

**“Heaven defend me from being ungrateful!”:
Gender and Colonialism in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park***

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Abstract

Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* has earned a reputation as a difficult text for its politically-charged negotiations of ethics and unsatisfactory heroine. Since Edward Said presented the novel as an example of British literature that contributed to "an expanding imperialist venture" (95), scholarly attention has shifted to focus on the extent to which the novel critically engages with macrocosmic power structures and hegemonic discourse. That is, how does *Mansfield Park's* description of power dynamics at home reflect slave-related issues in the foreign atmosphere? Austen's interest in and familial connections to slave-related issues, contemporary cultural awareness of abolitionist sentiment, and textual allusions to the slave trade all contribute to the novel's counterpoint between domestic and foreign spaces: the Bertram family is economically dependent on a slave plantation in Antigua. A microcosm of plantation life, *Mansfield Park* represents the dilemmas of marginalized women who are presented with choices to rebel against or submit to patriarchal authority. In order to preserve her own physical, emotional, and psychological safety, Fanny Price bids for patriarchal favour. While others are punished severely for their rebellion, Fanny is rewarded for her submissive choices and enjoys an elevated social status. However, she inspires no reformation and remains an unsatisfactory heroine. Like the 'grateful Negro' of contemporary plantation tales, Fanny functions to stabilize the status quo through her gratitude and loyalty, reinforcing society's tightly-controlled boundaries of acceptable behaviour. *Mansfield Park's* revelatory strength is that it exposes the mechanisms by which power is produced and maintained in domestic and imperial spaces.

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Introduction

Novels written by and about women have traditionally received little attention for their value as politically motivated literature. They are called domestic, limited, and apolitical. Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* has, likewise, been traditionally critiqued as "analogous to the perception of the domestic space itself [and] as...ignorant of the 'real' life and experience of men" (Stewart 1). In 2003, John Wiltshire declared that "Austen knew about slavery in the West Indies, but it did not preoccupy her [;]...it simply represented a fact in the background of English life" (317). Austen, he implies, was not concerned with the historical reality of slavery and the slave trade, nor did she anticipate political or international significance for her novel. In contrast to this view, Maaja Stewart claims that historical contingencies and specifically imperialism did indeed affect the lives of women and that "the controversies surrounding [imperialism in India and the West Indies] became part of the discourses of the age that penetrated all aspects of the metropolitan culture, including Austen's texts" (2). These controversial discourses are prominent features of the novel, creating tensions within the text that disturb a traditional reading of "gentle Jane's" novels.

Mansfield Park is primarily engaged with the difficulty of maintaining ethical convictions when they are challenged by negotiations of marriage, wealth, and estate management. The novel demonstrates the limits of social control that is based on domination, manipulation, and abuses of power. Fanny Price is triumphant in *Mansfield Park* but she does not necessarily represent a moral ideal. Those women who have disturbed the serenity of the Mansfield estate are marginalized to ensure the maintenance

of the status quo, whereas Fanny's rising status is affirmed because she embodies a slave master's fantasy of the 'grateful Negro,' discouraging rebellion and maintaining submission to authority. Fanny's connection to the 'grateful Negro,' however, is also problematic because it appropriates the symbolic power of slave-related issues. However, its narrative function is also central to the novel's action and meaning, and exposes subjugation and oppression that often masquerade as benevolence. The connection shows how life at home and abroad can be improved but is ultimately restricted by the tightly controlled boundaries of bourgeois society. References to this foreign atmosphere within the novel point to a similar system of control at work overseas where the conditions that foster resistance and rebellion are similar to those in the domestic space.

In 1993, Edward Said published his *Culture and Imperialism*, and devoted a small portion to "Jane Austen and Empire" (first published in 1989). Said identifies Austen among others as using "positive ideas of home, of a nation and its language, of proper order, good behavior, [and] moral values" to situate themselves and their work in the larger world (81). In *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas Bertram spends more than a year on his slave plantation in Antigua, connecting imperial and domestic spaces. But what, Said asks, are we to make of this connection? He posits that, like the Bertrams, Austen regards Antigua as wealth "converted to property, order, and, at the end of the novel, comfort and added good" (91). Essentially, says Said, the novel is "part of the structure of an expanding imperialist venture" and concludes that in order to read novels like *Mansfield Park* accurately, "we have to see them in the main as resisting or avoiding that other setting, which their formal inclusiveness, historical honesty, and prophetic suggestiveness cannot completely hide" (95, 96). Said's groundbreaking analysis

triggered a series of responses; critics were eager to discuss the accusation that Austen's *Mansfield Park* had contributed to a kind of literary imperialism in a story that focused on a family dependent on plantation income but contained no critical commentary on this dependence or on slavery and its abolition.

Generally, many critics found that although Said's main thesis is surely correct, a dimension of feminist critical analysis was lacking in his analysis of *Mansfield Park*. Austen's position as an unmarried, middle class woman had clearly given her a nuanced perspective about British life. As Susan Fraiman points out, Said generously grants Joseph Conrad "an extraordinarily persistent residual sense of his own exilic marginality" (*Culture and Imperialism* 24) but omits Austen's relevant social status completely from his analysis (209). This is a curious omission since many of the women who populate Austen's novels occupy marginal spaces. That is, they are dependent upon their attachments with men for their status and wealth. Indeed, where would her novels get their storylines if the threat of spinsterhood was not a great hazard for gentry-class women with little or no fortune? This recurring theme has prompted Nina Auerbach to say that the canon of Jane Austen should be described as "one long, and always doomed, fight for escape" (18). Feminist critics of *Mansfield Park* have thus asked: how does the novel's brave engagement with the position of British women inform and shape the extension of the description of "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village" into the imperial and international arena of slave-related issues (Austen, *Letters* 275)?

This question is considered by critics such as Clara Tuite, Moira Ferguson, Peter Smith, and Ruth Perry. They all agree that *Mansfield Park* represents a domestic microcosm of the world outside Britain, a kind of doubling of issues present in the

international arena onto the domestic space. The implications of this re-mapping, however, are not so clear. Some, like Clara Tuite, call the novel “an evangelical sermon which shows reluctant slave-owners how to make virtue out of an economic necessity” (102). This ‘ameliorative Austen’ is echoed by Moira Ferguson and Peter Smith, who both argue that although Sir Thomas’ authority remains dubious, moral improvement is the narrative thrust. Ferguson and Smith, however, concede that the narrative reflects hesitancy about the probable success of ameliorative efforts: rebellion and resistance simmer beneath the smooth surface of the Mansfield estate.

Indeed, voices of dissent are loudly proclaimed at Mansfield Park and there are those that consider these disruptions a key ironic component. Ruth Perry argues that the slave trade is a “trope for the marriage market and for the tyranny of marriage, a displacement of the subject status of captive Africans onto women” (100-1). Likewise, Joseph Lew posits that “Jane Austen depicts the inescapable problems and the moral compromises made inevitable by the power dynamics of Britain’s ‘second’ empire; one based not upon settlement but upon subjugation” (294). In short, they argue that the text invokes these voices precisely to expose the weakness of authority based on subjugation and dependent upon physical presence for its tyrannical rule.

Although many critics are hesitant to say that Austen’s novel is an abolitionist text, many argue that the Mansfield estate represents a deported existence for Fanny Price, a place where she is treated in economic terms and shuffled around according to the whims of her master. Fanny is brought to the Bertrams as an economic burden, a charity case, but her good behaviour quickly results in her elevated importance and value. In this framework, she is representative of the ‘grateful Negro,’ a popular literary character that

convinced owners to adopt ameliorative policies for their plantations. This comparison emphasizes the importance of Fanny's rebellion against Sir Thomas. However, the function of this act remains contentious: does it serve as a call for the reformation of slave-master relations within the confines of patriarchal power or as a voice of revolution and emancipation? Kay Torney Souter shows how Fanny's story is a kind of slave-narrative that tells the tale of a stolen child who eventually finds liberty as she matures (213-14). Souter confesses, however, that Fanny's 'liberation' is merely a choice between new masters. Christopher Hodgkins is perhaps more forceful in regard to the reformative power of Fanny's rebellion. He argues that the novel is an "anti-expansionist allegory" where Fanny is Mansfield's saviour, "restoring and healing the domestic sphere that has been so badly deranged by the poisonous prosperity of empire" (189, 188). Fanny's rebellion is particularly important for Brian Southam as well, who posits that because Fanny is the sole questioner of Sir Thomas' involvement in the slave trade, she is "unmistakably a 'friend of the abolition,' and Austen's readers in 1814 would have applauded the heroine and her author for exactly that" (14). In these readings, Fanny's instincts and actions form the moral centre of the novel.

Concluding, however, that *Mansfield Park* is an abolitionist text is problematic precisely because the narrative takes place only on British soil. Maaja Stewart directs attention to the text's narrative strategy: the domestic atmosphere is dominated by conversation that repeatedly refuses to accommodate imperial tales (124-27). Furthermore, the authority of the father forms the basic hierarchical structure of the domestic world and though Fanny's question about the slave trade introduces the connection between "domestic realities and imperial fictions," it remains "weak,

unfocused, and fragmentary” (122). Diane Capitani argues in this same vein: “the wealth of the Bertrams is what allows propriety and good behaviour to flourish” and thus in the world of *Mansfield Park* rebellion is ultimately contained. Although Austen’s abolitionist sympathies might be evident elsewhere, she argues, *Mansfield Park* does not make a strong statement about issues of slavery.

In fact, as Carl Plasa has noted, a strategy that may seem to “facilitate the return of those realities located in the textual margin at the same time effectively banishes them” because “such strategies rest upon analogies between orders of oppression which are incommensurable with one another[;] they result less in the return of the colonial than its re-effacement in another guise” (34, 59). Plasa affirms that there are connections between British women—particularly Fanny—and the West Indian slave but denies that the effect is pro-abolitionist. According to John Wiltshire, the postcolonial perspective creates another problem: “Postcolonial criticism, in fact, has colonized *Mansfield Park*” (303). Wiltshire contends that postcolonial readings of the novel are merely influenced by “ideological commitment...[,],an articulation of modern political need” (315-317). He likens these readings to the “familiar mode in which imperial culture, secure in its superiority, ignores or perverts the cultural life of indigenous peoples, ‘rewriting’ or construing texts according to its own agenda” (317). Unlike most postcolonial critics of *Mansfield Park* that confess a degree of exploration of imperial and slave-related issues, Wiltshire denies that these allusions exist at all.

These discussions that I have summarized form the background of the postcolonial critique of the novel since Edward Said. The colonial presence and its function in the novel have contributed to *Mansfield Park*’s reputation as a difficult text.

These difficulties arise mainly because the moral centre of the novel is hard to locate. For example, Fanny may be viewed as a moral ideal, the lower-class cousin who restores morality and harmony to the otherwise rebellious and improper lifestyles of the Bertram children. Perhaps it is Sir Thomas who experiences significant moral restoration, learning that “principle, active principle, had been wanting” in the education of his daughters (*Mansfield Park*¹ 364). These conclusions, however, remain unsatisfactory because they do not recognize the novel’s careful attention to the positions of marginalized women in relation to their patriarchal authorities. Thus, an analysis of Fanny Price is incomplete when it ignores her inadequate ethical code and her victim status. Her submission to authority is a conservative response but it is also the response of someone “literally afraid to move” (Seeber 113). Furthermore, Fanny’s rebellion comes very close to resulting in her permanent exile and she certainly does nothing to disturb the status quo. Likewise, although he may be regretful about his failure as a parent, Sir Thomas takes no active responsibility for the fate of his daughter Maria. The novel’s happy ending restores peace and harmony to the estate by replacing those characters who posed a threat with more subservient and grateful recruits. Indeed, what has changed at Mansfield as a result of Fanny’s moral influence or Sir Thomas’ supposed ethical improvement?

Mansfield Park, then, is not a tale of revolution or female empowerment.

Structured as a simple rags-to-riches fairytale, the novel describes a poor slave-child who turns the tide of circumstance. However, her eventual affirmation is not a result of an uncompromising character or moral superiority. The fairytale strategy is turned topsy-

¹ Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park*. Ed. James Kinsley. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003. All subsequent citations from this work will be taken from this edition.

turvy; the world of Mansfield Park rewards quiet servitude, not revolutionary principles. Thus, Fanny inspires sympathy but rarely admiration. To be sure, she has moments of confident resistance that resonate loudly, though not frequently. But truthfully, she is merely less spoiled than the rest of the inhabitants at Mansfield and less likely to place priority on her own desires. The general stability of the Mansfield estate, in spite of those rebellious voices that whisper at the margins of the text, confesses the reality of aristocratic British life. In *Mansfield Park*, there is recognition that rebellion incurs exile, submission invites reward, and gratitude towards authority that is based on domination contributes to the maintenance of status quo existence. In other words, *Mansfield Park* acknowledges that when conscience is challenged with the negotiations of wealth, estate management, and marriage, humanitarian concerns often capitulate to the comforts that wealth and status provide. These forces of propriety and principle, of wealth management and benevolence come to the forefront of *Mansfield Park*, a novel punctuated with hints of similar issues facing an entire nation, a nation eager to maintain and justify its imperial control under the guise of civilized propriety and ‘benevolent’ restorative effort. The novel focuses on those that occupy marginal spaces, explores the limitations and privileges of their positions and regretfully glances outward and abroad to those that endure the full force of imperial rule.

Chapter One presents the evidence that has been gathered to support a post-colonial reading of the novel. Although some of the scholarship is dubious, there is a collection of biographical, cultural, and textual data that supports the claim that *Mansfield Park* extends its analysis of the domestic affairs of upper-class gentry life into the international and imperial realm. For example, Austen’s family had connections to slave

plantations and her brother Francis talked openly in his travel journals about slavery. Certainly, the debate over slavery and its abolition was widespread and well-known. Although Austen's letters contain little or, I argue, no information regarding her political leanings, they do provide solid evidence that Austen was engaged with a variety of reading material: travel narratives, political essays, and history collections. And, of course, there is a range of slave-related references within the novel itself that, taken together, form an invitation to extend its moral observations into the world of foreign relations.

Chapter Two tackles the assumption that Fanny Price represents a moral ideal at Mansfield Park. Although she exhibits a moral restraint that Sir Thomas admires, the rigid propriety that she complies with does not prove to be a great strength. Indeed, her instincts prove to be accidentally advantageous. However, Fanny is treated sympathetically, making critique difficult because she endures such harsh abuse. Although it is tempting to let pity influence the moral barometer that measures her character, overlooking her weaknesses would be a mistake. To be sure, fidelity to her conscience is almost Fanny's downfall and certainly not a factor in her eventual success in this systematically negotiated world of women and property. This false notion of Fanny as a moral ideal creates problems for the analysis of other characters as well. Edmund is often paired with Fanny as a moral pillar but he is not immune to criticism. Mary Crawford has received similarly reductive criticism: polarized against Fanny, she becomes a conniving vixen aimed at corrupting the heroine's purity. The text's treatment of Mary is actually much more ambiguous: she is not so malevolent. In fact, Fanny, Maria, and Mary embody possible responses to their oppression but they do not

necessarily embody moral or immoral stances. Rather, their respective reactions characterize the dilemmas that exist for the main female characters. That is, they both experience a restricted sense of their own autonomy because they are polarized in positions of rebellion or submission. Maria's exile produces uncomfortable conclusions for all women: one must properly smile and quietly endure in order to be rewarded. These submissive responses serve to stabilize the hierarchy in ways that allow the deportation and rearrangement of women as assets and maintain the privileged position of men. De-centering Fanny Price releases her character from the burden of moral perfection, allowing the narrative to realize its complex negotiations of ethics.

Chapter Three focuses on Fanny's liminal and abused position at Mansfield Park and her connection to the 'grateful Negro' of popular plantation tales. As an ambassador for Sir Thomas' authority at home, her effect, like that of Maria Edgeworth's 'grateful Negro,' is to repress rebellion and maintain hierarchies of privilege by her loyalty and submission. Fanny's bid for patriarchal favour as an alternative to exile is understandable but not necessarily admirable because, by claiming respectability, Fanny ultimately reinscribes hegemonic relationships and participates in the maintenance of Sir Thomas' dubious authority. Like the 'grateful Negro,' she does not function as an agent of emancipation.

Chapter One

Considering a Postcolonial Reading: Biographical, Cultural, and Textual Evidence

Although *Mansfield Park* deals primarily with domestic rearrangements of marriage, wealth, and estate management, there is a significant set of evidence that encourages the extension of its moral analysis to the imperial arena of institutional slavery and its abolition. As a template for understanding the issues facing Britain and its people, the Bertram family and their circle provide a meta-analysis of the various discourses surrounding the debate about slave-related issues. That is, the characters of *Mansfield Park* experience the conflicts of conscience and social propriety while managing material, emotional, and spiritual needs. The novel describes a plantocratic family and patriarch struggling to maintain the stability of their economy, social status, and hierarchy as well as introducing the conditions that lead to either rebellion against or submission to patriarchal control. It is a reflection of Britain's struggle to deal with the economic and moral consequences of slavery and its abolition. Generally, *Mansfield Park* is quietly suggestive rather than directly confrontational about issues of worldwide significance but there is strong evidence to support the claim that the novel engages with social issues on an international as well as domestic scale. This chapter will present the biographical, cultural, and textual evidence that supports such a reading.

It is generally accepted that Austen was aware of the debate over slavery, understood its implications for English society, and opposed slavery and the slave trade. Austen's immediate family depended on a plantation in Antigua: her father was the principal trustee in 1760, the owner of which was godfather to the eldest Austen son,

James (Southam 14). Although this might suggest that she would justify the institution of slavery on grounds of economic necessity, there is evidence to indicate that Austen's family—at least some of the family—was not in favor of its continuation. Michael Steffes delivers a long account of the intimate connection of the Austen family and their social milieu to the debate over slavery in which he laments that there is no record of Mr. Austen's opinions on the matter. He presents instead Jane's brother, Francis Austen, who records about Antigua in his journal of 1808 that

slavery, however it may be modified is still slavery, and it is much to be regretted that any trace of it should be found to exist in countries dependent on England, or colonized by her subjects. (qtd in Steffes 27)

Maaja Stewart is perhaps too kind when she summarizes these sentiments as a “condemnation of slavery” (28), though it is true that this short reflection refers to the modifications that were being recommended for the kinder treatment of slaves. During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, low plantation efficiency required ameliorative policies to ensure the general health and reproduction of slaves (Carrington 141). Francis Austen perhaps recognized the ultimate hypocrisy of these policies: they were primarily motivated to aid a suffering economy. His choice of the relatively mild term *regret*, however, might only be indicative of sensitivity to politically-charged issues and exposes a tendency to privilege national pride over a more general sense of human benevolence. In other words, his first regret resides in the fact that slavery in India and the West Indies is an *English* imposition. In any case, Francis Austen's generally negative opinion about slavery does not prove conclusively that Jane was aware of his beliefs but it does testify that the issue of slavery weighed on the consciences of those around her.

Specific references to slave-related issues are significant details and central to the novel's action and meaning. Indeed, the social and political landscape would have been pervaded by the debate over slavery and its abolition by the time *Mansfield Park* was written. Abolitionist writings of William Wilberforce, Hannah More, and Thomas Clarkson were distributed widely. The overwhelming support for the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 in the House of Commons and in the House of Lords indicates that anti-slavery sentiment had gained fierce momentum (Steffes 24). Thomas Clarkson, founder of the Anti-Slavery Society, suggested that the popularity of the seal of the Anti-Slavery Society provided a glimpse of this cultural acceptance of anti-slavery sentiment. Manufactured by the Wedgwood firm in 1791, the seal depicts a black man kneeling with chained hands in a pleading gesture that reads "Am I Not a Man and a Brother" (Steffes 26). The medallion became a fashionable item, incorporated into jewelry and gentlemen's snuff boxes (27). While this would have been a clever method of advocacy reaching many members of upper-class society, the popularity of such an object often only indicates conformity to trendy liberal sentiment. It has also been suggested by J.R. Oldfield that Clarkson exaggerated the popularity of the medallion (Steffes 27). At the very least, this example is indicative of upper class society accepting abolitionist sentiment as good taste, fashion, and even propriety. Whatever the level of sincerity, certainly it can be confidently asserted that anti-slavery sentiment had reached a level of common knowledge and was not merely a product of radical or marginal political campaigners.

Although these allusions can be highlighted in the novel, Austen's letters provide little commentary on social or political issues. Nevertheless, they have been thoroughly

inspected for significant details though much that has been gleaned from these pages is ambiguous at best. For example, in a letter to her sister Cassandra, Austen testifies that she is “as much in love with the author [Captain Pasley] as ever I was with Clarkson or Buchanan, or even the two Mr. Smiths of the city” (*Letters* 198). It is difficult to say with certainty whether this passing reference is to Clarkson’s 1808 *History of Abolition* or his 1813 *Life of William Penn* (Chapman 221). Joseph Lew makes a convincing argument that it would have been highly unlikely that Austen could have attained and read *Life* in the short time between its publication and the letter’s date (295). But his assertion that she “loved” Clarkson is not only misquoted but also a relative statement: her love of Clarkson is dependent upon her love of Pasley, Buchanan, and the two Mr. Smiths. It is also an ambiguous statement: she loves Pasley’s Essay not for any political commentary it might contain but because it is “delightfully written & highly entertaining” and that he writes “with extraordinary force & spirit” (*Letters* 198). Ruth Perry deals with this issue better when she says: “[Austen’s] comparison of Pasley’s book on armies and empire to Clarkson’s *History of Abolition* (1808) and Buchanan’s *Christian Researches in Asia* (1811) shows a sensitivity to the politics of internationalism that is before her time” (104-5). Indeed, to assume political bias from this short comment would be a conjecture, though it certainly provides assurance of Austen’s interest in and informed position on international issues.

These biographical and cultural references provide peripheral support for the thesis that *Mansfield Park* is a politically-charged novel; their enduring significance, however, is dependent upon textual evidence. In particular, the Evangelical nature of Fanny’s character is often noted, linking her to the abolitionist efforts of many

Evangelicals (Lew 275). As well, William Cowper is identified as Fanny's favourite poet, a man who "vehemently opposed the trade and published a series of anti-slavery poems" (Lew 275). It was initially Frank Gibbon in 1982 who noted that Mrs. Norris' namesake may have derived from the notorious hypocrite in Clarkson's *History of Abolition* (303). First presenting himself as opposed to the slave trade, Norris later appeared as a witness for the continuation of the trade, arguing, as Ruth Perry summarizes, that "the Africans were so barbaric, cruel, and murderous to one another that bringing them away and introducing them to European culture was actually a blessing" (99). Mrs. Norris justifies her cruel treatment of Fanny with this same notion of the blessed civility of European culture. Her initial plan to bring Fanny to Mansfield is characteristic of her ulterior motives: Fanny would benefit from the connections there but she must not assume to be a *Miss Bertram*. She insists on the "benevolence of the action," and walks home "in the happy belief of being the most liberal-minded sister and aunt in the world," though she refuses to take Fanny into her own home (*MP* 9). Coleridge comments about just this kind of hypocrisy regarding abolitionist sentiment: "There is one criterion by which we may always distinguish benevolence from mere sensibility—Benevolence impels to action, and is accompanied by self-denial" (240). Mrs. Norris' brand of generosity precludes both of these requirements. Motivated by and pre-occupied with the finances of the Bertrams' estate, she is analogous to the amelioration policies imposed on plantation owners, a seeming benevolence disguising more sinister economic motivations. Numerous critics have echoed this important allusion to Norris and Margaret Kirkham added in 1986 that the title of *Mansfield Park* alludes to Lord Chief Justice Mansfield, who ruled in 1772 that no slave could be forcibly returned from Britain to the Caribbean.

Mansfield's judgment was "widely interpreted to mean that slavery in Britain had been legally abolished" (130). Thus, the title of the novel and the name of the estate allude ironically to this declaration of emancipation, providing a reminder that there are many legally sanctioned forms of slavery and imprisonment deriving from absolute power and still awaiting abolition.

John Wiltshire, however, argues that both of these names have been "overdetermined" by critics (306). There may be no reference at all in Austen's novel to the notorious Norris, he says, reiterating an earlier suggestion by Barbara Hardy in 1975 that the name is more likely a witticism, connected etymologically to the French "nourrice" and English "norrice" (306) as Mrs. Norris is clearly the opposite of a nourishing caregiver. Likewise, Wiltshire offers an alternative reading for the Mansfield reference, mindful of the reluctance with which the historical Mansfield made his decision but also pointing out that it might have been innocently chosen "for its representative Englishness" (306). Both of these alternative interpretations are quite plausible. However, with or without these nominal references, the novel's engagement with slave-related issues remains a major thematic force because the action revolves around a family supported by a West Indian plantation and a family patriarch who is relocated there for more than a year.

The Bertram family's connection to the economy of slavery functions to highlight their questionable morality. It is not merely a schematic ploy to shuffle the family patriarch to a remote location. As Maaja Stewart declares, "the West Indies could not by the late eighteenth century be used innocently in any English novel to signify merely the faraway source of wealth or a convenient outlet for excess population" (28). Michael

Steffes has also argued that the Bertrams would be exposed to a host of assumptions based on this connection, to which a contemporary reader would be receptive (32-6). West Indian plantation owners, he says, came to be seen as a bit of a social problem, exhibiting lavish spending habits and vulgarity that invited the disapproval of more stable aristocrats (33). These particular attributes find their closest representation in Tom Bertram but the whole family is suspect because their main source of wealth, comfort, and status is tainted by this dependency on plantation income.

This primary dependency on plantation income has generally been taken for granted but there have been efforts to prove that it was merely an expendable holding. Trevor Lloyd goes so far as to argue that Sir Thomas had merely gone to Antigua to sell his plantation in order to provide for his daughters' portions (68). Lloyd's argument relies on the postulation that Tom Bertram accompanies his father in order to secure this transfer of property and that there is no mention of it as owned property in the latter half of the novel (68). He thus asserts that the dead silence that follows Fanny's question about the slave trade "is easily understandable if the estate had been sold and the Bertrams had no West Indian commitments" (72). This is a creative solution but far too simplistic. Furthermore, if Lloyd is correct and Sir Thomas' business in Antigua was to sell his estate, one might also conclude that he was envisioned as an abolitionist and desired to disassociate himself from the institution of slavery altogether, bringing the novel's focus back to slavery-related issues. More plausible is that Sir Thomas brings Tom to Antigua in order to show Tom the reality of stabilizing the income that he had squandered away so frivolously, a detail that is mentioned in the novel numerous times.

Furthermore, Lloyd's long analysis of Sir Thomas' financial position is impressive in its attention to detail but it does little to show that the family would not have been viewed—at least initially—as significantly dependent upon a plantation income. Those statements directly concerning finances indicate as much and are made by a financially-informed source: Mrs. Norris tells Lady Bertram that ““Sir Thomas's means will be rather straitened, if the Antigua estate is to make such poor returns”” and she thinks that purchases in his absence should be avoided since “a large part of his income was unsettled” (*MP* 24, 29). Sir Thomas is indeed a slave owner, whether he intended to sell his plantation or not and the financial losses that he is said to have endured were enough to require his presence on his plantation for over a year. The degree of financial dependence and the exact reason for Sir Thomas' absence fail to contribute a more nuanced analysis of the Antiguan connection.

The plantation's location, however, is thematically significant because it is uncharacteristic for Austen to name specifically far-off destinations in her novels, as Maaja Stewart points out (28). This specificity of place encourages further research about Austen's opinion of Antigua. Her surviving letters contain only one reference to Antigua, though it is an ambiguous and indirect example of her opinion. Dated July 3, 1813, Austen would have just finished *Mansfield Park*, when she writes,

I wonder whether you happened to see Mr. Blackall's marriage in the Papers last Jany. *We* did. He was married at Clifton to a Miss Lewis, whose Father had been late of Antigua. I should very much like to know what sort of a Woman she is. He was a piece of Perfection, noisy Perfection himself which I always recollect with regard...I would wish

Miss Lewis to be of a silent turn & rather ignorant, but naturally intelligent & wishing to learn; fond of cold veal pies, green tea in the afternoon, & a green window blind at night. (*Letters* 216)

Mr. Blackall was an early and unsatisfactory suitor of Austen's (Honan 114). Michael Steffes has seized on this mention of Antigua, making an interesting analysis of its implications:

According to Deirdre Le Faye's note in her edition of *Jane Austen's Letters*, Miss Lewis' father was from Jamaica, rather than Antigua as Austen states. Austen's slip is probably a case of her perception of life being distorted by her art. Linking a pompous male, an example of "noisy Perfection," with Antigua very likely indicates the way in which she herself read the character of Sir Thomas Bertram, and certainly provides support for those readers who find him less than ideal. (34)

Mr. Blackall's connection to Antigua is a third degree of separation and Steffes' reading is a little forced. The connection to Miss Lewis, however, is stronger: she does not receive flattering treatment either and is more intimately connected with Antigua (Jamaica). Imagining her as a character, Austen writes that she "would wish" Miss Lewis to be superficially pre-occupied, linking her to the general lethargy and ignorance of Lady Bertram, whose only comment on William's travels is that she would like to receive "two shawls" upon his return (*MP* 239). Although these connections could be construed as fanciful, when Austen makes the error connecting Mr. "noisy Perfection" and Miss "rather ignorant" with Antigua the effect is decidedly negative.

John Wiltshire, however, argues that the naming of Antigua as the location of Sir Thomas' property has the opposite effect on the novel's action and meaning because, in the minds of some abolitionists, Antigua represented the best that could be said for West Indian slavery. In 1791, Wilberforce had referred to the increased value of slaves, "particularly in Antigua," due to their religious instruction (Clarkson 2:228). Wiltshire assumes that Austen would have been aware of Wilberforce's opinion and concludes that she had sent Sir Thomas to "the one island on which a Christian gentleman might own estates with less compromise to his religious principles" (313). Wiltshire attempts to relieve the skepticism that many have felt about Sir Thomas' moral leadership: "*Mansfield Park* may, then, not conceive of Sir Thomas as a corrupt, abusive planter, but rather as a gentleman who believes himself to live by high moral principles" (313). The generous exoneration of those who participated in the slave trade yet attempted to maintain a level of humanitarian concern may have been a common contemporary conclusion, as Wiltshire confirms, but it does not coincide with the spirit of the novel's moral thrust. That he "believes himself to live by high moral principles" is precisely the aspect of Sir Thomas' character with which the novel engages critically. *Mansfield Park* exposes the ways in which gentlemanly conduct contributes to the maintenance of systemic marginalization. Although Sir Thomas does seem to have been softened by his overseas experience, his benevolence only extends to Fanny and others when they choose to submit to his authority. Fanny's rebellion against his wishes for her engagement to Henry Crawford results in her temporary—but, at the time, possibly permanent—exile from the Mansfield estate.

Sir Thomas' questionable authority is connected to his anxiety about his social status and is revealed quickly in two ways. First, when he and Mrs. Norris define Fanny's position at Mansfield as "not a *Miss Bertram*" (*MP* 9), Sir Thomas' fear that she will become an heir to the estate either by adoption or marriage becomes obvious. Secondly, the Bertrams are wealthy but they are not historically established as such; they are 'new' money. Edmund confesses that there is no provision for him as the second son, something that, in more established families, might have been provided by an uncle or grandfather (72-3). Furthermore, Mansfield Park does not have historical or familial significance: there is no elaborate description of previous owners (Steffes 35). In contrast, the visit to Sotherton is punctuated with a grand tour in which "the family in former times, its rise and grandeur, regal visits and loyal efforts" is presented as a great source of pride (*MP* 67). This history of familial significance is Rushworth's only attractive quality and Sir Thomas encourages the match for the "addition of respectability and influence" that would ensue for him, indicating his concern for his daughter's well-being, but also his own (157). Sir Thomas' lower social status causes an anxiety that produces an unyielding sense of absolute authority that is often cruel and tyrannical.

These sinister aspects of Sir Thomas' authority are also connected with sexual power. Historically, sexual violence suffered by black female slaves was a common reality on many plantations, about which Mary Prince has testified in the *History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave* in 1831. Moira Ferguson also points to historical evidence that planters were notorious for fathering children with their slave mistresses (126). She suggests that Lady Bertram's lack of concern for Sir Thomas' safety might be indicative of a subtle protest or expression of anger over these alleged infidelities (126). Moreover,

the attention he offers Fanny upon his return from Antigua surprises her but also embarrasses her; his interest is limited to her body.² Indeed, there is something disturbing about these encounters, though Fanny is unable to articulate fully her distress and terror.

Fanny's silence about her real feelings is associated with the general conspiracy of silence that typifies Sir Thomas' household. The tendency towards euphemism and silence is emphasized throughout the novel as a force of control and restraint, inspiring the family's fear of uncensored loquacity and public disgrace. For example, Edmund criticizes Mary's opinions as improper, not for their substance, but for "making them public" (*MP* 51). Had Fanny kept silent in the way that her early education had encouraged her, she might have avoided her dangerous brush with disaster that brings her close to permanent exile. So, too, the family's horror at the threat of public mockery trumps the underlying problems that lead to Maria's affair; her unhappy marriage and consequent exile are marginal issues compared to the effects of the negative publicity. Edmund's reaction to the scandal is particularly disturbing for its selfishness, given that Fanny's entire future hinges upon Henry Crawford's promise of integrity, not to mention the catastrophic effect the affair would have for Maria. But Edmund says: "Fanny, think of *me!*" (350). His preoccupation with the residual effects of the affair also inspires his horror about Mary's unrefined reaction. It is curious that there is no report of any reaction from Edmund when he learns that Mary had secretly hoped for Tom's death, a fact that many readers have found more reprehensible than her reaction to the affair. There is a clear sense that the family is performing damage control while ignoring the root of the problem. Those that have limited power are made into unwilling scapegoats

² Sir Thomas' inappropriate interest in Fanny is discussed further in Chapter Three.

to maintain the public integrity of the powerful, the silent, and the grateful. Indeed, it is this scandal that propels Fanny back into the family circle; her value as a co-conspirator in this silence is confirmed.

Sir Thomas' slave plantation is also referred to with silence and euphemisms, indicating the family's need to avoid historical responsibility for their dependence on plantation income. When the family does refer to Sir Thomas' involvement, they present it ambiguously with phrases such as: "the concerns of his West Indian property" (*MP* 4), the "arrangement of his affairs" (25), "unfavourable circumstances had suddenly arisen" (30) and "[Sir Thomas was] awaiting the final arrangement" (30). This refusal to name the realities of their finances becomes prominent when Fanny directly questions Sir Thomas about the slave trade. Fanny recalls this moment later to Edmund:

"Did not you hear me ask him about the slave trade last night?"

"I did—and was in hopes the question would be followed up by others. It would have pleased your uncle to be inquired of farther."

"And I longed to do it—but there was such a dead silence! And while my cousins were sitting by without speaking a word, or seeming at all interested in the subject, I did not like—I thought it would appear as if I wanted to set myself off at their expense, by shewing a curiosity and pleasure in his information which he must wish his own daughters to feel."

(*MP* 155)

This silence in the drawing room has often been described as bearing the weight of the novel's engagement with slave-related issues and deserves careful consideration.

A number of interpretations regarding this important moment divert attention away from the silence itself. Wiltshire has contended that the silence only implicates Sir Thomas' daughters for their "indifference to geography and history" (316). Diane Capitani states that "Fanny does not seem to criticize the institution of slavery, nor does she condemn Sir Thomas for his role in it" (4). Stewart concludes that, "the real issue in the drawing room [is] Fanny's wish to please Sir Thomas" (122). Indeed, the scene highlights Fanny's sensitivity about her awkward position beside her less interested cousins; her non-judgmental approach is apparent. Furthermore, Edmund clearly encourages the subject, recalling his wish that she would have followed the question up by others. The issue, at first, appears to be that Fanny simply wishes to engage her uncle in conversation about his business and travels. It would be unlike her timid character to pursue the subject in a more critical manner.

Others, however, have disagreed that the scene's function is merely to promote character development. For example, Brian Southam explains that because Sir Thomas is so chatty in other forums about his visit to Antigua and so silent on this occasion, the dead silence indicates the breach of a taboo subject (13). Susan Fraiman agrees that Austen "deliberately invokes the dumbness of Mansfield Park concerning its own barbarity precisely because she means to rebuke it" (212). Patricia Rozema's film adaptation of the novel emphasizes abolitionist sentiment: the audience sees the family in the drawing room and hears Fanny's strong opinions about human rights and foreign affairs. Clearly influenced by radical postcolonial theory, the film's portrayal of Fanny

as a moral crusader for the abolitionist cause is greatly exaggerated.³ But the direct depiction of the scene in the film draws attention to a crucial aspect of its importance in the novel as an incident that is recalled and indirectly described. It is this detail that proves vital in interpreting the significance of the scene.

In the novel, readers rely on the memories of Fanny and Edmund; the “dead silence” is filtered through their perception. Because of this indirect description, the scene achieves two things: it emphasizes not only the family’s silence regarding slave-related issues but also that Fanny and Edmund both ignore this discomfort. The text emphasizes the silence by naming it explicitly but has no textual strategy to deal with the implications of the question. That is, the restrictive silence that controls Mansfield estate does not discriminate: Fanny and Edmund have no vocabulary for this moment either. They are dependent upon this trade too, blind to the family’s inability to name their historical situation. The silence sits suspended, euthanized by the narrative itself.

The silence is clearly stated in response to Fanny’s question, a social blunder to be sure, but not because Fanny steals the spotlight from her less interested cousins, as Wiltshire suggests. No doubt Mrs. Norris would have reprimanded Fanny herself had this been the perception of Fanny’s question. Fanny only fears this perception when she does not choose to pursue the question further: “And I longed to [follow up the question]—but there was such a dead silence! . . . I thought it would appear as if I wanted to set myself off at their expense” (*MP* 155). This is Fanny’s *reaction* to the silence, a silence that exists independently of her recollection of or reaction to it. There is

³ Tom Bertram, in Rozema’s adaptation, condemns and exposes his father’s exploitation of female slaves in his lewd drawings of his father’s imperial adventures. And while Edmund explicitly condemns the trade, he also notes the family’s dependence on the income that it provides.

something conspiratorial about the others' silences. Is it too speculative to assume that knowing glances might have been passed between the other family members when the question was raised? Or, would they have even noticed the silence at all? Sir Thomas is comfortable recalling his travels and the parties of Antigua but cannot respond to a question that would force a direct confrontation with the 'necessary evil' that provides their wealth and comfort. For a family that depends upon euphemisms and appearances for their blissful ignorance, they respond in the only way they know how: with silence.

Fanny is complicit in this agreed silence: she does not emerge as a critic of Sir Thomas. As Stewart makes clear, Fanny is desperate to please him. Since his return, he has shown an interest in her that, although it makes her a little uncomfortable, also pleases her. She knows that Mrs. Norris is also under Sir Thomas' ultimate rule and, just as he provided a fire for Fanny's room, his favour would produce immediate improvements. Furthermore, Fanny's readiness to blame herself for her less interested cousins is typically self-deprecating, though understandable: her question expires the family's congeniality. Fanny's reaction is so profoundly affected by her wish—indeed, her *need*—to appear non-judgmental of the comforts that Mansfield Park provides that she does not realize her inadvertent stumble onto a subject for which the family has no vocabulary. Her training as an inferior and alien creature makes the glaring vulnerability in the drawing room unavailable to her; she is too preoccupied with her damaged sense of self from the embarrassing episode. Because Fanny exists in a precarious position under Sir Thomas, her self-preserving reaction is understandable.

Edmund's ignorance of the real issue in the drawing room is perhaps less redeemable: his position is stable and respected. However, Edmund's interest in

mirroring the values and morals of his father suggest that condemning his father's business would not come easily for him and would not produce positive results for his future. As well, his immediate focus is on Fanny's damaged sense of belonging. Nonetheless, Fanny and Edmund often escape harsh criticism but here they are complicit in the perpetuation of the subject as taboo and participate in the conspiracy of silence.

These domestic realities of patriarchal control and the suppression of rebellion extend into the international scene, revealing that the social issues of family and estate reflect a broader system of shifting power dynamics. Although Austen's surviving letters provide little help in deciphering her personal convictions regarding politics, her family's intimate connections to the economy of the slave-trade provide a solid basis for proof that she would have been aware of the issues facing absentee plantation owners. *Mansfield Park* focuses on the Bertram family, a family explicitly connected to an Antiguan plantation and dependent on its income. This setting provides a counterpoint for these two worlds. According to historical evidence, plantation owners had poor reputations; Sir Thomas' authority would be suspect from the moment his name appeared on the page. Although some have denied the significance of these details, alternative readings prove insufficient because the text offers details that cannot be ignored. Furthermore, the Bertrams are consistently exposed as morally suspect for their dependence on silence and euphemism to maintain their reputations and privilege. Those that question or provide unsolicited commentary are silenced. Fanny's opinions are either not voiced at all or ignored completely. Likewise, Mary's candid wit is reprimanded only by Edmund's sense of public propriety, which he neither elaborates on nor justifies. These silences highlight the family's ignorance about their historical moment.

Because Fanny and Edmund are complicit in the silence in the drawing room, the strength of their moral caliber must also be questioned. Chapter Two discusses how Fanny and Edmund both admirably struggle with ethical decisions but are limited representations of morality. When Fanny and Edmund are read as the moral centre of the novel, Mary Crawford is cast in the role of scheming vixen. Releasing these static representations from their polarities re-instates the women of Mansfield Park as multi-faceted representations of female dilemmas. Thus, Mary's timely dismissal reflects the threat she poses to the novel's and society's tightly controlled boundaries of acceptable behaviour. Likewise, Fanny's triumph at the end of the novel is not an affirmation of her moral performance; it simply represents the result of her submissive choices.

Chapter Two

The Unsatisfactory Heroine and the Sympathetic Vixen

In an introduction to Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Jane Stabler declares that "Fanny's Christian Evangelical⁴ leanings supply an ideal to aspire to" (xx). This is a common evaluation of Fanny's centrality in the novel. She is often admired for her moral stoicism and accurate judgment. Likewise, Mary Poovey, in *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (1984), argues that Austen clearly endorses the Evangelical code with which Fanny struggles to align herself (217-18). In these readings, Fanny is perceived as the moral centre of the novel and, because Evangelicalism is historically connected with outspoken abolitionism, she can also be closely associated with anti-slavery sentiment, thus showing that *Mansfield Park* is an abolitionist text. This association with Evangelicalism, however, actually serves to highlight Fanny's and Edmund's paradoxical existence: they struggle to maintain ethical and principled impulses while being financially supported by plantation income, thriving off a system of slavery against which their Evangelical associations fought. Furthermore, Fanny's triumph, if indeed it can be called a triumph, results from the misfortunes and failures of others. Her actions—or lack of them—prove accidentally advantageous. Fanny does resemble a contemporary Evangelical and her dilemmas are given weighty consideration in the novel. She is often described struggling with the force of her emotions when they contradict her principles. Fanny Price, however, often ignores these emotions, producing moments of quiet

⁴ The Church of England responded to a strong Evangelical movement that was supported by influential writers such as Hannah More, who encouraged active religious principle, scrutiny of inner motivation, and strict standards of behaviour (Stabler xviii-xix).

resignation to authority and self-deprecating resolve. These conservative responses to the action around her do not epitomize the novel's moral message. In fact, they are revealed as deeply problematic and limited. When the complexity of Fanny's character, including her faults, is comprehensively described, the other characters that are closely associated with or polarized against Fanny become dislodged from their static representations of purity or corruption. Edmund's actions and principles can thus be diagnosed as limited and rather weak. Mary Crawford, who is often treated as a foil for Fanny, is released from a line of criticism that sees her as a conniving vixen. *Mansfield Park's* happy conclusion is sullied by the dismissal of the attractive Mary Crawford and by the limitations of the ethical code for which Fanny and Edmund stand. The details that produce this closure confirm the inadequacy of a system of ethics based on propriety and duty, a system that perpetuates the oppression of women, the lower class, and, by extension, the enslaved. The significance of Fanny's experience is that only the submissive, the grateful, and the properly circumstanced are rewarded with the opportunity for upward social mobility.

Fanny's Evangelical personality functions to highlight the way in which propriety rather than beneficent motivation often shapes social behaviour. Her careful analysis of the characters that populate the novel is often reliable. She is a keen observer, a reliable wallflower who catches nuances of meaning that others miss. For example, Mrs. Norris and Mrs. Rushworth are happy to affirm that Maria's animation at the ball is a result of Mr. Rushworth's presence, even proposing that her decision to dance with Mr. Crawford is due to her "strict sense of propriety" (*MP* 93). But Fanny notices that Maria's happiness, her "eyes sparkling with pleasure," is on account of the close proximity of Mr.

Crawford (93). This ability is emphasized again during deliberations over a choice of play: “Fanny looked on and listened, not amused to observe the selfishness which, more or less disguised, seemed to govern them all” (104). Portraying the ease with which propriety can be manipulated to disguise ulterior motivations, these scenes also demonstrate Fanny’s more discerning analysis of the motivations of those around her as well as her disapproval.

Fanny’s compassionate personality is also a refreshing alternative to the more sinister motivations of other characters that are frequently described. Her sympathy extends to Mr. Rushworth and Julia, those for whom even the omniscient narrator has little patience. Mr. Rushworth, although he exhibits very few redeeming attributes save his gigantic fortune and estate, is treated with nothing but disdain, save by Fanny. During the ha-ha scene, Fanny feels that “he had been very ill-used” (*MP* 80). And during rehearsals for the play, Fanny’s observations reflect her sympathy for his situation, “so decided to her eye was her cousin Maria’s avoidance of [Rushworth], and so needlessly often the rehearsal of the first scene between her and Mr. Crawford” (129). The narrative voice, on the other hand, delivers a scathing description of his buffoonery, even in the closing pages of the novel: “The indignities of stupidity, and the disappointments of selfish passion, can excite little pity” (364). Fanny’s sympathy is even extended to Julia, from whom she received little kindness. Her quiet observation of Julia’s jealousy and unrequited affection produces a degree of solidarity: “Fanny saw and pitied much of this in Julia; but there was no outward fellowship between them. Julia made no communication and Fanny took no liberties. They were two solitary sufferers, or connected only by Fanny’s consciousness” (128). However, Fanny’s sympathy is

communicated only to the reader because she understands that her position affords few liberties. Were she to extend a hand in solidarity, she would no doubt be interpreted as offering pity. Fanny is in no position to pity Julia. Mansfield Park has a pecking order: gratitude is offered up, pity is granted down.

As a result of this arrangement, Fanny's instincts are often censored, her emotions are kept private, and her observations are generally not reported. This deferential and silent behaviour is also in keeping with the rigid code of ethics which Evangelical writers such as Hannah More endorsed in her *Strictures on the Present System of Female Education* (1799) and *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1809). Fanny is the picture of textbook femininity: she is intelligent but not argumentative, observant but not prone to creating disturbance. In the event of conflict, she almost always chooses to respond submissively to authority. Although Fanny is discerning and compassionate, her conformity to this Evangelical ideal also supports hegemonic discourse.

Critical of fictional representations of idealized Evangelical women, Austen had commented that Mary Brunton's *Self-Control*, was an "excellently-meant, elegantly-written Work, without anything of Nature or Probability in it" (*Letters* 234). In contrast to this novel, Fanny Price faces problems for which she finds inadequate answers from this code of ethics. Mary Waldron argues similarly:

Mansfield Park actually questions, in a new and much more challenging way, the validity of some favourite contemporary moral and social assumptions...[and demonstrates] the ease with which unacceptable human feelings can be camouflaged in a system like Evangelicalism—a

useful set of moral imperatives can be used to transform and make
laudable such things as jealousy and cold-heartedness. (262, 275)

The failure of these social assumptions is a key feature of the novel. Austen's opinion about the Evangelicalism that informed the creation of Fanny Price's character becomes critically important for deciphering the extent to which Fanny can be considered a moral ideal.

The commentary in Austen's letters reveals that she was "both repelled and attracted" by Evangelicalism (Waldron 262). For example, in 1809, Austen comments about More's *Coelebs*, saying:

You have by no means raised my curiosity after Caleb [sic];—My disinclination for it before was affected, but now it is real; I do not like the Evangelicals.—Of course I shall be delighted, when I read it, like other people, but till I do I dislike it. (*Letters* 169-70)

Austen's opinion of Evangelicalism informs her opinion of More's novel. She is suspicious of its superficial and popular appeal. Her confession that she will probably be delighted by it, "like other people," is curious since she declares later that *she* does "not write for such dull elves" (*Letters* 202). Given the popularity of More's *Coelebs*, Austen's fidelity to realism was, no doubt, a conscious but economically difficult choice.

In 1814, Austen writes negatively about Evangelicalism again in a letter to Fanny Knight. She comments on what Fanny seems to have feared about a Mr. John Plumptre and his marital intentions toward her: "the danger of his becoming an Evangelical" (280). She does not think it a reason to reject a proposal of marriage. Rather, she advises Fanny to think only of his qualities and her feelings for him: "if his deficiencies of Manner &c

&c strike you more than all his good qualities, if you continue to think strongly of them, give him up at once” (280). It is difficult to discern Austen’s real feelings here because she seems to like Mr. Plumptre and so her rejection of Evangelicalism is softened:

I am by no means convinced that we ought not all to be Evangelicals, and am at least persuaded that they who are so from Reason and Feeling, must be happiest and safest. (280)

Austen might have stretched her opinion of Evangelicalism to include a favourable opinion of this particular suitor. This statement confesses a detached approbation of those who maintain these convictions in accordance with their own feelings and powers of reason. But there are those, according to Austen, that choose this lifestyle over a more honest engagement with their emotions and intelligence and thus they conform to a superficial and popular notion of respectability. Implicit in this exchange is Austen’s resistance to calling herself an Evangelical, though she is hesitant to condemn the movement outright. Nevertheless, a scathing sarcasm emerges from her assumption that they “*must* be happiest and safest” (280, emphasis added). There is a sense that Austen perceived Evangelical sentiment as appealing to those who could not think for themselves, who require a direct and clear code of ethics for their emotional and psychological safety.

This critique of Evangelical ideals not only informs Fanny’s character but also forms the backdrop for the general critique of the way Sir Thomas’ authority is enacted at Mansfield. That is, *Mansfield Park* calls negative attention to some favourite contemporary strategies to encourage the kinder treatment of slaves. A famous Evangelical and public advocate of abolitionism, William Wilberforce, refers to Antiguan plantations in a 1791 speech:

With respect to the instruction of the slaves in the principles of religion, the happiest effects had resulted, particularly in Antigua, where...they had so far profited, that the planters themselves confessed their value, as property, had been raised one-third by their increased habits of regularity and industry. (Clarkson 2:228)

Wilberforce's speech provides an example of the religious and economic preoccupations that are akin to what occurs at Mansfield as well. Emphasizing the slaves' increased value on the market, a result of better treatment to be sure, reveals that ameliorative projects were motivated by *economic need*.⁵ At *Mansfield Park*, Fanny's worth is also monitored in terms of her value on the marriage market and her status as a servant for Lady Bertram, who frequently asserts that she "cannot do without her" (*MP* 223). Her worth is measured by her usefulness, a requirement that Fanny herself is keenly aware. For example, during rehearsals for the play, Fanny is "at peace" for she was "occasionally useful to all" (*MP* 130).

Wilberforce's speech also utilizes the rhetoric of religious indoctrination by confessing that the improvement of a slave's welfare was achieved by the introduction of civilization, particularly through religious instruction. Wilberforce explains, in *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice, and Humanity of the British Empire, in behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies*, that the most serious of all the "vices" of slavery is the "lack of religious and moral instruction" (26). In *Mansfield Park*, religious authority is presented with skepticism for its proselytic motivations. Mary Crawford voices a number of scathing remarks about the effects of religious teachings that are striking for their logic

⁵ Selwyn Carrington argues that amelioration efforts were economically motivated in *The Sugar Industry And The Abolition Of The Slave Trade, 1775-1810*. This argument is further explored in Chapter Three.

and honesty. Indeed, Edmund is hard-pressed to argue with her when she accuses religious leaders of imposing strict regulations that they do not follow themselves (*MP* 68-9), revealing that piety is often assigned as a control mechanism rather than inspired as a moral agent. Wilberforce's testimony about the high caliber of Antiguan slaves, which happens to be the exact location of Sir Thomas' plantation, highlights some of the control mechanisms to which the novel calls negative attention.

Edmund and Fanny conform to and are guided by these Evangelical ideals. Their fidelity to this code is unsurprisingly contradicted by their failure to divert the catastrophes that occur at Mansfield, catastrophes that they narrowly escape themselves. Fanny is intelligent and educated, often contemplating the difficulty of her situation, but she has trouble transforming her silent convictions into clear decisions or actions. The emotional turmoil that results portrays the inadequacy of Evangelical strategies to help her make sense of her situation. For example, her nostalgia for home when Sir Thomas sends her to Portsmouth is evidence of her deeply emotional perspective:

The remembrance of all her earliest pleasures, and of what she had suffered in being torn from them, came over her with renewed strength, and it seemed as if to be at home again, would heal every pain that had since grown out of the separation. To be in the centre of such a circle, loved by so many, and more loved by all than she had ever been before, to feel affection without fear or restraint, to feel herself the equal of those who surrounded her... This was a prospect to be dwelt on with a fondness that could be but half acknowledged. (290)

Fanny's desire for a home in which she felt herself "the equal of those who surrounded her" consumes her. The irony of her grateful reaction is only available to the reader: Sir Thomas intends her visit to be a lesson for Fanny to realize the necessity of suppressing romantic fantasies in favour of economic realities. She dwells upon it as if it is a special gift from her uncle, not realizing the transformation of perspective she is about to undergo.

Fanny's hopes for a warm reunion are dashed almost immediately upon her arrival. Feeling the effects of her own privileged existence compared to her biological family, she complains of the dirt and disorder that permeates the Price family's home life. Moira Ferguson connects this noisy, dirty, and chaotic atmosphere with Antigua as the "wild, colonized others, signs of potential disruption and sexual conflict" (134). While it is true that Portsmouth represents an undesirable and previously idealized reality for Fanny, it does not necessarily follow that it represents an ultimate absence of morality. Indeed, if this were the case it is curious that Fanny, who is from Portsmouth, represents the best that can be said for the moral caliber of Mansfield. The Prices' household disrupts Fanny's idealized notion of "home," but it is certainly not the wild, sexually dangerous place that Ferguson describes. These are attributes that would better describe Mansfield.

The lasting significance of Fanny's experiences at Portsmouth is not the Price family's lack of decency or even their extreme poverty; it is that she does not belong. Her homecoming does not invoke the fanfare she imagined and her disappointment is severe. Fanny realizes her extreme displacement but typically blames herself for expecting too much: "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? She could have none, so long lost sight of! . . .*She* only was to blame” (*MP* 300). In Austen’s next novel *Emma*, Mr. Knightley identifies more closely this precarious position: the lower-class Harriet Smith “cannot gain by [Emma’s] acquaintance. Hartfield will only put her out of conceit with all the other places she belongs to. She will grow just refined enough to be uncomfortable with those among whom birth and circumstances have placed her home” (31). Fanny’s opportunity for upward social mobility has, in reality, produced a hybrid existence. Indeed, Fanny no longer belongs anywhere and her desperation produces nostalgic and false representations of her present and past experiences.

This nostalgic desperation, once having produced a longing for Portsmouth, now influences her opinion of Mansfield, a place where “every body had their due importance; every body’s feelings were consulted” (*MP* 308). Fanny’s treatment at Mansfield, however, is certainly quite the opposite: Fanny’s feelings and well-being are frequently ignored. Susan Fraiman also identifies the extreme irony that accompanies Fanny’s wavering opinions: “The Mansfield we have seen has been nothing but contention, jealousy, and insensitivity to others. . . .Portsmouth. . . is crowded, chaotic, greasy, and alcoholic—awash with stereotypes of the urban poor. But for all this, it only literalizes what at Mansfield is disorder of a more profound and hypocritical kind” (210). The juxtaposition shows that wealth does not produce morality any more than poverty creates immorality. Although Fanny does not recognize this larger truth, her analysis of the similarity between Lady Bertram and her mother shows her awareness that “where nature had made so little difference, circumstances should have made so much” (*MP* 320). She

begins to realize that wealth has its obvious advantages and this realization aggravates the high standard to which she holds Henry. He becomes a less repulsive option for her future stability. Fanny experiences the difficulty of resisting material comforts when faced with the hardships and noises of poverty, especially when a second displacement would not return her *home*.

Fanny's deeply emotional perspective, however, does not always contribute to her decisions. She also experiences this frustrated tension and confusion when she attempts to confront ethically ambiguous situations that do not necessarily involve her. When Edmund goes to her to receive her approbation for his involvement in the play, Fanny gives him no strong encouragement and his resolve to participate weighs heavily on her: "Was he not deceiving himself? Was he not wrong? Alas! it was all Miss Crawford's doing" (123). Fanny recognizes the inconsistency of his character but she cannot bring herself to place blame where it is deserved; she diverts it to Mary. The free indirect discourse of the narrator at once sympathizes with Fanny's logic but also reproaches her readiness to excuse Edmund for his bad decision. These instances of moral confusion cause Fanny to resort to a quiet conservatism even though she may feel differently than she is able to confess. Her warning to Maria during the ha-ha scene is indicative of her cautious personality. Although she senses the danger goes beyond a physical threat, she cannot produce a convincing argument: "You will hurt yourself Miss Bertram... You had better not go" (79). Fanny raises the alarm but the propriety that manages her capacity to verbalize the real danger restricts her from identifying it. That is, the gate scene describes Maria's deep feelings of agitated restriction and disregard for her fiancé. It

foreshadows that, when tempted, Maria will hurdle herself over the obstacle again with Henry Crawford at her side.

Fanny is also unable to identify the real danger of the family's private theatre. Edmund briefly recognizes Maria's delicate situation in acting with Henry: "It is a *very* anxious period for her" (99). But he resorts to Sir Thomas' expected disapproval of acting as the pivot of his resistance: "I am convinced that my father would totally disapprove" (100). Likewise, Fanny is appalled at the indecorum of the female parts but she is paralyzed to act on her conviction, believing that Edmund would make the necessary objection: "Agatha and Amelia appeared to her in their different ways so totally improper for home representation...she could hardly suppose her cousins could be aware of what they were engaging in; and longed to have them roused as soon as possible by the remonstrance which Edmund would certainly make" (108). These brief identifications of the real threats of the play are not fully explored by any of the characters. Even Sir Thomas' objections are not related to the threat of confused intimacy: he is simply shocked that it had "assumed so serious a character" (144). The real danger is, of course, that Henry and Maria are allowed a close proximity that is shameful in its disregard for Mr. Rushworth and provokes risky emotions in Maria, who begins to confuse attention that Henry gives *while acting* for real affection. On account of the play, Henry enjoys a wide range of freedom for his flirtation with Maria and is also protected from accusations of harbouring real emotions. *Mansfield Park* exposes the risk involved in these provocations, demonstrating their power even in feigned reality. Playing out on the stage what they are forbidden to do in real life, the household comes alive with excitement. However, these provocations also contribute to the very real

heartache and confused sense of self that ensues for Maria, Julia, Mr. Rushworth, and Edmund. Generally, these dangers go unnoticed by the players, amplifying the extent to which propriety can be manipulated. That Fanny and Edmund recognize that something is amiss is the best that can be said for the residents at Mansfield but they have difficulty verbalizing their disapproval and their convictions are easily set aside to accommodate their emotional desires. Thus Fanny's disapproval becomes hypocritical because she observes every rehearsal and aids in every scene. Her fear of being watched is eventually revealed to be the real reason she declines to accept a part. Likewise, Edmund's stoicism bends to accommodate his participation because of his jealousy over Miss Crawford. They have been trained in the ways of propriety, able to identify what they *should* oppose but unable to name the real threat.

Edmund's struggle with ethical considerations is not limited to this misplaced objection about the play. He frequently misdiagnoses the action around him and is often dismissive of Fanny's more discerning observations. It is tempting to excuse Edmund from a more stern criticism on account of his kindness towards Fanny but his treatment of her is not always empathetic. For example, he arrogantly ignores Fanny's better judgment about Henry's interest in Maria:

“If Miss Bertram were not engaged,” said Fanny, cautiously, “I could sometimes almost think that he admired her more than Julia.”

“Which is, perhaps, more in favour of his liking Julia best, than you, Fanny, may be aware; for I believe it often happens, that a man, before he has quite made up his own mind, will distinguish the sister or intimate friend of the woman he is really thinking of, more than the

woman herself. Crawford has too much sense to stay here if he found himself in any danger from Maria; and I am not at all afraid for her, after such a proof as she has given, that her feelings are not strong.”

Fanny supposed she must have been mistaken, and meant to think differently in future; but with all that submission to Edmund could do, and all the help of the coinciding looks and hints which she occasionally noticed in some of the others, and which seemed to say that Julia was Mr. Crawford’s choice, she knew not always what to think. (*MP* 92)

Fanny’s perceptive surveillance is dismissed as naivety and also reveals the extent to which Edmund is willing to manipulate his judgment in order to maintain his high regard for Henry Crawford, attached as he is to Henry’s sister Mary. Later, Edmund actively seeks Fanny for her approbation regarding his decision to join the play: “I am not comfortable without it,” he says (*MP* 122). But, he cleverly twists Fanny’s response in order to go away with an affirmation of his own initial inclinations: “She could not finish the generous effusion [about Mary’s kindness]. Her conscience stopt her in the middle, but Edmund was satisfied” (122). Edmund is poised for Fanny’s consent, justifying his own behaviour by appealing to Fanny’s need to please him. His ignorance of Fanny’s true feelings is revealed again when Sir Thomas recruits his services to speak to Fanny on behalf of Crawford. They are convinced that, if given time, she would eventually accept his proposal of marriage. Although she pleads with Edmund to understand that she “cannot approve his character,” he perseveres until he arrives at the conclusion to which he had already come: “You have now given exactly the explanation which I ventured to make for you” (277). Although Fanny’s “feelings were all in revolt,” she feels trapped

by Edmund's sly manipulation of her words (278). In this moment, Fanny is desperate for her real feelings to be affirmed but even Edmund is ignorant about them.

In addition to his lack of empathy for and ignorance of Fanny's real feelings, Edmund's sense of morality is grounded primarily in manners and conduct that conveniently allow modification when comfort or desire call for it. His passionate objection to the play is later revised to allow for his participation, cleverly reprising the pillar of his argument: the family must be protected from the impropriety of inviting an outsider to act with them. It is clear, however, that he modifies his response because he is jealous: Mary Crawford must not act alongside anyone but him. Furthermore, Edmund criticizes Mary's witty yet scathing remarks not because he censures her opinions but because "there is impropriety in making them public" (51). Finally, Edmund and Sir Thomas maintain throughout the novel that a clergyman's place is with his parishioners, arguing that moral authority is not effective unless one is consistently present (194). The end of the novel quietly undermines Edmund's ethical stance when he and Fanny move to the Mansfield parsonage, away from Thornton Lacey, when they began to feel the need for an "increase of income" (372). He has become another version of Sir Thomas' absent and dubious authority on his plantation in Antigua as well as at home, spouting the rhetoric of principle and propriety but lacking any real conviction.

Fanny and Edmund are thus much more than caricatures of a moral ideal. Rather, they should be considered as realistic: they experience conflicts of conscience but do not always act on their stated convictions. Likewise, Mary Crawford is often incorrectly treated as a static representation of corruption, as Fanny's nemesis. Thus she is often diagnosed as brazen, vulgar, and dangerous. Mary Poovey concludes that Fanny "finally

engages Edmund's love, not by aggressively exposing *Mary's treachery*, but through the irresistible appeal of her constant love" (219, emphasis added). Kay Tourney Souter sees Mary Crawford as "destructive," taking delight in lying, and as "[a] schemer to the bootstraps...[who] believe[s] that feelings are tools, if not in fact weapons, to be used when useful, and an investment against possible future need" (213, 209). According to Joseph Lew, Mary and Henry "inhabit a realm vicious enough to corrupt young women, as Mary's shamelessly open reference to homosexual sodomy, to '*Rears and Vices*,' makes abundantly clear" (294). These conclusions encourage readers to assume the worst of Mary's motivations: she is treacherous, scheming, destructive, manipulative, vicious, corrupt, and shameless. Poovey and Souter do not cite specific examples for their sweeping statements about Mary's character; their negativity seems to be connected to the extent she will go to win Edmund's heart or to help Henry win Fanny's. In these cases, Mary is either competition for Fanny or an accomplice for Henry's unwanted attention. This default to Fanny's perspective, however, is unwarranted by the text's treatment of Mary, as I will show shortly. Likewise, Lew's "abundantly clear" conclusion that Mary is a vicious and corrupting force is complicated by the text's positive presentation of her anti-establishment views: she is outspoken and witty, providing thoughtful commentary and comedic relief.⁶

The text's treatment of Mary deserves consideration that is not based on Fanny's feelings or perspective. Barbara Seeber agrees that "the text is much more ambiguous towards Mary Crawford than this (monologic) reading implies" (47). Negative readings

⁶ Lew also neglects to note that there has been some debate about the degree of ribaldry of Mary's pun about the Navy. Jane Stabler notes in the Oxford World's Classics Edition that the fact that "Edmund feels 'grave' rather than aghast in response suggests that he thinks Mary is being indiscreet rather than outrageous" (400). Mary refers to large bottoms and generally bad behaviour, but not sodomy.

of Mary's character are prompted by an assumption that she is privy to Fanny's feelings for Edmund, feelings that go beyond their familial relationship and that she acts in order to intervene or steal Edmund's heart away from Fanny. But the narrator explicitly declares that Fanny would have been susceptible to Henry's courtship "had not Fanny's heart been guarded in a way *unsuspected by Miss Crawford*" (181, emphasis added). Mary Crawford *does not suspect* that Fanny is in love with Edmund. Furthermore, Mary's kindness toward Fanny is often overlooked. After Fanny receives another verbal attack by Mrs. Norris, the narrator's description of Mary's "astonished" reaction and her effort to comfort Fanny prevents a treacherous reading of Mary's motivations. The narrator interjects here to explain that Mary's actions are a result of "the really good feelings by which she was almost purely governed" (MP 116). Her kindness is particularly significant because she acts on her conviction, whereas Edmund is "too angry to speak" (116).

Further to Mary's attractive qualities, she is often fitted with the most objective and witty comments in the novel. The arrogance of the wealthy, the financially driven marriage market, and the hypocrisy of the Church are frequent targets for her cynicism. Her comments are brief but honest, identifying coercive forms of control that others seem to condone. Regarding the arrogance of the wealthy, she says: "Nothing amuses me more than the easy manner with which everybody settles the abundance of those who have a great deal less than themselves" (177). Skeptical of the "manoeuvring business" of marriage, Mary's opinion is loudly asserted: "there is not one in a hundred of either sex, who is not taken in when they marry. Look where I will, I see that it *is* so; and I feel that it *must* be so, when I consider that it is, of all transactions, the one in which people expect

most from others, and are least honest themselves” (36-7). The narrator, it seems, also shares this skepticism: Maria is described as being “prepared for matrimony by an hatred of home, restraint, and tranquility; by the misery of disappointed affection, and contempt of the man she was to marry” (158). When her statements about the hypocrisy of the pious are challenged by Edmund, his arguments are less convincing than Mary’s rebuttals.

Mary says:

“It must do the heads of the family a great deal of good to force all the poor house-maids and footmen to leave business and pleasure, and say their prayers twice a day, while they are inventing excuses themselves for staying away...The young Mrs. Eleanors and Mrs. Bridgets—starched up into seeming piety, but with heads full of something very different—especially if the poor chaplain were not worth looking at—and, in those days, I fancy parsons were very inferior even to what they are now.”

For a few moments she was unanswered. Fanny coloured and looked at Edmund, but felt too angry for speech; and he needed a little recollection before he could say, “Your lively mind can hardly be serious even on serious subjects. You have given us an amusing sketch, and human nature cannot say it was not so” (68-9).

Edmund is embarrassed here: Mary does not yet know that he intends to become a clergyman. He glosses her honesty by calling it an “amusing sketch”: she is funny but not to be taken seriously. Edmund’s treatment of Mary, like some of the current criticism, is reductive: when he agrees he exaggerates her goodness and femininity but when he disagrees he dismisses her observations as jest or exaggerated cynicism, even as

“feminine lawlessness” (75). Mary is unfairly treated by Fanny, Edmund, and her critics as a dangerous seductress, embodying all of the characteristics traditionally attributed to independent and outspoken women. She is threatening because she questions the validity of established customs and beliefs.

Thus, Mary’s wit and intelligence become unsurprisingly problematic. After Mary is established as an attractive and entertaining character, the plot moves toward situations for which Mary’s candidness would prove disastrous. As Barbara Seeber argues, “to provide ideological closure, Edmund and Fanny have to be right and Mary horribly wrong” (53). She is loyal to her brother to a fault because she is aware of his inconstancy and poor motivations yet she conspires on his behalf in order to manipulate Fanny’s emotions. Additionally, her suggestion that Tom Bertram’s death would have positive effects for Edmund’s financial position is true but in bad taste: she suggests it to Fanny during the height of Tom’s sickness. Proposing the advantage to “Sir Edmund” as a “natural,” “philanthropic and virtuous” reaction to Tom’s physical danger, Mary is decidedly cold about the family’s concern for his health (*MP* 341). Mary’s honest engagement with many touchy circumstances is usually refreshing but here it is decidedly harsh.

But the “ideological closure” that Seeber writes about is usually connected to Mary’s failure to condemn Maria’s affair. Edmund’s view that Mary’s response shows a “blunted delicacy and a corrupted, vitiated mind” is often taken as narrative fact (358). However, Mary’s response to the scandal is quite compassionate compared to the family’s pre-occupation with their public disgrace. It is easy to understand the family’s horrified reaction: common as it was, an affair and separation would serve to taint the

family's reputation. But unlike the rest of the Bertram family, Mary has Maria's well-being in mind. She suggests that they be allowed to marry and thus the family's disgrace could be lessened by their acceptance of the marriage and Maria's banishment from good society would not be permanent (359). Mary's suggestion stems from two areas of conviction. First, her view of marriage throughout the novel is that it is a business; her reaction to the scandal is in keeping with this view. She is expected to participate in the business of marriage but is also scorned for engaging too seriously. Second, she displays a keen understanding of the economic, social, and familial concerns that would face Maria were she abandoned by Henry, who would not endure such harsh consequences. Souter's analysis of reconsigned children shows their deep awareness of the consequences of stepping outside moral restrictions: "they have to be good to be loved" (208). Mary's position in this society, like Maria's, is not guaranteed. Ironically, it is her concern for Maria's well-being that causes Edmund to reject her, dashing her hopes for future security as well.

The narrative structure, however, requires that Mary be marginalized in order to show how the threat of feminine lawlessness is contained. Her concern for the future of her financial and social position is condemned because she places these values ahead of a much more important social constraint: a woman has asserted her independence and freedom to choose extra-marital sexual partners. Maaja Stewart argues similarly: "the unrelenting defensive patriarchy dramatized in the novel cannot endure the alternative perspectives...that Mary's wit represents" (135). Her compassionate response to Maria's affair is processed as an affirmation of the freedom of women to step outside the

boundaries of patriarchy. They must be punished for their rebellion: Maria for her affair and Mary for her refusal to condemn it.

My point here is not to exonerate Mary from all her behaviour. It is only to say that because she has been set up as a foil for Fanny, a polarity that sees Fanny as a moral ideal and thus Mary as a corrupt and selfish individual, her character has been stripped of its complexity. Just as Fanny cannot be seen as the epitome of morality, Mary cannot be dismissed as villainous, unfeminine, and selfishly motivated. In placing Mary and Fanny next to each other, the text compares responses to their very similar situations. Mary's rebellious and outspoken nature, "unfeminine" as Edmund describes it, comes to be interpreted as a threat to the proper structure of society. Fanny, on the other hand, in her submission, gratitude, and acceptance, is rewarded when others fall from grace.

Fanny's lapses in judgment and lack of conviction demonstrate that she is an inappropriate moral ideal, though it is quite easy to sympathize with her position. She is, like the others, a complex character susceptible to the fluctuations of emotion and reason. Because she is rewarded in the end, it is tempting to view her and her marriage to Edmund as a sort of affirmation of the Evangelical code of ethics that guides her towards this end. But this affirmation does not consider the accidental nature of Fanny's rise in social status, nor does it consider her limitations as a heroine. Mary Crawford thus becomes a more sympathetic character. When Fanny's response to her situation is affirmed at the end of the novel and Mary's vulgarity is condemned, the novel demonstrates that only the Fannys of this world are rewarded and, generally, at the expense of other revolutionary voices. Mary Crawford and Maria Bertram rebel against their oppression and are consequently turned out of the Mansfield circle. The swift

disposal of these marginal characters and subsequent tidy ending provide narrative closure, perhaps to satisfy an urge to end Fanny's torture, but it does not adequately deal with the imbalance of punishment and reward so provocatively described in its pages, particularly because it seems that Sir Thomas, Tom, Edmund, and Henry escape chastisement. The novel supplies one final thought to tantalize those of us who are unsatisfied: "That punishment, the public punishment of disgrace, should in a just measure attend [Henry's] share of the offence, is, we know, not one of the barriers, which society gives to virtue. In this world, the penalty is less equal than could be wished" (368). Quitting those representatives of "guilt and misery" (362), Austen restores order and harmony, suggesting also a restoration of patriarchal authority. Fanny is given all the ethical tools of propriety she needs to justify behaviour that capitulates to authority and to participate in this hierarchical society without a nagging conscience. *Mansfield Park* invokes Fanny's Evangelical personality in order to expose its inadequacy: her strategy for survival is perhaps all she can manage but it does little to disturb the gleaming surface of superficial propriety that governs Mansfield Park.

Just as the fissures beneath *Mansfield Park's* surfaces appear when Fanny asks her famous question, so the novel's domestic borders widen through Fanny's resemblance to the literary figure of the 'grateful Negro,' another strategy for survival. Contemporary tales that involved the 'grateful Negro' encouraged planters to ameliorate conditions on their plantations; in return, slaves would respond with gratitude and loyalty, responses that would stabilize a planter's assets from within the ranks of the subjugated. In Chapter Three, I suggest that Fanny represents such a figure and, because of her limited autonomy, chooses to bid for patriarchal favour through submission and gratitude

in order to preserve her physical, emotional, and psychological safety. In doing so, Fanny functions as a stabilizing force for the status quo. By invoking Fanny's status as victim and exploring her limited power as a repressive force against rebellion, *Mansfield Park* shows how, both at home and abroad, patriarchal hierarchies of control are protected and maintained.

Chapter Three

The 'grateful Negro' at *Mansfield Park*

As a microcosm of plantation life, Austen's *Mansfield Park* demonstrates the practical details of imposed authority and the conditions that lead to rebellion. Because Sir Thomas is absent from both his British estate and his West Indian plantation, the physical presence on which his authority relies is intermittently threatened; he requires ambassadors of his authority while he is away. As such an ambassador, Fanny Price voices disapproval and, though the results are somewhat limited, she also acts as a repressive force against rebellion. Functioning as a kind of 'grateful Negro,' a sentimentalized and popularized literary figure of the late eighteenth century, Fanny wields no established authority and has limited influence. However, she is an important agent for Sir Thomas because her submissive position represents the standard for his approval against which the other female characters are measured. Sir Thomas rewards Fanny's behaviour and hence ensures that the hierarchy of his authority remains intact. Fanny Price does not, in *Mansfield Park*, represent a moral ideal or a progressive voice of reformation, nor does she represent an agent of emancipation. In fact, the novel inspires the opposite conclusion: Fanny Price's enduring sense of gratitude towards Sir Thomas and his family is exposed as a control mechanism that stabilizes hierarchies of power by placing value on Fanny as an ideal of propriety, gratitude, and morality. Consequently, the rebellions of those who exist on the margins of the text and society are punished severely. *Mansfield Park* connects Fanny Price and this pessimistic conclusion to the 'grateful Negro,' indicting this planter's fantasy of a loyal and grateful slave that would

heal the divide between master and slave as nothing more than an agent of perpetuating slavery and domination.

Perhaps the most famous example of this sentimental description of life on a plantation is Maria Edgeworth's "The Grateful Negro." The tale is clearly aimed at plantation owners to inspire more benevolent treatment of their slaves in order to repress rebellion and improve economic efficiency. The moral hero, Mr. Edwards, is a kind and humane master:

[Mr. Edwards] wished that there was no such thing as slavery in the world; but he was convinced, by the arguments of those who have the best means of obtaining information, that the sudden emancipation of the negroes would rather increase than diminish their miseries. His benevolence, therefore, confined itself within the bounds of reason. He adopted those plans for the amelioration of the state of the slaves which appeared to him the most likely to succeed without producing any violent agitation or revolution. (232)

Edgeworth's tale is didactic and its logical arguments are often poorly managed; it relies on commonly held beliefs and not on thorough explanations for the continued exploitation of labour. Mr. Edwards appeals to an unreal yet powerfully intimidating force when he refers to the arguments of "those who have the best means of obtaining information" for his conclusions (232).

The propaganda contained in this tale does not need to justify its conclusions because it conforms to commonly held beliefs that rely on unfounded but unchallenged notions of truth. It also exploits tendencies towards conformity and social decorum by

stressing the importance of reasonable behaviour. Thus, Mr. Edwards is prudent, reasonable, and “engaged in no wild speculations” (234). He is a gentleman. Although the narrative contains seeds of distrust for the “necessary and immutable order of things,” the moral thrust is to quell the conscience of those masters whose allegiance to the system is wavering due to the growing strength of the abolitionist argument (252). As the tale demonstrates, a ‘grateful Negro’ was a planter’s greatest asset, an ally who would repress rebellion and provide information and loyalty to the master. The tale insists that the enslaved also benefited by this system. However, it provides no clear explanation for this belief except that the risk of death in a rebellion is very high and a slave would do well to avoid participation in an uprising. Cleverly delivered, the tale attempts to mask the true reasons behind new reformations that would ameliorate poor conditions on slave-run plantations, imbedded in the language of benevolence tempered by reason. That is, Edgeworth’s tale encourages the kind treatment of slaves in order to protect the economic interests of the master and to discourage the slaves’ rebellion. As George Boulukos has suggested in discussing earlier but similar tales of the ‘grateful Negro,’⁷ “reformers improve slaves’ lives only in order to enslave them more securely” (161). In short, they are controlled by gratitude.

The ‘grateful Negro’ fantasy existed only in literature. Maaja Stewart explains that, historically, slaves generally refused to respond to amelioration efforts (136). However, though this prototype failed on the plantation, the ideal British woman was successfully controlled through this discourse owing to her need to distinguish herself from the “ungrateful and undisciplined female slave” (136). I agree with Stewart’s

⁷ Boulukos describes Edward Kimber’s 1754 *History of the Life and Adventures of Mr. Anderson*, Sarah Scott’s 1766 *History of Sir George Ellison*, and Henry Mackenzie’s 1777 *Julia de Roubigne*.

analysis and would add that *Mansfield Park*'s indictment of this ideal is that it serves to perpetuate systems of oppression and not, as some abolitionists would claim, to support emancipation. Indeed, had ameliorative efforts succeeded on plantations, their relative stability would have been, according to the conclusion of *Mansfield Park*, decidedly increased. Although it has been argued by Clara Tuite, Moira Ferguson, and Peter Smith that *Mansfield Park* demonstrates the positive effects of amelioration and consequential moral development, I argue that the novel emphasizes the negative effects of amelioration and dismantles the myth that the 'grateful Negro' figure is an emancipatory agent. That is, the 'grateful Negro,' both on the plantation and at home, was merely a strategy for owners to maintain their wealth and status and to oppose revolution.

Benevolence to a lucky few allowed owners to claim that they were sympathetic to abolitionist feeling, while also maintaining their superior status of power, wealth, and unchallenged authority, not unlike the way in which Fanny is adopted by the Bertram family as a token gesture of benevolence for the poor Price family, easing the conscience of Mrs. Norris and Sir Thomas but not the Price family's poverty.

Anti-slavery rhetoric of the late eighteenth century is commonly yet erroneously equated with humanitarian goals and values (Boulukos 161). Of course, this humanitarian impetus is partially true but it should not be historically connected to the 'benevolence' of slave owners. Selwyn Carrington supplies evidence for this claim and concludes that amelioration policies were economically motivated:

While one may be tempted to relate these changes to the white humanitarian impulses toward the African slaves, it is an incontrovertible

fact that amelioration...was more concerned with arresting the decline of the plantations and less with humaneness to the enslaved population. (164)

Owners were encouraged to supply proper care and supplies for their slaves with the promise that these improvements would increase efficiency and production (141-6). Thus, the concept of the morally-treated slave—a paradoxical misnomer—created the opposite effect: amelioration policies actually served to maintain and ensure a future slave population through improved economic strategies and the suppression of rebellions. Ultimately, reform “becomes an argument not for equality, but for paternalism: it claims to demonstrate that while African slaves are human, with basic affective capacities, they are nonetheless incapable of the ‘independence’ so highly valued in European workers” (Boulukos 173). *Mansfield Park* explores this phenomenon of unrest, rebellion, and the maintenance of authority by placing Sir Thomas outside the family circle for a time, describing the excitement and rebellion that ensues, and finally reinstating his paternal influence.

Those that live under Sir Thomas’ unchallenged authority at Mansfield Park exhibit characteristics of repressive agitation; the conditions that lead to rebellion are vividly present. For example, the Crawfords and the Bertram children are described as being loosed onto the grounds at Sotherton:

[T]he young people, meeting with an outward door, temptingly open on a flight of steps which led immediately to turf and shrubs, and all the sweets of pleasure-grounds, as by one impulse, one wish for air and liberty, all walked out. (*MP* 71)

Sir Thomas' children all endure a claustrophobic desire for experience and liberty. Tom participates intermittently in family events but he is frequently absent for extended periods of time, exercising his independence as the eldest male. Maria describes herself as having ““a feeling of restraint and hardship—I cannot get out, as the starling said”” (78). Here, she refers to Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* but also her own imprisonment. Flattered by the attention she receives from Henry but confused about his motivations, Maria begins to show the effects of his manipulations and questions her engagement to Rushworth. But, like all Sir Thomas' children, Maria feels the “restraint which her father imposed” and eventually marries in order to escape him (158). Julia's elopement with Yates is similarly described: “her increased dread of her father and of home, on that event—imagining its certain consequence to herself would be greater severity and restraint—made her hastily resolve on avoiding such immediate horrors at all risks” (366). Julia enters a risky marriage to avoid her father's strict authority.

Just as Tom, Maria, and Julia seek distance from Sir Thomas' authority, the excitement about performing the play when Sir Thomas is abroad testifies to the entire household's general frustration. His re-entry frightens and alarms everyone. Uniting them all in a “moment of absolute horror,” Sir Thomas' homecoming inspires fear: “What will become of us? what is to be done now?” (137). Edmund discusses the restoration of “sameness and gloom” later with Fanny and laments the loss of the liveliness that had typified their lives for a short time: “I believe our evenings are rather returned to what they were, than assuming a new character. The novelty was in their being lively.—Yet, how strong the impression that only a few weeks will give! I have been feeling as if we had never lived so before” (154). Although there is a clear sense

that the play's rehearsals had agitated the already delicate relationships at Mansfield Park, Edmund's recollection is striking for its nostalgia and sad resignation. Because the guideline for permissible behaviour fluctuates according to the presence or absence of Sir Thomas, the residents of Mansfield begin to regard him with growing animosity. They are tantalized by forbidden fruit and feel burdened with the weight of obedience when Sir Thomas returns. Such moments of liberation and the sudden reinstatement of strict authority foster the conditions that produce rebellious unrest. Maaja Stewart connects the limitations of Sir Thomas' authority to his absenteeism: his authority is only effective when he is physically present (113). Because Sir Thomas rules by subjugation, he inspires no loyalty when he is absent.

Loyalty, as in Maria Edgeworth's tale, is minimally inspired from within the ranks of the subjugated. Fanny is fostered to become such a figure and it is perhaps these 'grateful Negro' characteristics that cause Sir Thomas to treat her with a newfound benevolence when he returns from Antigua: she is the only member of the household who did not participate actively in the private theatricals and remained loyal to Sir Thomas' disapproval. Furthermore, unlike the other metaphorical "negro" slaves in the Bertram household, Fanny is indebted to Sir Thomas. She represents the undeserving poor, those that are required to respond with gratitude for the smallest of kindnesses bestowed upon them. This perpetual state of gratitude is a useful trait for Sir Thomas: he can count on her loyalty. Fanny's treatment as a commodity, victim status, lack of general safety, limited power as a sexual entity, and perpetual sense of gratitude associate her with the 'grateful Negro' of plantation tales.

Indeed, Fanny is treated as a commodity from her first moment at Mansfield Park: Mrs. Norris is prepared to help, provided that the “trouble and expense of it to them, would be nothing compared to the benevolence of the action” (*MP* 5). She invests in Fanny, willing to bet that their benevolence would no doubt bring her an advantageous marriage. “Give a girl an education,” she says, “and introduce her properly into the world, and ten to one but she has the means of settling well, without farther expense to any body” (5). Fanny understands this expectation, feeling an acute sense of gratitude and need to be useful. However, Mrs. Norris and Lady Bertram often take advantage of her willingness to serve. They often discuss Fanny’s social opportunities as being permissible only if she is currently dispensable. In a typical moment when Fanny’s health is sacrificed for the sake of picking roses, her resulting headache and fatigue are discussed at length as if she is not present and able to comment on her own condition (57-9). Such discussions emphasize Fanny’s status as a kind of servant and charity case.

Fanny’s social status in the Bertram household begins a steady upswing when Maria and Julia leave Mansfield: “Fanny’s consequence increased on the departure of her cousins...Not only at home did her value increase, but at the Parsonage too” (160). Reflecting economic fluctuations of supply and demand, Fanny’s importance rises only because others are unavailable. She is subject to market worth. As a result, Henry notices her charm when he is no longer distracted by Maria: he begins to pursue her hand in marriage. Consequently, Sir Thomas is inspired to rationalize her previous treatment:

“I know what [Mrs. Norris’] sentiments have always been. The principle was good in itself, but it may have been, and I believe *has been* carried too far in your case.... You will take in the whole of the past, you will consider

times, persons, and probabilities, and you will feel that *they* were not least your friends who were educating and preparing you for that mediocrity of condition which *seemed* to be your lot.—Though their caution may prove eventually unnecessary, it was kindly meant; and of this you may be assured, that every advantage of affluence will be doubled by the little privations and restrictions that may have been imposed.” (244-5)

Sir Thomas’ admission of Fanny’s abuse is undermined by his explanation: the family’s past mistreatment was merely an attempt to prepare her for ““that mediocrity of condition which seemed to be [her] lot”” (245). This justification, however, is contradicted almost immediately when Sir Thomas argues that the restrictions imposed upon Fanny were inspired by a “kindly meant” contribution to her future affluence. In the end, his defensive ‘apology’ deteriorates into a cruel attack on Fanny’s character. As Fanny observes earlier: “‘Advise’ was his word, but it was the advice of absolute power” (220).

Fanny’s fluctuating status in Sir Thomas’ household contributes to her status as victim: she has no control over her fate. Furthermore, Joan Klingel Ray argues that Fanny exhibits all of the characteristics that modern researchers identify as “the battered-child syndrome” (16). The abuse that Fanny experiences under Sir Thomas’ rule is transmitted by his entire family. Julia and Maria have an enduring sense of their superiority over Fanny, while Mrs. Bertram is passively ignorant about Fanny’s happiness. Tom, although he is intermittently kind, is generally a caricature of the selfish, eldest son and treats Fanny as more of a prop than a sister or cousin. During Fanny’s first ball, for example, Tom hypocritically whisks her away to dance only to avoid playing cards with Dr. Grant, saying, “‘It raises my spleen more than any thing, to have the

pretence of being asked, of being given a choice, and at the same time addressed in such a way as to oblige one to do the very thing—whatever it be!” (MP 95). Although Tom’s complaint encapsulates Fanny’s constant experience at Mansfield, his privileged position blinds him to Fanny’s perspective. Even Edmund becomes neglectful when he is distracted by Mary. His manipulation and ignorance of Fanny’s true feelings, discussed at length in Chapter Two, result in frequent emotional dilemmas for Fanny.

There is no equal, however, to the humiliation and emotional cruelty Fanny experiences on account of Mrs. Norris’ selfish personality. For example, when Fanny is invited to the Grants for dinner, Mrs. Norris’ comments are indicative of her precarious sense of superiority:

“I hope you are aware that there is no real occasion for your going into company in this sort of way, or ever dining out at all; and it is what you must not depend upon ever being repeated. Nor must you be fancying, that the invitation is meant as any particular compliment to you; the compliment is intended to your uncle and aunt, and me. Mrs. Grant thinks it a civility due to us to take a little notice of you, or else it would never have come into her head, and you may be very certain, that if your cousin Julia had been at home, you would not have been asked at all.” (172)

Allowing no pleasure and contributing to Fanny’s damaged self-esteem, Mrs. Norris’ cruelty demonstrates the lack of solidarity between those who experience limited autonomies. That is, Mrs. Norris and Fanny would make mutually beneficial allies but their competition for Sir Thomas’ favour pits them against one another. Similarly over-critical of the Grants, she declares that ““people are never respected when they step out of

their proper sphere. Remember *that*, Fanny’” (172). Because Mrs. Norris’ authority exists in a hierarchy of privilege that is subject to fluctuations in power relations, she becomes desperate to maintain her position as Sir Thomas’ right hand, exhibiting panicked and defensive strategies when others resist the established social order or enjoy perceived undeserved favour.

These constant reminders of inferiority manifest themselves in Fanny’s emotional reactions and contribute to her psychological abuse. Her experience at Mansfield is punctuated with frequent experiences of fear, terror, neglect, and “the tremors of a most palpitating heart” (135). Fanny explains these emotional reactions with self-deprecating logic, a survival strategy to manage psychological abuse. For example, the narrator explains that though Fanny “was often mortified by their treatment of her, she thought too lowly of her own claims to feel injured by it” (16). Later, she is described as rating “her own claims to comfort as low even as Mrs. Norris could” (173). Fanny is terrified to offend and paralyzed to act.

As a result of these experiences, deflecting harm and ensuring physical and emotional safety are frequent pre-occupations for Fanny. For example, her warning to Maria at the ha-ha reflects the caution for physical and emotional safety she applies to many situations that confront her: ““You will hurt yourself, Miss Bertram... You had better not go.”” (MP 79). When Fanny finally agrees to fill in for an absent actor in the play, she believes that she has been “properly punished” for attending the rehearsal: “why had not she rather gone to her own room, as she had felt to be *safest*, instead of attending the rehearsal at all?” (135, emphasis added). These apprehensions are echoed when she prepares for her coming out ball:

[Fanny] had too many agitations and fear to have half the enjoyment in anticipation which she ought to have had...[and] was worn down at last to think every thing an evil belonging to the ball, and when sent off with a parting worry to dress, moved as languidly towards her own room, and felt as incapable of happiness as if she had been allowed no share in it. (209)

Because she is terrified to occupy the spotlight for fear of greater scrutiny, her reaction includes a hypersensitive modesty, timidity, and embarrassment. These coping mechanisms are a result not only of her conservative ethical convictions but also her need to deflect harm, to preserve emotional and physical health. As Barbara Seeber has argued, “her stillness is not one of reactionary conservatism: it is the stillness of somebody who is literally afraid to move” (113). Here, Fanny’s sense of danger is highlighted by acute feelings of vulnerability, producing a longing for her own space, a “nest of comforts” where she finds “immediate consolation” from the cruelties that she experiences elsewhere (120, 119).

Not impregnable to interruption, her little attic room is not always a protective haven; she lacks a space in the house where she is truly safe. When Edmund and Mary visit her to rehearse their lines for the play, her little attic becomes a venue of emotional torture as she is forced to provide an audience for this feigned love scene (132-4). Sir Thomas’ visit to Fanny’s room after Henry’s proposal deteriorates into a cruel tirade on Fanny’s character. In what might be called the climax of the novel’s negotiation of power relations, Sir Thomas invades this safe space and wields the full force of his authority, even getting up to stand over Fanny during his lecture (244-5). Later in the day, he organizes another attack, a private meeting for Henry and Fanny in *his* study, to which

she is called formally by the butler (254-8). Sir Thomas establishes his authority, though he is physically absent, through spatial intimidation: that is, the meeting takes place on his turf. And when that fails as well, he decrees a physical exile that displaces Fanny outside her own home. Sir Thomas invokes strategies of verbal, spatial, and physical coercion that invade her sense of security.

It is also pertinent to note that Sir Thomas' treatment of Fanny is punctuated with a degree of sexual harassment: his footsteps invoke the "terror of his former occasional visits" (243). It suggests, as Barbara Seeber describes, a "power dynamic characteristic of sexual abuse" (103). Furthermore, the attention that Sir Thomas grants Fanny upon his return from Antigua is limited to her body, giving a disturbing edge to his interest.

Kissing her affectionately, admiring how much she had grown, even moving her nearer to the light to look at her again, Sir Thomas provokes uncomfortable emotions in Fanny: she is "astonished," "penetrated," and "oppressed" (*MP* 139). Edmund urges her later to receive her uncle's attention with less modesty, saying, "Anybody but myself would have made something more of it, and any body but you would resent that you had not been thought very pretty before;...and your figure—Nay, Fanny, do not turn away about it—it is but an uncle" (154). But Fanny feels more than modesty in this moment and she is not entirely subdued by Edmund's soft rebuttal: she is "distressed by more feelings than he was aware of" (155). Sir Thomas' unwanted attention indicates his awareness that Fanny's sexual maturity provides for her a kind of power previously unavailable.

As a result of Fanny's maturing body, her sexuality becomes another area that she must protect and manage. Kay Torney Souter emphasizes the importance of female sexuality for Fanny, saying that sexual maturity "liberates the slave-child into a world

where she may have a chance to make her own truths and bargains, and to find herself new masters” (213). While she is right to associate power with sexual prowess, a subsequent liberation is too optimistic. Fanny, as Souter confesses, only chooses a new master. This choice is demonstrated by the dilemma over the neck chains, another subtle allusion to slavery-related issues. Here, it is not whether she will be enslaved or not, it is *to whom* she will be enslaved: the cross may be threaded by Edmund’s chain but rejects Henry’s. Fanny’s sexual maturity thus indicates the onset of a new form of abuse.

Such sexual overtones conjure an association with the sexual abuse experienced by female slaves. Patricia Rozema makes this association explicit in her adaptation of *Mansfield Park*, showing graphic descriptions of Sir Thomas’ exploitation of his female slaves overseas. The suggestion that Fanny experiences sexual abuse on a par with a West Indian is, of course, absurd. However, Sir Thomas’ new interest in Fanny’s maturing body does produce a hint of his possible activities in Antigua. Fanny’s maturity marks the moment that she may no longer be treated like a cowering child. Sir Thomas’ actions are based on the imperial conquest of the female body. They function to remind Fanny of her worth as a navigable sexual body and teach her to rely on the limited power that such a position grants.

To all of these abuses, Fanny responds with exaggerated gratitude. The novel is riddled with descriptions of her gratitude or ingratitude, connecting her strongly to the ‘grateful Negro’. A highly effective manipulative force, Fanny’s grateful responses are instinctual but also dictated to her. Although she is mortified to learn that she may have to live with her Aunt Norris, she resolves, “‘I hope I am not ungrateful’” (20). Like her cousins, she feels the relief of Sir Thomas’ departure but “‘a more tender nature suggested

that her feelings were ungrateful, and she really grieved because she could not grieve” (26). When she refuses to join the play, Mrs. Norris dictates Fanny’s expected response: “I shall think her a very obstinate, ungrateful girl, if she does not do what her aunt and cousins wish her—very ungrateful indeed, considering who and what she is” (116). Regardless of Fanny’s feelings, Mrs. Norris expects compliance because she is lower class, a position that does not even grant her personhood: “considering who and *what* she is” (116, emphasis added). Later, Sir Thomas cruelly reprimands her when she refuses Crawford’s proposal of marriage and Fanny feels the full force of his accusations, “so heavy, so multiplied, so rising in dreadful gradation! Self-willed, obstinate, selfish, and ungrateful” (250). As the essence of her transgression, ingratitude describes the height of her depravity. Even Edmund resorts to this manipulative strategy when he encourages her to accept Crawford’s proposal as well: “I cannot suppose that you have not the wish to love him—the natural wish of gratitude” (273). Here, Edmund seizes the power dynamic created by Crawford’s earlier arrangement for William Price’s promotion. Fanny is convinced of her unnatural state and, in a typical moment of self-deprecation, she reprimands herself: “I must be a brute indeed, if I can be really ungrateful!” said she in soliloquy; ‘Heaven defend me from being ungrateful!’” (252). Sincerely distraught over her self-assessed ingratitude, Fanny’s horror becomes comic. She is, however, also described here as having striking awareness of her situation: she identifies ingratitude as her fiercest enemy and beckons divine intervention. Indeed, ingratitude would prove a great impediment to her future position under Sir Thomas’ authority.

Fanny’s attempts to repress rebellion, treatment as a commodity, victim status, lack of general safety, limited power as a sexual entity, and perpetual sense of gratitude

show that she is, indeed, representative of a ‘grateful Negro,’ though this analogy is not without its limitations. Although several female writers of the late eighteenth century incorporated the connection between slaves and women in their writing, these analogies are risky. It renders the experience of both slaves and British women as common, essentializing the status of the victim into a homogenous pool of women and slaves with no historical personality or agency. It thus participates in the imperial discourse of the age that resisted the foreign setting of slavery and plantation life. As Susan Fraiman explains, the “imperialist gesture is to exploit the symbolic value of slavery, while ignoring slaves as suffering and resistant historical subjects” (213). Chandra Mohanty similarly argues that power is exercised in “any discourse that sets up its own authorial subjects as the implicit referent, i.e. the yardstick by which to encode and represent cultural Others” (199)⁸. Indeed, *Mansfield Park* participates in this appropriation of anti-slavery sentiment to gain sympathy for the novel’s main character.

A contemporary example of such appropriation of experience is Hannah More’s pamphlet *The White Slave Trade, Hints towards forming a Bill for the Abolition of the White Female Slave Trade in the Cities of London and Westminster*. Published in 1805, it demonstrates the limits of these comparative strategies: the ‘coming out’ of young debutants is juxtaposed with the selling of slaves. Although the tract encourages Christian women and society to reform its expectations of fashion in support of women’s psychological health, its satiric undercurrent attacks contemporary feminist strategy that compared the lot of women with slaves. Such an instance of this comparison can be found in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*: “Is one half of the

⁸ Mohanty argues generally about Western women writers and the unjustified connections with cultural Others, not specifically about Jane Austen.

human species, like the poor African slaves, to be subject to prejudices that brutalize them?” (ix.par.15). Deirdre Coleman similarly points to Mary Ann Radcliffe, who “rebuked the abolitionists for callously putting the cause of illiterate slaves before that of their own country-women” (354). More’s comparison, however, is so obscene that it bursts the seams of her satirical strategy:

Here are great multitudes of beautiful white creatures, forced away, like their prototypes in Africa, from all the endearing connections of domestic life, separated from their husbands, dragged from their children, ‘till these last are old enough to be also engaged as slaves in the same labour: nay, in some respects, their condition is worse than that of their African brethren; for, if they are less restricted in the article of food, they are more abridged in that of rest. (37)

It becomes unclear whether *The White Slave Trade* is a serious attempt to compare woman and slave in order to fuel rights for women, or to point to the absurdity of these appropriative strategies. More’s long commitment to the abolitionist movement would support the latter but her claim that the ‘slavery’ of women is “worse than that of their African brethren” is an exaggeration that the comparison cannot accommodate. In any case, More’s pamphlet is an example of the precarious and problematic discourses that are produced when the privileged subject encodes personal experience in the language of the cultural Other.

Likewise, Fanny Price’s connection to the ‘grateful Negro’ in *Mansfield Park* is limited in its metaphorical strength. Namely, that though it is possible to point to Fanny’s direct experiences of psychological, verbal, and emotional abuse, her general

position is quite privileged. Her basic needs are cared for; she enjoys a certain amount of autonomy, and she receives education. And while it is prudent to recognize that neglect and coercion are forms of physical abuse and that objectification is a form of sexual abuse, it is not tantamount to assault, rape, or explicit acts of physical abuse. As bell hooks has noted:

the white woman's legal status under patriarchy may have been that of 'property,' but she was in no way subjected to the de-humanization and brutal oppression that was the lot of the slave. When white reformers made synonymous the impact of sexism on their lives, they were not revealing an awareness of our sensitivity to the slave's lot; they were simply appropriating the horror of the slave experience to enhance their own cause. (126)

Gathering all forms and gradations of abuse under a canopy of global power hierarchies, perpetrated both systemically and individually, prevents the telling of nuanced narratives of oppressed experience.

This is precisely the risk of postcolonial criticism that Gayatri Spivak warns against in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" which critiques the extent to which disinterested intellectuals can access and represent the colonial subaltern subject. The subaltern subject, she says, must speak for herself; the disinterested intellectual can assist in this process but cannot and should not attempt to speak for or about the subaltern experience. The intellectual must resist the urge to assume the subaltern's voice; the task is rather to clear the space for the resisting subject to speak but it "is the slippage from rendering visible the mechanism to rendering vocal the individual...that is consistently

troublesome” (81). Thus, in *Mansfield Park*, the troubling factor or slippage that occurs is that the reader is tempted to assume experiential knowledge of colonial power and the cultural Other in the foreign space of slavery. Does *Mansfield Park* connect these domestic and imperial spaces to identify mechanisms of power production and clear a space for the subaltern to speak? While it is certainly a viable conclusion to say that *Mansfield Park* delivers a description of the canopy of power relations that encompasses both domestic and imperial spaces, the strength of the novel’s revelatory power is that it identifies clearly the obstacles of access to voice and the maintenance of the authority that restricts this access. Although the metaphor of Fanny as slave is limited by the homogenous experience of victimhood it inevitably creates, it is also a useful metaphor because through it, *Mansfield Park* exposes systemic forces that produce hierarchical marginalization and identifies forces of stagnation that impede reformation. The text demonstrates that patriarchal systems of control both internationally and at home are enacted and maintained in similar ways.

The connection between Fanny Price and the ‘grateful Negro’ focuses on the specificities of Fanny’s individual experiences while hinting that they are part of a broader system at work. The text emphasizes her problematic position as a social hybrid, owned property, and victim. Sir Thomas’ kindnesses to Fanny might be described as ameliorative gestures. The fire that appears in her room certainly has the desired effect: she contemplates his kindness. However, his protection and benevolence are also exposed as conditional, subject to revert to cruelty at the slightest hint of rebellion: his rant against Fanny is an act of subjugation and abuse. She only receives kindness if she submits to Sir Thomas’ “advice.” This manipulation that is couched in the language of

benevolence produces a disability in Fanny—she cannot name the effects of her abuse, nor can she name her abusers. This subaltern subject cannot speak but *Mansfield Park* reveals the mechanisms that restrict opportunity for voice and subjectivity in such domestic and foreign spaces.

Fanny's primary focus is her individual safety, status, and well-being. Such are the concerns for Olaudah Equiano's struggles in his *Interesting Narrative* of 1789. Equiano performs well for his master and buys his own freedom from slavery. Thereafter, Equiano becomes an imperialist as well, owning a slave plantation himself and participating in the same system that first oppressed him. Thus one might argue that Equiano is triumphant in that he is an example of trustworthiness, loyalty, and productivity. However, his success also depends upon his metamorphosis into an English gentleman, as the frontispiece to his narrative, name change, and conversion to Christianity testify. The unfortunate implied message is that only those that can claim respectability are deserving of privilege and status. Interestingly, Equiano supported ameliorative practices as economically beneficial to plantation owners, who "found that benevolence was their true interest" (1:209).

Fanny experiences this same cycle of liminality. She must reject her dirty, poor, and 'savage' origins at Portsmouth and become convinced of the greater opportunities that Mansfield represents. Fanny's success thus hinges on her capacity to prove herself a valuable, pretty, agreeable, grateful, and proper individual. By claiming respectability in order to share in the privileges that respectability grants, she reinscribes those societal boundaries that divide the deserving from the undeserving. Fanny's limited autonomy requires her participation in this hierarchy of privilege: her only choice seems to be to

rebel and risk exile—as Maria, Mary, and Julia do—or to appeal individually through submission and compliance. Fanny chooses to bid for patriarchal favour and thus moves from being a transported object to a transporting agent, collecting authority as she rises in social status.

After Maria’s scandalous affair with Henry, Sir Thomas rearranges his immediate household by replacing Maria and Mrs. Norris with more submissive recruits. The hierarchy of social status at Mansfield Park is constantly in flux. Just as Tom Bertram’s lavish spending habits cause Edmund’s financial security to wane, Maria’s rebellion and consequent exile leave a vacancy for Fanny to enter. William will also be accepted as a new convert. After Fanny’s marriage, Susan will fill Fanny’s previous position in the Bertram household as companion to Lady Bertram. Participating in the transportation of women and wealth when she prepares Susan for Mansfield, Fanny realizes the pleasures of influence and contributes to the maintenance of patriarchal power: “Fanny was [Susan’s] oracle. . . That a girl so capable of being made, every thing good, should be left in [the Price family’s] hands, distressed her more and more” (*MP* 328). Rearing up a new recruit and rescuing Susan from the poverty of Portsmouth, Fanny places her in the same impossible position in which she had once found herself. Susan is now dependent upon the kindnesses of those who occupy positions of authority over her, her future resting on her ability to be useful and grateful: “Susan remained to supply [Fanny’s] place.—Susan became the stationary niece—delighted to be so!—and equally well adapted for it by a readiness of mind, and an inclination for usefulness, as Fanny had been by sweetness of temper, and strong feelings of gratitude” (*MP* 371). The shifting hierarchy at Mansfield is cyclical. Those who become dissatisfied and rebel are replaced with more

(re)productive members, members who are more likely to quietly endure heavy-handed authority and sometimes abuse to enjoy a limited sense of superiority and influence.

Indeed, Fanny's actions serve ultimately to perpetuate the status quo. She discourages Maria's escape from the gate at Sotherton, views Mary's outspoken opinions as vulgar and corrupt, and remains stoic in her disapproval of the play on account of the affront to Sir Thomas. Her sole rebellion against Sir Thomas, though admirable for its conviction, is not a bid for autonomy. Frazer Easton and others have regarded her refusal to accept Sir Thomas' advice as a refusal to be "trucked, bartered, or exchanged by others in marriage" (461). Although she refuses to marry Henry Crawford, her main motivation for this refusal stems from her feelings for Edmund. The text explains that Fanny is not the sort of girl that would be able to resist the flattery of "such a man as Crawford" for very long, "had not her affection been engaged elsewhere" (*MP* 181). One wonders if she would have succumbed to Henry's pursuit had he not suddenly run off with Maria. Additionally, her visit to Portsmouth teaches her exactly what Sir Thomas had intended. She recognizes that, "though Mansfield Park might have some pains, Portsmouth could have no pleasures" (308). Her new outlook concerning the importance of financial stability contributes to her softened criticism of Henry Crawford, suggesting that, in time, she might have accepted his proposal after all. It is only on account of good luck and convenient timing of others' failings that Fanny finally wins Edmund's heart.

Fanny's attributes of gratitude, propriety, and general submission prove to be a recipe for success, though she does nothing to disturb the quiet serenity of Mansfield Park's existence. Of course, *Mansfield Park* carefully explores her impossible position by emphasizing the verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse she endures in addition to

a degree of physical and sexual abuse. As a victim, she is desperate for her individual safety; a bid for patriarchal favour is perhaps all she can manage. Consequently, Fanny opposes dissent, encourages submission, and quietly resolves to accept punishment. If Fanny Price is representative of the 'grateful Negro,' she also embodies the particular difficulties that such a position raises, both ideologically and textually. Fanny Price is also a representative of a safe and submissive response to her oppression. Thus, as many readers find Fanny an unsatisfactory heroine, they do so for a very good reason. Fanny's response to her abuse, though understandable, inspires no great reformation. And, by extension, *Mansfield Park* demonstrates that the 'grateful Negro' ideal on West Indian plantations would also serve to stabilize economic relationships.

Conclusion

When Fanny Price arrives at Mansfield Park, reconstituted from her poor origins in Portsmouth to live with her wealthy uncle Sir Thomas, her cousins tease her for her lack of education: “She thinks of nothing but the Isle of Wight, and she calls it *the Island*, as if there were no other island in the world” (*MP* 15). The girls receive criticism for their cruel condescension but also, as Susan Fraiman notes, the text “likens all three girls to one another and ridicules them for their lordly outlook upon the world,” providing a subtle commentary of the imperialism that had pervaded the education of young aristocrats in Europe (215). *Mansfield Park* suggests that readers, too, should extend their sights past the domestic affairs of “Wight” society.

Traditionally treated as a difficult text, *Mansfield Park* is considered limited to domestic concerns for its social commentary. However, Edward Said’s groundbreaking analysis of *Mansfield Park* in 1989 brought colonial and imperial concerns to the forefront of the novel, issuing a controversial decree that British literature in general and particularly *Mansfield Park* had contributed to the structure of “an expanding imperialist venture” (95). While this is true in the sense that the novel places at its centre a plantocratic family that was dependent on plantation income, his analysis does not consider the extent to which the novel illuminates ideologies of power and its nuanced perspective on British home life. The novel’s engagement with slave-related issues is configured with the same wit, cynicism, and skepticism with which the position of women in British society is investigated. That is, *Mansfield Park* frequently points to the

ways in which British society—perhaps all societies—maintain their tightly controlled boundaries and hierarchies of power by rewarding submission and punishing rebellion.

Said's analysis of Austen's novel has also been criticized by Susan Fraiman as intentionally titillating: *Mansfield Park* is "'Exhibit A' in the case for culture's endorsement of empire...[and she] is made to bear the symbolic burden of empire" (220). Indeed, the symbolic feminine presence at home and her responsibility for driving the economy of slaves is not an uncommon association. For example, Coleridge writes in "Lecture on the Slave Trade" in 1795 about the consumption of luxury items:

She sips a beverage sweetened with human blood, even while she is weeping over the refined sorrows of Werter or Clementina. Sensibility is not Benevolence. (239)

By focusing on luxury items as the force behind the trade's ruthless economy, Coleridge brings the global issue to the local level, showing how simple boycotts of certain items might contribute to abolition. However, these suggestions for local activism are also domesticated; the guilty party is conspicuously feminine. As Deirdre Coleman explains, Coleridge targets sugar rather than an item like rum, which was also an imported luxury, though not for the general enjoyment of women (344). These suggestions for boycott contribute to an "association of women with brutal colonization" which was well established by the end of the eighteenth century (344). Likewise, Said's analysis forfeits *Mansfield Park's* complex depiction of morality in order to prove it typically female and incurably domestic yet, curiously, also responsible for the wiles of imperial culture.

In contrast to these conclusions, I argue that throughout *Mansfield Park* there is a network of slave-related details that widen the novel's boundaries to include international

concerns of foreign relations and imperialism. These details, combined with what has been gathered from Austen's familial connections, letters, reading material, and cultural milieu, supply a collection of evidence that supports this complex postcolonial reading of the novel. Chapter One presents this evidence but also critically questions the validity of some of these findings. For example, though Francis Austen writes of his regret over Britain's involvement with slavery, he nonetheless privileges national pride over a general condemnation. Austen's letters contain a few references to slave-related issues that postcolonial critics have deemed important. But, in truth, the letters do not reveal any direct or obvious statements of her political leanings or the extent to which she had broader concerns in mind. They do, however, testify to a very well-read author who had a broad range of reading interests, including Clarkson, Buchanan, and Pasley (*Letters* 198). These biographical and cultural references, with all of their difficulties, do provide peripheral support for the thesis that *Mansfield Park* is a politically-charged novel but their significance is dependant upon the text's engagement with and allusions to the broader imperial arena.

Allusions to slave-related issues within the novel are particularly striking because they do not contribute directly to the plot's movement through time and space. For example, the family's relief when Sir Thomas is taken away on business and the dread of his reinstatement is the main narrative progression but the fact that he goes to Antigua because his plantation is in financial trouble is a secondary and unnecessary detail, unless there is a secondary function for Sir Thomas's business there. Similarly, the "dead silence" in the drawing room that follows Fanny's question about the slave trade constitutes a major counterpoint that connects this domestic sphere to the international

scene. Their awkward silence is indicative of their discomfort: Fanny had stumbled upon a subject for which the family has no vocabulary. Because neither Fanny nor Edmund can engage critically with this silence, they are complicit in the silence as well, unable to name the family's historical moment.

This moment of complicity is not an isolated incident for Fanny and Edmund. Although they are often taken together as the novel's main proponents of morality, they are not immune to criticism. In Chapter Two, the Evangelicalism that informs Fanny's character is critiqued as limited and insufficient. Indeed, the only moment that Fanny's actions deserve high moral praise is her rebellion against Sir Thomas' command that she accept Henry Crawford's proposal, a rebellion that conflicts with her obligation to family and society and unsurprisingly results in her temporary exile. Although her Evangelical ideals supply her with the tools she needs to survive her inferior and abused position, they are exposed as insufficient to deal with the difficulties of her reality. Correcting the assumption that she represents an ethical ideal at *Mansfield Park* also enlightens the depiction of other characters: Fanny makes an unsatisfactory heroine just as Mary is a sympathetic vixen. Her witty and outspoken character can be redeemed from her villainous reputation: the text's treatment of her is much more ambiguous than some scholars have suggested. However, she also represents the threat of female rebelliousness that the text and society must contain in order to provide narrative closure.

This narrative closure is also achieved through the elevation of Fanny's social status, a reward that she receives as a result of her submissive choices and gratitude. In Chapter Three, I suggest that Fanny is representative of the 'grateful Negro' at *Mansfield Park*, another strategy to survive the physical, emotional, and psychological abuse she

endures. By invoking Fanny's status as victim and exploring her limited power as a repressive force against rebellion, *Mansfield Park* shows how, both at home and abroad, patriarchal hierarchies of control are protected and maintained.

Fanny's submissive and grateful responses function to stabilize the status quo at Mansfield Park. Her bid for patriarchal favour constitutes a fortuitous ending for herself but also upholds Sir Thomas' questionable moral authority. Although he does seem to have learned a lesson about "active principle" that had been lacking in his children's education, Sir Thomas is not punished, nor is Henry Crawford (*MP* 364). Maria, Mary, and Mrs. Norris, on the other hand, bear the burden of his moral failure: they are all banished from good society. Fanny's exaggerated gratitude for the smallest of kindnesses supplies protection from similar treatment. *Mansfield Park* connects these domestic power dynamics to the international atmosphere of slave-related issues, revealing mechanisms of power production that are maintained through conditional benevolence for the submissive, certain exile for the rebellious, and a conspicuous lack of consequences for those who exist at the crest of the hierarchy.

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