edmund says of the Crawfords, Orlando is “[e]qually in brother and sister deceived” (*MP* 531). The seemingly charming Miss Audley is revealed early on to the reader, by means of her letters to Edward, as morally disreputable. Miss Audley, like Mary Crawford, receives greater narrative leniency than her disgraced brother: “in proportion as she had been intoxicated by vanity, was she now abased by despondence” (5:308). Her experiences, “probably for the first time in her life, made her reflect seriously on her own faulty conduct” (5:307). Like Mary, the failures of strong family example are emphasized as the cause of her dissipated mind.

Sidney foresees no danger in bringing up Orlando alongside her two wealthy daughters, for whom the larger family has considerable matrimonial ambitions. She defends her position in words strikingly similar to Mrs. Norris’s in *Mansfield Park*:

To say the truth, I believe it seldom happens that persons brought up together from childhood, conceive a passion for each other. The eyes thro’ which the hearts of most young people are reached, are first struck by novelty; and persons educated together almost from infancy, not having this advantage with regard to each other, by the time they come to an age susceptible of love, would much sooner be caught by an object less amiable than that to which they have been accustomed, merely because it was new. (4:20-21)

Similarly, it is resolved at Mansfield that Fanny would be brought up with the Bertram children “like brothers and sisters,” and because of this proximity, according to Mrs. Norris, it would be impossible that one of the boys would fall in love with her:

“You are thinking of your sons—but do not you know that of all things upon earth *that* is the least likely to happen; brought up, as they would be, always together like brothers and sisters? It is morally impossible. I never knew an instance of it. It is, in fact, the only sure way of providing against the connection. Suppose her a pretty girl, and seen by Tom or Edmund for the first time seven years hence, and I dare say there would be mischief. The very idea of her having been suffered to grow up at a distance from us all in poverty and neglect, would be enough to make either of the dear

sweet-tempered boys in love with her. But breed her up with them from this time, and suppose her even to have the beauty of an angel, and she will never be more to either than a sister.” (7)

Mrs. Norris’s words are to a great extent borne out by the plot, as Edmund falls for a very “pretty girl,” Mary Crawford, a new arrival in the Mansfield parsonage, about seven years after Fanny has joined the household.

Like Mrs. Norris, Sidney emphasizes the importance of “novelty” as a condition for love, and therefore the lack of amorous susceptibility between those brought up together as siblings. Later, Sidney’s friend Cecilia B—asks her to consider “what if it should turn out that the affection which you encouraged between them and Falkland in their childhood, should with regard to this poor young creature [in this case, her daughter Cecilia] have stepped beyond the bounds which your maternal care would have prescribed?” (4:283). Orlando has indeed stepped beyond those bounds, trying to reach beyond the ha-ha that figures domestic restraint. The novel ends with the re-establishment of the purported sibling relationships: Orlando once again becomes considered “as a brother” (5:315). Right to the end, however, there is uncertainty regarding his identity as brother or lover, as he proposes once more to Dolly with sincerity of feeling and inherited wealth. She refuses him for a single life.

There is, according to McMillan, an undecidability about Fanny’s situation throughout *Mansfield Park*, such that even in the last chapter we entertain the possibility of her having an alternative life outside the purview of Mansfield: “Would [Henry] have persevered, and uprightly, Fanny must have been his reward—and a reward very voluntarily bestowed” (540; McMillan 15). To live at Mansfield, when really only a poor relation from Portsmouth, provides Fanny with social advancement and pleasure, but it also establishes “restraint and hardship” (as Maria says of the ha-ha) because Fanny is affiliated to Edmund as a sibling while her emotions belie that purported relationship. However, Fanny’s feelings of “restraint” are lifted at the end of the novel (548), though in a very different manner to Maria’s. The Fanny-Edmund love plot eventually concludes with the invisible barrier between them successfully negotiated and the couple established “within the view and patronage of Mansfield Park” (548). For Maria and Henry, however, the ha-ha is a precipice that suggests their fall and ultimate exclusion; Maria’s transgression of legitimate familial constructions results in her exile outside of Mansfield “in another country—remote and private” (538).

Both the *Conclusion of the Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* and *Mansfield Park* have plots initiated by the incorporation of a needy child into a wealthy

household, and in both the child establishes a romantic endogamous attachment within the home. Both, too, display the symbolic potential of the ha-ha as a place of transgression and fall. In the *Conclusion* Orlando's fall into the ha-ha sabotages a potentially successful, though initially socially-inauspicious, marriage to Cecilia. Fanny, by contrast, though equally identified as a threat to family security in terms of her negligible marriage potential, sees off exogamous threats to her love for Edmund. She sits by the ha-ha patiently, warns others against "slipping," and, when they have fallen, is rewarded by being able to relinquish the delusive connection of "sister."

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