

A Study of Jane Austen
-Fanny's Moral Attitude in *Mansfield Park*-

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I. Introduction

Nineteenth-century English realism is the tradition founded by Jane Austen, by virtue of her steady grasp of human imperfection touched occasionally by love. Recent critics have more thoughtfully scrutinized her powers, first of all, and her rational intellectual genius has attracted most analytical attention.

Mansfield Park is one of the Austen novels which take its title from a house. The book shows a steady, serious concern with the duties of a parish priest, and "represents established tradition including a sense of responsibility".⁽¹⁾ As "the work of Jane Austen's maturity"⁽²⁾ Austen is clearly organizing this novel on different principles from her others, indicating a much wider range, and a power to handle a good many more different kinds of topic. *Mansfield Park* is, after *Clarissa*, "the first of the great English novels to show how the life of the individual is created by the action on the open self of the social grounds—and their representative individuals—which make up its world",⁽³⁾ and offers "a vision of reality which is unprecedented in English fiction, but which becomes the dominant note of the nineteenth-century novel".⁽⁴⁾

Jane Austen clearly regarded *Mansfield Park* as something special in her work. The subdued tone and dignity of this work which distinguished it from Miss Austen's other novels are anticipated in a letter she wrote to her sister Cassandra regarding its predecessor, *Pride and Prejudice*: "The work is rather too light and bright and sparkling; it wants a shade;

(1) Christopher Gillie, *A Preface of Jane Austen* (Essex: Longman Group, 1974), p. 82.

(2) W.A. Craik, *Jane Austen* (London: Methuen Inc., 1979), p. 91.

(3) Avron Fleishman, *A Reading of Mansfield Park* (London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), p. 74.

(4) *Ibid.*, p. 79.

it wants to be stretched out here and there with a long chapter of sense, if it could be had."⁽⁵⁾ The novel is designed to study the relation of her morality to her total personality, and her deepest explorations of human heart and head. In this work Jane Austen expresses the problem of maintaining the moral values, individual and social, which traditional wisdom and the enlighten individual conscience validate, against the pressure of the looser values of the world at large. And Miss Austen also has an interest in the education upbringing of ladies in the light of contemporary educational philosophy. As a development novel Jane Austen herself shows attention to the problem of feminine accomplishments.

The aim of this thesis is to present the features of feminine education in eighteenth-century England, and the moral and social principles the author upholds through Fanny Price as the supreme virtues. As a whole it is designed to vindicate Fanny Price and the values for which she stands.

II. The Historical Background

We should remind ourselves, as Mrs. Leaves has argued, that Jane Austen's writings is to be seen to appear at a crucial point in the transition of English society to the modern age: at the point when the fear that the French Revolution would spread to England caused a cultural reaction which gave its peculiarly conservative cast to much of English Romanticism. In general it was a period of great stability just about to give way to a time of unimagined changes. Most of the population were involved in rural and agricultural work. Regency London boomed and became a great centre of fashion. While England in 1813 was still a land of country town and villages, there was "a division into two main groups: the nobility, or titled aristocracy; and the lesser country gentry, the baronets, knights and squires."⁽⁶⁾

The gentry in England had taken their Christian religion for granted. In most Austen novels clergymen take up their posts, as their assured position in society. But, by the time of the century, there was a new Evangelical Movement which the author was inclined to take seriously, and this effect set *Mansfield Park* the sobriety mood. The renewal of moral concern about social life reflected the worldly motives of Evangelicalism. *Mansfield Park* may be read as a dramatic record of the gentry's effort to work out a more vigorous ideology, to modifying its traditional way of life in response to the changed political and economic circumstances.

Surely Jane Austen parallels the Evangelicals' effort to save England's ruling class from the erosion of its religion bulwarks and the politically dangerous growth of the skeptical doctrines of the Enlightenment.⁽⁷⁾ She was at the same time very aware of a whole range of new energies and impulses, new ideas and powers, which were changed or about to change

(5) Jane Austen, *Jane Austen's Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 299.

(6) Valerie Grosvenor Myer, *Jane Austen* (London: Blackie & Son, 1980), p. 23.

(7) Avron Fleishman, *A Reading of Mansfield Park* (London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), p. 23.

to make Jane Austen's world seem as remote as the Elizabethan Age. She was living in a diminishing enclave of traditional rural stability just prior to a period of convulsive, uncontrollable change; and *Mansfield Park* is a novel about rest and restless stability and change—the moving and the immovable.⁽⁸⁾

Mansfield Park is generally assumed to be a defense, even a celebration, of the gentry's way of life, mostly it mirrors conditions of the time. Society may be defined for Jane Austen as a system of independence, but Jane Austen writes little about the aristocracy and almost nothing about the bourgeoisie in their struggle for supremacy in the age of the industrial revolutions. She holds, on the contrary, a unique place in the history of the social novel by speaking to and for the gentry as it was affected by those revolutions. She is trying to discover subtle readjustments in the daily life of her own class. The attitude toward traditional rural life was important in her. As D.W. Harding has well described Jane Austen's relation to her society, "Austen's object is not missionary; it is the more desperate one of merely finding some mode of existence for her critical attitude."⁽⁹⁾

However, Jane Austen had much interest in female education. Culture of the mind, for eighteenth-century moralists, meant cultivation of the habits of reflection and self-discipline in order that the passions should be subdued by reason. Female education, courtship, and moral conduct had been treated in the light of practical Christianity, but Jane Austen concerned the meaning and validity of decorum in her moral attitude, which operates on different levels of value in her novels. At least in good people, good manners are only the surface expression of fundamental virtues, self-knowledge, self-discipline, unselfish regard for others, a conscious, sincere effort to judge, feel, and act rightly in accordance with the traditional standards set by religion and by the experience wisdom of humanity.⁽¹⁰⁾

III. The Female Education

A number of people in Jane Austen's days are interested in the education of women dominated by Hannah More, Elizabeth Hamilton, Maria Edgeworth, and the other woman writers. Among these eminent education writers then in vogue, Jane Austen appears to have been acquainted with Elizabeth Hamilton, the respectable writer mentioned by her letter to Cassandra. Mrs. Hamilton emphasized the importance of extending the benefits of education to the lower orders of society and the cultivation of faculties of perception, observation, and taste in preference to memory.⁽¹¹⁾ In the realm of female education, the plea for more practical, useful, natural education took the form of an attack on the acquisition of "accomplishments" as the chief end of a woman's upbringing. Education writers were criticizing the kind of education which was designed to provide a young Miss Bingley

(8) Tony Tanner, "Jane Austen and the Quiet Thing" in *Critical Essays on Jane Austen*, ed. B.C. Southan (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 139.

(9) Fleishman, op. cit., p. 40.

(10) Douglas Bush, *Jane Austen* (New York Macmillan Publishing Co., 1975), p. 119.

(11) Robert A. Colby, *Fiction with A Purpose* p. 73.

in *Pride and Prejudice* with a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and so on, “the learned rubbish”⁽¹²⁾ what Locke calls. The inner woman was being neglected. Mothers and teachers, instead of concentrating on externals, should attempt to cultivate the hearts and understandings of their charges.

It was an odd coincidence that *Mansfield Park* and Maria Edgeworth's *Patronage* appeared in the same year, 1814. The inevitable ideas on female education filtered down into the fiction of the period since Maria Edgeworth, Hannah More, and Jane West. The great uses of study to a woman, according to Miss More, are to enable her to regulate her own mind, and to be instrumental to the good of others. She warns against the “dangers arising from an excessive cultivation of arts,” at the expense of more substantial acquirements. She outlines a program of education aimed at teaching a young lady to think and feel as well as at cultivating the social grace. Learning, to More, becomes an exercise of the mind which to strengthen the judgement, the principles, and the feelings.⁽¹³⁾

Jane Austen shares these values of Hannah More, which underline the picture of Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*. Miss Austen stresses the great importance of innate ability over what the age called accomplishments, and also believes, along many educator of her time, in the value of exemplary teaching. It is noticeable that *Mansfield Park* with a library is a place where *Quarterly Reviews* and other literary periodicals are lying around. Jane Austen implies value judgements though she is not very explicit about the curriculum. Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* is encouraged to cultivate her active faculties, blending the intellectual and moral powers. Fanny takes all the opportunities of cultural development *Mansfield Park* offers her. Essentially, the author applies the moral ideals of the Evangelical ladies to a real and imperfect world which she was much aware of.

However Jane Austen did not intend Fanny to be “the static picture of perfection.”⁽¹⁴⁾ Fanny lacks her cousins' polish, but she possesses “delicacy of taste, of mind, of feeling” (p.81). But Jane Austen intended Fanny to be seen as a character who grew painfully into self-knowledge in the course of *Mansfield Park*. Fanny alone gains the full self-knowledge and integrity born of almost unflinching self-discipline through the years of experience and much lonely reflection. Fanny, who has her faculties of observation and perception, becomes the first young person who learns enough of the world to win through to success by moral effort. Moral effort is in her in itself an education process, and she is the first English heroine we can observe in the process of coming to know the moral world, which she is conscious as a moral debate.

Fanny never becomes the accomplished woman. She displays at an early age “a fondness for reading, which properly directed, must be an education in itself” (p.22), but mostly she displays “the thinking mind” that education writers were praising as the sign of a cultivated intellect. It is Fanny, of course, who best supports the theory of education which

(12) Valerie Grosvenor Myer, *Jane Austen* (London & Son, 1980), p. 95.

(13) Kenneth L. Moler, *Jane Austen's Art of Allusion* (London: Lindo, 1978), p. 114.

(14) *Ibid.*, p. 110.

is being advanced in this novel. She has suffered the most from "early hardship and discipline, and the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure" (p.473); and she turns out to be the ideal woman, wife, and daughter.

The theme of education recurs so insistently in *Mansfield Park* that at least the principle of the thematic development of the novel could be discovered. In a sense, "this novel can be said to be about education, but if so, what it reveals is the failure of education as an effective determinant of character."⁽¹⁵⁾ This failure could be seen in the manner that Sir Thomas maintained with his children, and it is not surprising that three of the four children turned out badly. Sir Thomas had given them the excessive indulgence and flattery of Mrs. Norris. Eventually Jane Austen lets Sir Thomas come to realize that the education he gave his children was inadequate:

"He feared that principle, active principle, had been wanting, that they had never been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers, by the sense of duty which can alone suffice.... He had meant him to be good, but his cares had been directed to the understanding and manners, not the disposition; and of the necessity of self-denial and humility, he feared they had never heard from any lips that could profit them." (p.463)

It was one of the ironies of well-to-do society in the last decades of the eighteenth-century and the beginning of the nineteenth that, having taken pride in teaching their daughters such leisure arts as piano-playing and singing at a time when it was no longer economically necessary for them to spend so much on domestic chores, they should then have to warn young women against showing off unduly in company.⁽¹⁶⁾ In broad sense, *Mansfield Park* shows the central and comprehensive theme in feminine education and the religious, moral and social environment.

IV. Fanny's Moral Attitude

Fleishman has warned us that "sooner or later who seeks to defend Fanny Price against the dyspeptic rage of her critics tends to claim for her a higher moral level than the other characters in the novel".⁽¹⁷⁾ And he defines the attackers as "committed to a morality of vitality and freedom" while the defenders assert "religion, duty and restraint". This view reminds us that many of Fanny's qualities are not given us for admiration, and that we need not admire duty and restraint as against vitality and freedom. However, Fanny Price is a high moral figure though she is a flawed, humble and self-deceptive character who has obvious shortcomings.

Mansfield Park is a development story of Fanny Price, who is "a frail spirit fighting the battle of life with weapon inadequate to cope with the society in which she exists"⁽¹⁸⁾ Also

(15) Robert Alan Donovan, *The Shaping Vision* (New York: Cornell Univ., 1966), p. 169.

(16) Eva Figes, *Sex and Subterfuge* (London: Macmillan Press, 1982), p. 94.

(17) Avron Fleishman, *A Reading of Mansfield Park* (London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), p. 43.

(18) Susan Morgan, *In The Meantime* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 155

it can be said that it is a likely variation of Jane Austen's concern with perception as involvement. Fanny is a girl, who is a creature less furnished, and she is overtly and consciously virtuous on a moral level. But without natural gift, without major revelations, she grows up and changes the shape and atmosphere of Mansfield Park, which lacks a heart and centre.

The moral seriousness of *Mansfield Park* has been attributed to a religious change in the author, an inclination to Evangelicalism. Jane Austen knew that "virtue was a hard affair and morality might involve renunciation, sacrifice, and solitary anguish."⁽¹⁹⁾ Life was that-humiliation, renunciation, and self-limiting. Jane had "a firm grasp of the paradox that the self may destroy the self by the very energies that define its being, that the self may be preserved by the negation of its own energies."⁽²⁰⁾ It is Fanny who perceives the pain and labour involved in maintaining true values in a corrosive world of dangerous energies and selfish power. She suffers in her stillness.

Fanny is the child who inherits the future and justifies the sufferings of the past.⁽²¹⁾ Like most of the Austen heroines, Fanny is uprooted from familiar surroundings and has to work out her own salvation in another world. Just she is being prepared for a Christian life, and she is remarkable for a reliable judgement in a very young person. She is timid, fearful, shy, enduring and dependent, but she is a reliable guide through the difficult shifts of emphasis and the changing events of the story. She is used as means by which we can judge the true value and see how important other characters will be in the novel. She is a convenient moral observer who is a constant point of reference. She stands as a slightly tarnished golden mean between the extremes of self-hood of extinction of feeling and self-hood entirely created by feeling.⁽²²⁾

Fanny's difficulties are in her personality and in the complexity of experience. She is presented "as an inextricable knot of moral idealism and self-protective egoism. She is like *Mansfield Park* itself in her stuffiness and mediocrity."⁽²³⁾ She is a means of our coming to know and evaluate the other characters. Therefore Fanny is the measure of human existence in *Mansfield Park*. Here we have "one of the first instances of the nineteenth-century concern for the nature of self-hood, defined here by the precarious form in which the characters submerge, disguise, or express their deepest impulses."⁽²⁴⁾

However more important, Fanny is in a way the supreme consciousness of the society she moves in. Though she is marked by natural syness, Jane Austen means it not a false

(19) Tonny Tanner, "Jane Austen and the Quiet Thing" in *Critical Essays on Jane Austen*, ed. B.C. Southam (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 158.

(20) Loc. cit.

(21) Joseph Wiesenfarth, "Austen and Apollo" in *Jane Austen Today*, ed. Joel Weinsheimer (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1975), p. 49.

(22) Avron Fleishman, *A Reading of Mansfield Park* (London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), p. 50.

(23) Ibid., p. 78.

(24) Ibid., p. 47.

modesty but a true unassertive reticence of soul. "Though Fanny prefers custom and habit to novelty and innovation, her resolute immobility is a gesture of resistance against the corrosions of unfettered impulse and change. She stands for the difficulty of delicate right thinking in a world of inadequate perception and subtly corrupted instincts. Her toils and her triumphs are all mental and moral."⁽²⁵⁾

Fanny becomes the subject of a test of her loyalty to her potential inheritance, that is, a test of her alienation from her parents since she is selected for triumph because of her moral qualities. But she overcomes her childhood weakness by developing moral implements for self-preservation, and when presented with the weakness of her tormentors, she employs these tools with sufficient strength to prevail over them. It is clear that "her victory must be entirely a victory of character, so she must be deprived of the weapons of wit, persuasiveness, physical vitality, and personal presence. "Her resistance constitutes an authentic but little-regarded brand of heroism."⁽²⁶⁾ The author assists us to the continuous awareness "that the smallest concerns of life have potential moral significance, that the life of principle or of moral heroism demands a constant vigilance."⁽²⁷⁾

However Jane Austen is not trying to superimpose her morality upon the story; the story follows what is, for her inescapable logic of a universe, ruled by moral necessity. "She is not affirming a conviction that good people are rewarded and bad people punished; she is affirming tacitly, that no one can escape his destiny, and, like Heraclitus, she holds that man's character is his destiny."⁽²⁸⁾ It seems that Jane Austen's world is ruled, not by a mechanistic conception of causality, but by a more or less deterministic one. It could be explained at once by her moral nature that "her moral universe is largely populated by men and women who were trapped in their characters somewhat like crabs trapped in shells which they can neither change nor outgrow."⁽²⁹⁾ There is no escape hatch; and we have to make the best of an unsatisfactory human world. Therefore, self-actualization is never an issue, either for Fanny or for Jane Austen. Fanny subordinates herself entirely to others in the hope of gaining some scrap of love, praise, consequence, and protection. What is at issue is whether Fanny's self-sacrifice will be appreciated. Fanny is the product of an environment which forces her to develop in a self-alienated way. She has little self-esteem. She is severely deprived of the external support which she needs in order to grow. She really behaves as if a great catastrophe was almost always impending; and she is engaged in a search for a protector. But she reestablishes the life of Mansfield Park, and becomes the conscious member of the family. She has a strength from her own sense of life.

(25) Tonny Tanner, "Jane Austen and the Quiet Thing" in *Critical Essays on Jane Austen*, ed. B.C. Southam (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 149.

(26) Robert Alan Donovan, *The Shaping Vision* (New York: Cornell Univ., 1966), p. 152.

(27) *Ibid.*, p. 157.

(28) *Ibid.*, p. 168.

(29) *Ibid.*, p. 166.

But the author makes it very difficult for us chart Fanny's progress. Jane refuses to elevate Fanny and eventually shows her agreeing to act. Fanny cannot be entirely exempt from powerful social pressures, and her solitude is furnished with social symbols. Fanny's deep stream of feeling in social conflict is shown in the warm drawing-room, but solitude and society are side by side, ensuring reflection on the response to both. As Richard Simpson acknowledged Jane Austen's sense of the individual as a social being, "man is a social being, and apart from society there is no even the individual."⁽³⁰⁾ Austen criticizes society through the drama of particular types and groups, but her moral comments are never heavy. On the contrary her morality is very traditional, and she shows that "weak characters can live good and happy lives, and struggle and endure."⁽³¹⁾

It is Mary Lascelles who best corrects our angle of vision on Fanny. It is the moral and social conduct of Fanny that the action of the educated disposition is most fully tested. Fanny has been properly taught to govern her inclinations and temper, and she knows what propriety is. She has a propriety of mind, and does not have the gifts or the strength of Mary Crawford or her cousins, but she struggles and endures as the others cannot. It is she who receives and hands on the proper teaching and alone maintains its life when all others seem to have lost it. It is always Fanny who sees the entire process. She sees what others are doing when they themselves do not understand their own action. Her propriety which is a comprehensive virtue has a large source.

We can see the moral judgements in the web of morality and psychology that is the substance of Jane Austen's human world, which emerges most clearly in her relation with her parents:

"She was at home. But alas! it was not such a home, she had not such a welcome, as—she checked herself; she was unreasonable. What right had she to be of importance to her family?.....there would have been a consideration of times and seasons, a regulation of subject, a propriety, an attention towards every body which there was not here." (p.382-83)

This passage typifies Fanny's mind, with its mixture of self-derogation and hostility, of egoistic claims and frosty judgements of others, of snobbish embarrassment for her parents, even of jealousy of her favorite brother. Her affirmation of Mansfield Park can be read as grudging approval of her rich relations based on the hope of greater personal recognition there.

Mansfield Park is not only about Fanny is getting her wishes; it is also about Fanny is getting her due. Fanny is presented not only as a weak woman with self-defensive and self-aggrandizing impulses who is forced to adopt a feminine, submissive style of life. Jane Austen's acceptance of world of life is expressed in a pragmatic humanism that undertakes

(30) Barbara Hardy, *A Reading of Jane Austen* (London: Athlone Press, 1979), p. 31.

(31) Susan Morgan, *In The Meantime* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 156.

to shape the life as best we can. The submissiveness is Fanny's conventional moral attitude, and she exhibits the possibilities of moral awareness through heightened introspection. She is the only character in the novel who is amply conscious of her relations with others. She is actually self-conscious that "life is a moral debate."⁽³²⁾ It is Fanny who makes it possible for Mansfield to sustain its life, in spite of its serious failures, by taking from it the best it has offered and by making it live in accord with its best life.⁽³³⁾ Fanny values Mansfield Park more highly than Sir Thomas, and appreciates it for its propriety, order, and peace that make life possible. Fanny becomes "indeed the daughter "that Sir Thomas Bertram wanted, and her story ends with so much true merit and true love, and no want of fortune or friends.

V. Conclusion

Jane Austen has produced a story which touches profoundly on the past and future of England itself with a minute attention to local detail. *Mansfield Park* resembles no other novel in affirming the abiding reality of society. Jane Austen here as elsewhere distributes rewards and punishments within the compass of an imperfect world. The security of Mansfield Park depends on the human will to accept an imperfect world, and at every level the vision of *Mansfield Park* is humanistic. The mixture of negation and affirmation is the most consistent feature of this work. But as Lionel Trilling indicates in his essay about the modern values of openness and chance, *Mansfield Park* is modern rather than anti-modern or flawed rather than great.⁽³⁴⁾

Jane Austen created the one master-piece of a dead early nineteenth-century genre—the Christian didactic novel. She believed that reason and restraint made for civilization. She stressed the great importance of innate ability over what the age called accomplishments and the value of exemplary teaching. She displayed "the thinking mind" as the sign of a cultivated intellect with self-knowledge and integrity, and the faculty of observation and perception.

The author, dealing with the subject of feminine accomplishments, makes us appreciate the morality and the artistry of *Mansfield Park*. She is in tune with an inherited strand of moral teaching accepting that "right thinking and right feeling must be firmly based on religious principle." While maintaining the secular hope that was to animate the nineteenth-century Austen expresses the tarnished golden mean between the extremes of a self-hood by extinction of feeling and self-hood entirely created by feeling. Through Fanny Austen emphasizes the difficulty of delicate right thinking in a world of inadequate perception and subtly corrupted instincts.

(32) P.J.M. Scott, *Jane Austen: A Reassessment* (London: Vision Press, 1982) p. 156.

(33) Stuart M. Tave, *Some Words of Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 204.

(34) Susan Morgan, *In The Meantime* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 132.

The greatness of *Mansfield Park* lies in the gentleness, the naturalness of Fanny's change. It can be recognized as a strain of moral seriousness not new in kind but new in its predominance. It offers a concern with a somewhat different set of human values, even though written in a flat tone. It is a real natural everyday life; Austen's heritage to her successors in the Victorian Age was the elevation of common life and the domestic virtues; this might stand as preliminary definition of the realistic novel. The creation of a complex, ambivalent view of the social life of man and of modern society in particular establishes Jane Austen in the classic tradition of European realism.⁽³⁵⁾

(35) Avron Fleishman, *A Reading of Mansfield Park* (London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), p. 71.