

14. Fanny Price and Mary Crawford

When *Pride and Prejudice* was finally in course of publication, Jane Austen wrote to her sister Cassandra: “now I will try to write of something else, and it shall be a complete change of subject-ordination.”ⁱ The writing of *Mansfield Park* was by then far advanced, and one would have thought that Cassandra was bound to have a fair idea of what was in it — but it would seem that she did not know what Jane thought she ought to know. The topic of “ordination” does occupy a focal place in the story, because the ordination of the hero, Edmund Bertram, is what proves fatal to his love affair with Mary Crawford, and drives him at last into the arms of his virtuously patient and gentle cousin, Fanny Price. But a careful study of the histories of these two women who are in love with Edmund, shows that the novel is about “ordination” in a far more fundamental sense;ⁱⁱ and that from the standpoint of ordinary social discourse, what matters most is that the book is not named for the hero or heroine (like *Emma*) or for its dominant social dispositions (like *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Persuasion*), but for the place in which the dramatic action is set (like *Northanger Abbey*, thanks to the decision of Jane Austen’s brother Henry).

The novel begins with the three Ward sisters, and particularly with the “good luck” of the middle one — the beauty of the family — Miss Maria, who “captivate[d] Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton” (I, i, 1). The eldest — who is “Miss Ward” properly, so that we never learn her Christian name at allⁱⁱⁱ — “at the end of half a dozen years, found herself obliged to be attached to the Rev. Mr. Norris.” Behind this discreetly revealing clause, we can detect a rather ugly transaction in the marriage market. Miss Ward (with her seven thousand pounds) is nearing thirty, and is in danger of becoming an “old maid.” Mr. Norris has no private fortune; but he is a personal friend of Sir Thomas Bertram. Sir Thomas gives him the well-endowed

“living” of Mansfield Parish (with a stipend of nearly seven hundred pounds a year); and he agrees to marry Sir Thomas’ sister-in-law, who is tolerably good-looking and very active, but envious and embittered. The marriage is childless, and lasts rather more than fifteen years. Even at nearly a thousand pounds a year, it proved to be a bad bargain for “the Rev. Mr. Norris.” Mrs. Norris became a compulsive miser. Money took the place in her heart of the children that she did not have.

The youngest sister, Miss Frances, was rather like her sister Maria. They were both good-looking, but not particularly intelligent; and both of them (unlike Miss Ward) were naturally lazy. But Miss Frances was impulsive about her marriage. Like Lydia Bennet (and Miss Churchill of Enscombe) she fell in love with a uniform. She married not a redcoat officer, but a naval lieutenant; and — largely thanks to the too-busy Mrs. Norris, who always kept in touch with her — she quarreled with her rich relations. After a breach of some twelve years, Mrs. Frances Price is about to have her ninth child, and her husband is disabled on half-pay.

Thanks again (very largely) to Mrs. Norris, the eldest Price daughter — another Frances, of course — is half-adopted by the Bertrams. Little Fanny Price, just ten years old, comes to live at Mansfield Park. Lady Bertram, having done her duty as a wife by producing four children in the six years before her sisters married (two tall boys, now 17 and 16, and two well-grown, handsome girls, 13 and 12) has subsided onto a sofa, and cares for nothing outside herself except her “poor pug” (I, i, 10). Poor Fanny, who is small, gentle and *very* shy, is terrified of all of them — and especially of Sir Thomas, an authority figure of whom his own daughters stand in awe. After a week the sixteen-year-old Edmund finds her crying on the stairs of her attic room, because she wants to write a letter home, but has no pen or paper. From this moment she is under his protection; the bond that is at the heart of the novel is established — and after five or six more years Fanny is deeply in love with Edmund in the normal sexual sense.

The love-story proper begins when Mr. Norris dies, and a year later Sir Thomas sails for Antigua to attend to his business interests there. The Parsonage, some half-mile from the Park mansion (I, vii, 67) is now occupied by Dr. and Mrs. Grant (aged 45 and 30 respectively — I, iii,

24). Sir Thomas has been away for a whole year, when his daughter Maria becomes engaged to Mr. Rushworth (who is extremely stupid, but the richest landowner in that part of the county). By the time that Sir Thomas' approval is received,^{iv} Fanny has just passed her seventeenth birthday (I, iv, 40). At this point, Henry and Mary Crawford appear. They are the younger half-brother and sister of Mrs. Grant. Henry is about 24 (III, i, 317)^v and Mary is probably 20 or 21. They have been brought up in London, by a naval uncle and aunt. Henry has an estate worth £4000 a year in Norfolk (I, xii, 118) and Mary has £20,000 (I, iv, 40). The Admiral spoiled Henry; and his wife — with whom he was bitterly at odds — spoiled Mary. Mary has come to live with Mrs. Grant, because after her aunt died, the Admiral brought his mistress into the London household. Mary is something of a beauty; and Mrs. Grant (who is not) has a special fondness for her on this account.

Both of the Crawfords are cynics about marriage; and Mrs. Grant (who has good grounds for cynicism herself) says that “Mansfield shall cure you both” (I, v, 47). Mary shall marry Tom Bertram (the heir); and Henry is to marry Julia. The whole Mansfield family is invited to dinner at the Parsonage (I, v, 48). Mary likes the look of Tom; and both Maria and Julia find Henry charming. But Henry is not in the marriage-market. He is only interested in flirting. He is a confirmed lady-killer, who likes to have girls in love with him; and he especially likes to tease those who are already engaged.^{vi}

Tom Bertram soon shows that he is more interested in racing than in girls; and Mary discovers that Edmund is much more interesting. (Edmund, meanwhile, has fallen in love with her almost on sight.) Mr. Rushworth enlists Henry to advise him about the “improvement” of his estate at Sotherton; and both families agree to make a day’s excursion out of the ten-mile journey. During the conversation Mary speaks with joking contempt about her uncle, the Admiral, and even about his profession (I, vi, 57, 60). This makes Edmund aware that her moral education has been gravely at fault. She does not have sound principles of conduct.

The symbolic importance of the expedition to Sotherton has long been recognized. To have an avenue of trees cut down (fully mature trees, planted perhaps three generations ago) simply in

order to “improve” the view, according to one’s own subjective standard of taste, is to set up the gratification of momentary whims as the standard of human happiness. The avenue might have to come down; but only for the realization of some objective social purpose. The benefit and advantage of *future* generations would have to be considered. Mary’s objection to the Admiral’s cottage-improvement (I, vi, 57) is just as sound as Fanny’s romantic mourning for the trees (I, vi, 56). It appears to be more self-interested, certainly, but Mary also supports Fanny’s naively sympathetic concern in her wittily ironic way — the cottage “being excessively pretty, it was soon found necessary to be improved.” The Admiral’s behavior over the cottage at Twickenham coheres with his attitude to his home after his wife died; and Mary’s reaction to that — though necessarily self-interested — was certainly correct.

The events of the expedition to Sotherton do in part prefigure the actual career of Henry Crawford, as we shall observe it. First he shows his clear preference for Maria over Julia; then, when he is supposed to be proposing “improvements,” he persuades Maria to escape with him through the narrow space beside a locked gate. Poor Mr. Rushworth, returning with the key, finds them already gone; and he never does catch up with them.

What is really important here is the respect in which this is *not* a true prophecy. Henry and Maria will break out; but they do not stay together. Rushworth will “unlock the gate,” later, when he divorces Maria as rapidly as possible. But Henry does not marry her — though she stays with him as long as she has any hope of that. As we shall see later, their marriage is what *ought* to happen. Ideally, of course, the day at Sotherton ought to have resulted in the breaking of the Rushworth engagement (for that is what the unlocking *properly* symbolizes) and the formal betrothal of Maria to Henry. She ought to go home with him on the box of his barouche, just as she came. But it is Julia who actually has that pleasure.

Similarly, with respect to Mary and Edmund, the day at Sotherton is a prophecy of what ought to happen, but does not. They go off by themselves, and leave poor Fanny alone on her woodland bench. After her unsatisfactory encounters with Henry, Maria, Julia and Rushworth,

Fanny goes in search of Mary and Edmund. They, too, have been out in the park, and have only just returned to the “wilderness” (I, x, 103). But in the end, it is Fanny who will live in the park, and Mary who will go into the wilderness of urban life.

The reason for this is foreshadowed indoors. They are all shown over the house; and when they come to the chapel, Mary speaks wittily of the abolition of “family prayers” as an “improvement” — picturing “The young Mrs. Eleanors and Mrs. Bridgets — starched up into seeming piety, but with heads full of something very different” (I, ix, 87). This is the point at which she learns that Edmund is to be ordained, as soon as Sir Thomas returns. “She looked almost aghast” (I, ix, 89); but her feelings are not those that Fanny ascribes to her. She recovers from the social faux pas quite quickly; but she finds the idea of marriage to a clergyman appalling. (Yet that is what her closely subsequent walk into the park symbolizes.)^{vii}

Only Fanny knows that Henry prefers Maria; and she cannot convince Edmund (I, xii, 116). Mrs. Norris even talks to Mrs. Rushworth of an “understanding” between Henry and Julia (I, xii, 118). But the casting of the play, which now follows, forces Henry’s preference into the open. It is not easy to understand why the very project of amateur theatricals was considered improper. There were rehearsals and performances at Steventon when Jane Austen was a girl; and one can readily believe that something similar happened at Longbourn. I cannot quite imagine Darcy acting — at least not before his marriage — but theatricals would not be frowned on at Pemberley. Yet all of the children at Mansfield know that Sir Thomas would never countenance what they are doing (cf. I, xiii, 125-8; II, 1, 175; ii, 193). Only Mrs. Norris is really blind to this truth. (She does not even object to the expense on behalf of Sir Thomas — though it must be greater than what was involved in the purchase of a mare for Fanny to ride.)

The fact that the infection is spread from a house-party of the idle and irresponsible nobility (I, xiii, 121-3) helps to make the disapproval of Sir Thomas more natural. We can easily see that “Lover’s Vows,” the play actually chosen, was *quite* improper for this company — and the casting made it even more so.^{viii} Henry Crawford plays Frederick, the “love-child” of Agatha (for whose

part Henry is forced to nominate Maria over Julia — I, xiv, 133). Mary Crawford plays Amelia, who virtually makes a declaration of love to the Protestant pastor Anhalt (who lectures her on happy marriage). Edmund, who begins by saying that he will have nothing to do with the project, feels “obliged” to take this part in the end, in order to save Mary from having to act with a stranger — and in order to prevent a mere dining-acquaintance from becoming a family intimate. (This seemingly snobbish difficulty points towards the real problem of the amateur theatricals. Sir Thomas, as M.P., represents a constituency of very puritanical landowners.)^{ix}

Edmund is very conscious that if there has to be a play at all, “Lover’s Vows” is the worst possible choice. He offends Mary by telling her that it ought to be given up; and then that a candidate for ordination is the last person who ought to play Anhalt (I, xv, 144-5). Thus his capitulation on this point — which is powerfully influenced by his being in love with Mary — is likely both to be very pleasing to her, and to make her think that Edmund can be persuaded to abandon his projected career in the Church.

Fanny naturally agrees with Edmund’s view of the play; and even more naturally she is distressed by his acceptance of the part of Anhalt. For herself, the idea of playing a part is quite terrifying (she even wonders whether her *moral* objection is quite real, because her personal repulsion is so strong — I, xvi, 153).^x But she wants very much to *see* the play; and she helps the project forward in every way that she can. (She probably understands the puritanical feelings of the neighborhood. But she is no Puritan herself.)

The bitter disappointment of Julia has its advantages for Henry Crawford, who has no intention of becoming seriously involved with her (I, xvii, 160-1). Mary understands his position; and it is clear that she thinks Maria should stick to the fool she has chosen, and not make a fool of herself over someone else.^{xi} Maria, however, has begun to have serious hopes of Henry (I, xviii, 165-6).

The return of Sir Thomas brings all of the theatrical activity to an end — except for his own dramatic encounter with Mr. Yates, when he goes from his own room to the billiard-room-theater (II, i, 182-3). Edmund justifies Fanny, and explains his own participation; for the rest, the whole affair is passed over in silence. (This is an implicit acknowledgment on the part of Sir Thomas, that the moral education of his children has been defective; he is afraid that the other children do not even understand how they have been in the wrong. It is quite apparent that Mrs. Norris does not.)^{xii}

Maria's hopes are dashed, because Henry Crawford announces that he is going to Bath. Life is quiet again, and Edmund is sorry for it. Indeed he is almost witty about his father, so that Fanny is rather shocked (II, iii, 196-7). Sir Thomas has to recognize that Mr. Rushworth is a fool; and he has a serious interview with Maria, but he does not press her very hard — he was “glad to be satisfied” (II, iii, 201). He can see that Maria — like Charlotte Lucas — is going into her marriage with open eyes; but he does not see that Maria has none of Charlotte's rational self-discipline. She is only determined that Henry shall never know how badly she has been hurt (II, iii, 202).

With Maria married and Julia gone away with her, Fanny becomes important both at home and at the Parsonage. Mary reveals how her concept of happiness has changed, but Fanny can only recognize the continuing operation of worldly ambition.^{xiii} When she is invited to dinner at the Parsonage, Fanny is made conscious of her newly acquired social consequence. Before this, she has only dined out when the family party included Lady Bertram; now Sir Thomas has to reassure his lady that she will not be alone if Fanny goes (II, v, 218-9). And behold, when Fanny and Edmund arrive at the Parsonage, they find that the ever-mobile Henry Crawford has come back also.

With no one else but Fanny available, it is natural enough for Henry to try to “make a small hole in Fanny Price's heart” (II, vi, 229). But now he faces a rather special kind of problem. For Fanny does not only dislike him; she heartily disapproves of the whole practice of flirting, and she has an absolute conviction that no well-born flirt could possibly be seriously interested in someone as socially insignificant as herself.^{xiv} A “small hole” in Fanny's heart is almost impossible, because she cannot enter into the game of “small holes” at all.

Mary, meanwhile, has resolved to play a rather similar game with Edmund. She is alarmed at the imminence of his ordination; and although she is properly in love, and fully intends to marry him,^{xv} she feels that if he loves her, then he ought to take her desires more seriously. Her objection to the Church can be better expressed, than the conventional language of her own social formation allows. She recognizes that she can never be as simple-mindedly “serious” as Edmund and Fanny; so she can never become a proper Rector’s wife according to their standards. But just as she needs to understand their “seriousness” better, so they need to appreciate her wittily ironic attitude toward social hypocrisy. Jane Austen appears to side with them when she condemns Mary for not “remonstrating” with Henry more earnestly about the possible breaking of Fanny’s heart (II, vi, 231). But she is being ironic. Mary knows — and we certainly *ought* to know by now — that further “remonstrance” would be useless. The question therefore is: *must* one adopt a morally proper position explicitly, when it will do no good, and may damage one’s influence for the future? Even Mrs. Grant would probably say no more at this point. Does that make her a *bad* Rector’s wife?^{xvi}

The way to Fanny’s heart is through her brother William. What Henry Crawford, with his naval connections, is able to do for William, would certainly have won Fanny’s heart if it were not already committed to Edmund. But before the “making” of William can happen, Henry must fall properly in love with Fanny himself. His first encounter with William offers us the key to Henry’s character. For him, role-playing is life. He was by far the best of the amateur actors (I, xviii, 165); and he can read Shakespeare dramatically with marvelous flexibility of expression (III, iii, 336-8). Listening to William, he begins enviously to play the role of a naval hero in his own mind. But he soon remembers how pleasant it is to be able to play the hunting squire (II, vi, 236-7).

Sir Thomas notices Henry’s courtship of Fanny at the very moment when it is becoming something more than a fourteen-day role. Henry has accidentally wandered into Thornton Lacey (where Edmund is to be Rector); and, finding that he cannot get Edmund interested in “improvements,” he proposes to rent it himself for the winter. This elicits the information that

Edmund will certainly be residing there himself. As Sir Thomas says: “human nature needs more lessons than a weekly sermon can convey, and . . . if he [Edmund] does not live among his parishioners . . . he does very little either for their good or his own (II, vii, 248). This is sad news for Mary Crawford — who does not dare to try any witty sallies on Sir Thomas.^{xvii}

We can pass quickly over Fanny’s coming out ball, and the affair of the amber cross that William has given her. She needs a chain for this cross; and both Henry and Edmund have bought one for it. Henry’s chain has to be conveyed to her as a present from Mary; and when Edmund comes with his gift, he naturally will not allow Fanny to give Mary’s present back. But luckily Henry’s chain proves to be incompatible with the cross; so Fanny is able to wear *both* of her necklaces to the ball. Mary is threatening never to dance with Edmund after this ball; and he is deeply distressed — but he rightly suspects that it is only “playfulness” (II, ix, 269).

Immediately after the ball, Henry takes William to London. William is *en route* for Portsmouth, but Henry means to introduce him to Admiral Crawford, and get him “made” as a Lieutenant; and this is what happens. Edmund disappears also, to prepare for his ordination. This gives us a fair chance to observe how deeply Mary is in love. Edmund is in the same case, but he lengthens his absence deliberately. Mary is waiting for Henry to take her to London; and in this connection she makes the one comment that reveals her true kinship with Elizabeth Bennet. Fanny says she will be much missed, and she retorts: “Oh! yes, missed as every noisy evil is missed, when it is taken away; that is, there is a great difference felt” (II, xi, 289). Mary does not have Elizabeth’s moral consciousness; but the sensibly stable girl who can see herself thus, could certainly develop it.^{xviii}

When Henry tells Mary that he has decided to *marry* Fanny, she can hardly believe it (II, xii, 292). They both take it for granted that Fanny will accept with alacrity; and they are both amazed by her refusal. Yet it is her moral character that Henry has fallen in love with. Henry says he will “let a seven years’ lease of Everingham,”^{xix} and rent a house near Mansfield; and Mary almost betrays her own secret at this point (II, xii, 295-6).

The very next day the news of William's commission arrives; and Henry makes his declaration. Poor Fanny is in a cleft stick, since she no longer knows what she *ought* to feel about him as a person, and she must express the gratitude that she does feel. She takes refuge in her conviction that he cannot possibly be serious. What gets through to Henry is "I must not listen to such" (II, xiii, 302). So he makes his formal proposal to Sir Thomas; and the baronet has to face the astonishing fact that his niece really means to refuse a clever and amiable young man with £4000 a year who has given quite convincing proof of his affection (III, i, 314-21).^{xx} He is so seriously displeased that he speaks to her in the accents of Mrs. Norris. He calls her "wilful and perverse" and asks "if your heart can acquit you of ingratitude" (III, 1, 318-9). But he does not forget that she ought to have a fire in her room (III, 1, 312, 322).^{xxi}

Sir Thomas is delighted that Henry means to persist. Fanny is quietly angry in her old way, because Henry is not only persistent, but confident rather than downcast.^{xxii} Lady Bertram tells her that it is "every young woman's duty to accept such a very unexceptionable offer" (III, ii, 333). Sir Thomas does not quite think that. He knows that there must be attachment; and he suspects the truth. Edmund — who has no such suspicion, but well knows why Fanny dislikes Henry Crawford — simply hopes that she will come round; and Sir Thomas is right in thinking that if Edmund were married she would feel differently.

Having displayed his talents as a dramatic reader, Henry plays for a few moments with the role of a preacher. But he admits that he could not do it constantly, and he would need a London audience. Fanny is driven into saying that it is "a pity that you did not always know yourself as well as you seemed to do at that moment." "My conduct shall speak for me — absence, distance, time shall speak for me" (III, iii, 343), responds Henry. Absence and distance do speak in quite a short time. We shall see that "steadiness of conduct" is just another role to be maintained on stage.

Henry's failings are faults of observable behavior; and Fanny is very sensibly doubtful that a wife could influence him (III, iv, 351). Mary's failings are all in speech; and often her speech is

only pretense — as Edmund can see clearly in the matter of her being “angry” with Fanny. Fanny thinks that any woman ought to sympathize with one who is obliged to refuse a man, because she does not love him; and we know that Mary actually feels very properly about this.^{xxiii} When they do meet, she is playfully “angry”; but she quotes Anhalt’s speech about happy marriage in “Lover’s Vows”; and she says, “in sober sadness, I believe I now love you all” (III, v, 358). Of course, her wish that the return of Sir Thomas might have been delayed highlights the gulf between her and Fanny, both in feelings and in “principles.” The ethical conventions are all on Fanny’s side; but it is not really clear who was in the right — and certainly Mary’s view of her London friends is now quite correct.

Our sympathies are all engaged on the side of Fanny; we see Mary through her eyes, and we are even led to accept a very puritanical evaluation of speech and actions as the standard of “integrity.” Fanny thinks that, except for love, “there was scarcely a second feeling in common between” Edmund and Mary (III, vi, 367). That would not be enough between her and Henry Crawford; but as between Edmund and Mary, Jane Austen herself thinks differently. Fanny’s judgment, which is so right about Henry, is quite wrong about Mary.^{xxiv}

The “medicinal project” of Sir Thomas upon Fanny’s understanding is a very necessary part of her education. It ought hardly to be *possible* at this stage, because Fanny ought properly to have visited her birth-family long before now. She ought to know what respectable poverty is like by this time. It is a measure of the rather appalling moral self-satisfaction of Mansfield that Fanny has lived there for eight years without anyone thinking that she should spend some time in Portsmouth.

Sir Thomas is mistaken in a typically “Mansfield” way. It is not “the value of a good income” that Fanny learns in Portsmouth. If, like Emma Watson, she were lovingly welcomed into a house of truly *genteel* poverty, she would be almost as happy as she was expecting. She is struck by the small size of the rooms (III, vii, 377-8, 387); and the *noise* of a large family of happy boys (banished to boarding school in the world of Mansfield) is a hard trial for her rather pampered nerves (III, viii, 391-2). Even the food is unappetizing (III, xi, 413). But it is her parents who are truly

disappointing. They are as noisy as the children, for one thing (III, vii, 382-3 etc.). Her father thinks only of his tavern-cronies and his grog; and her mother is a bad manager — as incompetent as Lady Bertram, whom she resembles (III, viii, 390; xi, 408). Jane Austen remarks that Mrs. Norris would have managed a large family on a small income much better (III, viii, 390). That is a thought that would never occur to Fanny; and we can hardly imagine Miss Ward eloping with a uniform like Miss Frances. But the sisters are alike in their tendency to make favorites. Mrs. Price now dotes on Betsey — her “baby,” and the first of her girls to get into the favorite’s position (III, viii, 389).

The Portsmouth chapters must rank among Jane Austen’s greatest achievements. She knew what the genteel poverty of Elizabeth Watson was like from personal experience. But here, where she could only have imagination, and a more distant observation to rely upon, every line carries absolute conviction.

Fanny is glad to hear from Mary now — even from Mary in London, and at her worst. Henry, she hears, has gone to Norfolk, to play the part of responsible landowner. She makes no friends in Portsmouth, except for her younger sister, Susan. Susan is rather remarkably right-minded, and eager to learn.^{xxv} The Portsmouth visit is very good for Fanny, who learns now to be a tutor in her turn. (Away from Mansfield, and from Edmund’s dominance, she would certainly have done well, and might still have been quite happy — though not with Henry.)

Henry Crawford, visiting Portsmouth, is at his very best. The Price family loves him as “William’s friend”; and he shows real sensitivity in avoiding the sort of contact that would embarrass Fanny.^{xxvi} He can make a little parade of his “good squire” role; and Fanny, like Elizabeth, must imagine herself as the squire’s helpmate (though she does not *want* to do that). Henry still thinks of their living much of the year near Mansfield; and the thought of Thornton Lacey must make Fanny think more kindly of Everingham. Not surprisingly, she finds Henry “decidedly improved” (III, x, 406; cf. xi, 413-4).

The charm, and the parade of the good squire, continues next day. Henry says that he and Mary will take Fanny back to Mansfield, if necessary. But Fanny knows that Sir Thomas would never approve of that. She sends her love to Mary, and asks for a letter from Edmund; and when Henry is gone, she misses him (III, xi, 413). Sir Thomas would be well pleased with his “experiment.” But he was right to be almost as doubtful as Fanny of Henry’s “constancy.”

Mary’s letter shows us that she is still teasing Edmund. She must be “punishing” him, because he is now an ordained minister. Her behavior in London puts him off quite badly — and she must be fully aware of that (Fanny’s interpretation is quite accurate here — III, xii, 417). Henry must stay in London until after a party at which he will meet Maria. That is the hinge of fate upon which the final catastrophe turns. Fanny little knows how vital a “concern of hers” it is “whether Mr. Crawford went into Norfolk before or after the 14th” (III, xii, 418). Edmund still does not write (because he has no *good* news to send); but Fanny certainly does write to Lady Bertram about Susan — for she actually thinks of taking Susan with her if she ever does become mistress of Everingham (III, xii, 419).

Edmund finally does write after he has returned, disappointed, to Mansfield. This is just about a month before the scandal of Maria’s adultery breaks.^{xxvii} Edmund was at the crucial party, where Maria Bertram’s hostility challenged Henry Crawford to see if he could revive her love for him (III, xiii, 423).

The month is full of incident. First, Tom becomes dangerously ill. He is away from home, and has been at the race track. He has to be brought home, and that causes a relapse. Although soon out of danger, his recovery is slow. For Fanny, her time away in Portsmouth drags — she is calling it “three months” some two weeks early (III, xiv, 430). She longs to be back “home” at Mansfield (431) — though Portsmouth was “home” when she left there (cf. III, vi, 370). Lady Bertram calls Mansfield her “home” too (III, xiv, 431).

Hearing of Tom’s illness, Mary Crawford writes to ask what his prospects are; and it is apparent that she is more interested in the possibility of Edmund becoming Sir Edmund than in the

health of Tom. She thinks that if Edmund becomes the heir, his ordination will lie dormant, and can be ignored. She regrets, now, that she teased Edmund into going away; and she hopes he will return soon. She also reveals that Henry did not go to Norfolk, but stayed close to the house-party at Richmond where Maria Rushworth was. The offer to take Fanny back to Mansfield is renewed. Fanny is torn between her wish to be at home, and her earnest desire not to bring Mary and Edmund together. She tells herself that she must wait for Sir Thomas to send for her; but it is obvious that in the present crisis she could quite "conscientiously" write to Lady Bertram, and get his decision about accepting the Crawfords' help. Her dismissal of this possibility as "presumption" (III, xiv, 436) is a transparent rationalization.

Just one week later comes the disaster. Henry and Maria are "gone" somewhere, reports Mary; and so is Julia. But "at any rate . . . Henry is blameless" (III, xv, 437). Fanny only understands this when her father finds a report in his newspaper that "Mrs. R." has left her home "in company with the . . . captivating Mr. C." (440). She already knows that Henry is far from "blameless" (cf. III, xiv, 436). But it is important to understand what Mary meant. The whole scandal has arisen through the very deliberate initiative of Maria. She quarreled bitterly with her mother-in-law (III, xv, 451) and thrust herself upon Henry. All the time he was flirting with her, he thought of it as an idle amusement. Now he has been trapped by the emotional backlash of his own sadistic game; and thanks to Mrs. Rushworth senior the explosion has become a public scandal. Henry was not able to get out of it by taking Maria back to her proper home in an anonymous carriage. For Sir Thomas, the only recourse now is "discovering and snatching her from further vice, though all was lost on the side of character" (III, xvi, 451).^{xxviii}

When the scandal broke, Julia ran off to Gretna Green with Mr. Yates. Mr. Yates had been courting her steadily. But he was a younger son of the nobility with nothing to recommend him to Sir Thomas as a son-in-law. No doubt they ran off, because they anticipated the institution of a puritanical regime that would separate them (III, xvi, 451-2; cf. xvii, 466-7).

In the midst of this catastrophe Sir Thomas sends Edmund to fetch Fanny home; and Susan comes with her. Fanny's return is natural enough. Lady Bertram needs her; and Edmund needs something to do that will take him away from London. The invitation to Susan needs pondering, because it may well seem implausible. Susan will be needed at Mansfield eventually; but her invitation for a visit could easily have been sent a bit later. Jane Austen must want us to recognize here an attempt to "keep up appearances." As far as possible what has happened is to be passed over; everything must appear to continue normally. Mrs. Norris, who really *feels* how abnormal the situation is, is very resentful of Susan's coming; and Susan is actually neglected when she arrives (III, xvi, 449). We are meant to be startled; but instead of thinking that Jane Austen is quite unnecessarily clumsy, we are supposed to understand that Mansfield is rather a peculiar place.

Edmund has parted finally from Mary. He and Fanny agree in regarding her attitude as morally disgraceful. Mary thinks of what has happened as "folly" rather than "vice" or "crime." It is the public scandal that she finds really deplorable; and she wants Sir Thomas to leave things alone until Henry can be persuaded to do the honorable thing. In her view, it is all really Fanny's fault for not accepting Henry's proposal (III, xvi, 454-7). Fanny confirms the corrupted condition of Mary's understanding by revealing to Edmund how she had written about Tom's illness, and about the possibility that Edmund would be the heir. They agree, piously, about "how excellent she [Miss Crawford] would have been, had she fallen into good hands earlier" (459).

This is the real end of the novel. Properly speaking *Mansfield Park* is a tragicomedy of moral cowardice. Mary Crawford is the true heroine; and Edmund is a hero only for Fanny, the heroine of the Mansfield standpoint only. The moment when Mary calls Edmund to come back, and he resists, fearing to be seduced (III, xvi, 459) is where he fails the test of his ordination decisively — and he knows this, even though he hides the awareness under his moral rationalizations.

About Fanny, Edmund says that "it seems to have been the merciful appointment of Providence that the heart which knew no guile, should not suffer" (III, xvi, 455). This explicit reference to God's ordination of all things is completely justified. If Maria had not wrecked Henry's

career as a lady-killer, the general chorus of his supporters would probably have persuaded Fanny to marry him (III, xvii, 467). But he would then have gone on playing the part of God's gift to every pretty woman he met (including his "regular standing flirtation, in yearly meetings at Sotherton and Everingham"—456). This would eventually have become visible to Fanny, and it would have been an abiding misery for her.^{xxix}

The famous last chapter is hardly important to the story at all; but it is important to the design. It points the moral of the tale; and since the topic of the novel is "ordination," the moral is important. Sir Thomas is deeply conscious that he has made "errors in his conduct as a parent" (III, xvii, 461). But in the case of Julia and Tom, his errors are retrievable. Mr. Yates turns out to be a more respectable son-in-law than he appeared: "his estate rather more, and his debts much less, than he [Sir Thomas] had feared"; and Sir Thomas was "consulted and treated as the friend best worth attending to" (462). Young Tom Bertram is actually more like his father than he has hitherto appeared. His health was set back by the scandal (III, xvi, 451); and he blames himself for bringing Yates and Julia together in "the dangerous intimacy of his unjustifiable theater" (III, xvii, 462). So "he became what he ought to be, useful to his father, steady and quiet, and not living merely for himself" (462).

The errors of Sir Thomas in the education of his daughters are now examined. He allowed Mrs. Norris to indulge their self-importance, while repressing all spontaneous intercourse of feelings with himself. But his most serious mistake was in their moral and religious education. They had never been taught to *practice* their religious principles, so they did not acquire them properly: "of the necessity of self-denial and humility, he feared they had never heard from any lips that could profit them" (463).^{xxx}

This is all very well for Sir Thomas, who can "scarcely comprehend" his daughters' deficiency of moral principle. But does Jane Austen herself believe that education and training can securely implant moral principles? Does she seriously believe the *theory* that Henry Crawford was "ruined by early independence and bad domestic example" (III, xvii, 467)? R.W. Chapman thinks

she does; and he responds that Henry “was born a rake, and the Admiral’s living in sin did not make him one.”^{xxxii}

I do not believe that Jane Austen held either of these simplifications; she was simply skeptical about our understanding of moral formation. But the “Mansfield view” combines both nature and education. The fate of Maria illustrates this. Mrs. Norris — the only one who is actually motivated by love here — wants Maria to be received at Mansfield. Sir Thomas will not allow that because “he would never have offered so great an insult to the neighbourhood” (III, xvii, 465). Here again we can recognize the vital significance of his position as M.P. for the County — certain *standards* must be maintained. Maria’s “high spirit and strong passions” (464) have effectively damned her, just as the “habit” of Mary Crawford’s mind damned her (III, xvi, 458). God has ordained, so to speak, that they shall both be dismissed from the sight of the just. “Maria had destroyed her own character” (III, xvii, 463) and it cannot now ever be restored.

So in the end, Maria is settled “in another country” (i.e. another *county*), with Mrs. Norris as her companion; and Jane Austen lazily accepts the “poetic justice” convention of the sentimental novel. “Shut up together with little society, on one side no affection, on the other, no judgment, it may be reasonably supposed that their tempers became their mutual punishment” (463).^{xxxiii} In view of the constant affection of the childless aunt, and the desperate need of the embittered niece, it is more reasonable to suppose that they hated all the world, especially Mansfield — but they loved one another. It was essential *to Mansfield* that Maria should never regain a respectable position in society — but that was *not* how Darcy regarded Lydia’s prospects, when he sought to separate her from Wickham.

Julia’s “spirit and passions” were less “high” than Maria’s. In the comparison between them we catch sight of Jane Austen’s own real opinion about environment and genetic inheritance. Three factors — “disposition” (nature), “circumstance” (being “Miss Julia” not “Miss Bertram”) and upbringing (by Mrs. Norris, who is surrogate mother) all contribute to the “character.” But the last is (we are bound to *hope*) the most important. Julia had a strong self-preserved instinct of social

prudence. When she saw that trouble was impending, she got out of the way; and when disaster came she panicked.

Henry's behavior we have already examined. It is "circumstance" that matters most in his case. Jane Austen makes it clear that the pretended ordinance of divine justice is really only the ordinance of society — the ordinance of "man's field." As the early heir to estate and fortune, Henry perceived from the example of his guardian, that a "gentleman" could do just as he chose. Self-indulgent Henry would have been in any case, but his "cold-blooded vanity" might have been moderated by a more sensibly loving education and discipline. The crucial fact, as Jane Austen says, is "that punishment, the public punishment of disgrace" does not "in a just measure attend *his* share of the offence" (III, xvii, 468). This makes it all the more shameful that her own family should support the verdict of society against Maria so wholeheartedly.^{xxxiii}

Mary Crawford was chastened by her experience. We are told that it was a long time before she got over it; whether she did eventually marry we are not told (III, xvii, 470). Jane Austen has no great relish for the task of disposing of Mary and Fanny that finally imposes itself. Fanny deserves her happy ending; and we can well believe that Sir Thomas was pleased with it when it came. But Sir Thomas is only Mrs. Grundy endowed with a feeling heart; and Edmund is only Mr. Collins endowed with intelligence and culture. It was Mr. Collins, we remember, who reprimanded Mr. Bennet for receiving Lydia (*Pride and Prejudice*, III, xv, 364); he also congratulated himself on escaping marriage to Elizabeth (*P and P*, III, vi, 297). Mr. Bennet had pretended that he was going to avoid the reprimand (*P and P*, III, viii, 310), and he allowed himself to be talked into a more Christian frame of mind by Jane and Elizabeth (*P and P*, III, viii, 314). Sir Thomas agrees *exactly* with Mr. Collins ("As a daughter . . . she [Maria] should be protected by him, and secured in every comfort . . . but farther than *that*, he would not go — III, xvii, 465). Edmund does not talk his father into receiving Maria, and then settling her somewhere not too far away for easy family contact; and he turns his back on Mary with as much self-congratulation as Mr. Collins. Jane Austen must have smiled with a certain wry amusement, when those in her circle who thought Mr. Collins and Mr.

Elton were regrettable satires against her Church, accepted Edmund Bertram as a clerical paragon.^{xxxiv}

The book ends with perfect appropriateness. Dr. Grant has apoplexy; so Edmund and Fanny can move from Thornton Lacey to the Mansfield Parsonage.^{xxxv} They can finally be all together — freed from the presence of Mrs. Norris, and almost completely forgetful of Maria (cf. III, xvii, 465-6). Everything is “thoroughly perfect” in Fanny’s eyes (473). But the death of Dr. Grant was already mentioned a few pages earlier (469) so our thoughts must be with his widow and her sister. The real greatness — and the near-perfection — of *Mansfield Park*, arises from *our* recognition of how very imperfect “the view and patronage of Mansfield Park” has *always* been.^{xxxvi}

Notes

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- i. *Letters*, 1952, 298; 1997, 202 (29.i.1813).
 - ii. I take it that Jane was giving Cassandra a clear hint to study *Mansfield Park* with the idea of “divine ordination” in mind. Cassandra would have known at least some parts of the text by this time. It is from her memorandum that we learn that *Mansfield Park* was begun in February 1811. It was finished by June 1813 (or soon after that).
 - iii. It is a fairly probable guess that Mrs. Norris is “Julia.” Having given her own name to her first daughter, Lady Bertram would quite naturally give her mother’s name to the second one; and that mother would have given her own name to her eldest. (Of course, there is the mother of Sir Thomas to be remembered also; but it is the boys who are named from his side of the family.)
 - iv. The engagement must, of course, receive Sir Thomas’ approval (I, iv, 39). A vivid illustration of his authority as paterfamilias is provided by the fact that when the “old grey poney” dies, Fanny can only have a horse to ride, because Edmund exchanges one of his for a suitable mount (I, iv, 37). (To write to Antigua would cause months of delay.)
 - v. Sir Thomas approves of Henry Crawford’s proposing to Fanny because he “would have every young man, with a sufficient income, settle as soon after four and twenty as he can” (III, i, 317). So Henry is past his twenty-fourth birthday, but probably not very far past it. (Edmund, whom Sir Thomas expects will soon marry, is twenty-four.)
 - vi. The banter about Henry liking Julia best (I, vi, 45) seems to touch on the truth for a moment,

when he says that he likes Maria the better for being engaged, because “all is safe.”

- vii. Mary only makes matters worse by commenting on the happiness of Rushworth as he thinks of his marriage; and by calling that marriage with witty accuracy “a sacrifice to the gods” (I, x, 108). Marriage is, after all, an “ordained sacrament.” But with respect to priestly ordination itself, she makes a good case for her contempt; and she distinguishes well between it and the Navy as worthy of respect — though her uncle, by tacit implication, is not (I, xi, 109). Mary is a thoughtful and serious observer of life, not at all like her brother. (Edmund, being in love, is gravely prejudiced; but his verdict at I, xi, 112 is quite just.)
- viii. None of the readers whose opinions were collected by Jane Austen herself seems to have found Sir Thomas’ disapproval of amateur theatricals as such, at all surprising. But this may have been because “Lover’s Vows” itself was so obviously morally objectionable in the circumstances. (Even the placid Lady Bertram might have seen this — I, xv, 140-1. Mrs. Norris shows herself to be quite aware of it, when she takes care to prevent her sister from finding out what the play is about too soon — I, xviii, 167.) But Sir Thomas did not just object to “Lover’s Vows”; and Edmund knew that the whole acting project was morally wrong (I, xiii, 125-7). (Sir Thomas himself speaks discreetly, of “a home which shuts out noisy pleasures” — II, i, 186; but his objections were probably as much political as they were moral — see the next note.)
- ix. Tom Bertram is letting the side down badly, by introducing friends like Mr. Yates — who would be objectionable to Sir Thomas both for social and for political reasons. Yates is connected with a noble house (and probably a Whig), whereas Sir Thomas is a Tory M.P., and the chosen representative of the local Tory gentry — this is almost certainly the “same interest” that he has with James Rushworth (I, iv, 40). Compared with Yates — over whose presence Edmund has no control — Charles Maddox (another Tory squire, or the son of one)

cannot count as objectionable; but what has to be avoided is general knowledge in the dining neighborhood of Mansfield, of the morally “disgraceful” project of playacting (cf. I, xiii, 127; xvi 155; xviii, 164). It appears clearly that the local supporters of Sir Thomas Bertram M.P., are evangelical descendants of Cromwell’s Puritans.

- x. Mary’s essential kindness — and her goodwill to Fanny as unappreciated and unfairly oppressed — shows up clearly when the party tries to persuade Fanny to be “Cottager’s wife,” and Mrs. Norris cruelly accuses her of obstinacy and ingratitude “considering who she is” (I, xv, 146-7). Mary is disappointed herself at this moment; but it is through her agency that her sister, Mrs. Grant, volunteers for the part — though we must not suppose that Mary had to persuade her, because Mrs. Grant is very good-hearted herself.
- xi. Mary is more clear-eyed than Mrs. Grant (I, xvii, 161). But the “coldness” of her comments indicates the conflict between her “principles” (such as they are) and her feelings. According to Mary’s conventional “principles” Maria has done remarkably well in “catching” James Rushworth. But Mary has herself abandoned Tom Bertram in favor of Edmund; and she sees clearly that Rushworth is an impossible mate for an intelligent woman. She is skeptical that Sir Thomas can get Rushworth into Parliament. But that is mainly because she does not *want* to believe it. She knows that it *ought* not to happen. (The moral reformation of her “principles” is in progress.)
- xii. This is perhaps a sign that in the “country” of Sir Thomas, playacting is *ethically* reprehensible. (The children all understand their father’s social position, better than Mrs. Norris; but only Edmund accepts the moral responsibility that it imposes.)
- xiii. Mary would sooner be Mrs. Edmund Bertram than Mrs. Rushworth; but she would like best

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- to be Lady Bertram to his “Sir Edmund” (II, iv, 210-1).
- xiv. Crawford’s project is actually born at the moment when Fanny chokes him off on the subject of the play (II, v, 225). He grasps what her attitude is, and he cannot resist the challenge (II, vi, 230).
- xv. This is not what she *says* to herself. Her conscious resolution is: “If *he* does not care then I won’t!” But that is role-playing (just like Maria’s); and she has already shown herself to be far wiser than Maria (in preferring Edmund to Tom, and acting accordingly). The whole novel is a study of the relation between role-playing and felt commitment.
- xvi. Mary’s disapproval of Henry’s plot against Fanny is quite genuine. She did not mind his flirting with Maria — though she *wanted* him to attach himself to Julia — but when he confesses that he has been “caught” by Fanny, she says: “Your *wicked* project upon her peace turns out a clever thought” (II, xii, 295).
- xvii. We should note that Thornton Lacey is a *possible* home for Edmund and Mary. Mansfield Parsonage itself would never do, because Sir Thomas can never change, and there would always be a conflict of feeling and influence between him and Mary.
- xviii. There is a significant difference, however. Mary continues: “But I am not fishing” — when that is exactly what she is doing, and continues to do. Elizabeth would never be guilty of fibbing quite so blatantly; and Mary will never stop doing it. (This links her with Caroline Bingley; but Mary deserves forgiveness, where Caroline does not, because Mary is not mercenary.)

- xix. This is a momentary impulse of which we hear no more. When Henry realizes the importance of a responsible landowner (like Sir Thomas) in Fanny's mind, he takes up *that* role with enthusiasm (and forgets it again, of course, as soon as Maria's hostility provides a new challenge).
- xx. Volume II ends very cleverly with Henry using Mary as a go-between. Mary expresses her delighted confidence by writing a note to "My dear Fanny" (II, xii, 303); and Fanny shows how little delighted she is, by responding to "My dear Miss Crawford" (twice — II, xii, 307). So Henry must be quite consciously fibbing when he tells Sir Thomas he has received "encouragement."
- xxi. Unlike Mrs. Norris, Sir Thomas is both kind and sensitively insightful. He "chuses at least to appear satisfied" (III, i, 316) with Fanny's denial that she is in love with Edmund; but he goes on to get her agreement that Edmund loves Mary (317). He certainly allows for *that* when he sets up his "medicinal project" (III, vi, 369).
- xxii. He would succeed better, if he would play the "despairing" role, for Fanny has a natural sympathy with that (III, i, 321; cf. III, v, 365). But there are some parts that he cannot play (or at least they never occur to him).
- xxiii. The woman's position is conventionally very difficult. Mary is expected to sympathize with Fanny rather than her brother; Maria (and Julia) were wrong to let their interest in Henry's attentions show; and Fanny (who behaves very properly in that respect) ought to be in love with Henry as soon as he declares himself. Richardson's doctrine that no girl should ever be in love with a young man, until he is in love with her (*Northanger Abbey* I, 3, 29-30) is exposed in all its absurdity in this chapter.

- xxiv. Jane Austen speaks of “that participation of the general nature of women, which would lead her [Mary] to adopt the opinions of the man she loved and respected” (III, vi, 367). The “participation” is simply what “loving respect” means. But its sexual *direction* is socially determined. Where men occupy the public world almost exclusively the significant “participation” must be mainly as Jane Austen describes it. But a study of William and Charlotte Collins shows how complex the participation might still be. If “Henry succeeded at last” (III, iv, 347), Mary’s imaginary ten years of marriage (III, iv, 354) would have made Fanny bitterly unhappy, because “respect” would have vanished. The same ten years would have markedly improved *both* Edmund and Mary morally.
- xxv. We must assume that Mrs. Price brought up her girls quite intelligently, until she began to spoil Betsey (who was “trained up to think the alphabet her greatest enemy” — III, viii, 391). Susan — fifth child in a family of nine, with three older brothers, and her only older sister gone — has accepted the “natural” priority of boys, and her own duty to be helpful. She has only begun to be jealous in the last year or two, because Betsey is favored.
- xxvi. Just for a moment we see a resemblance between Fanny and Elizabeth Bennet: “there is scarcely a young lady in the united kingdoms, who would not rather put up with the misfortune of being sought by a clever, agreeable man, than have him driven away by the vulgarity of her nearest relations” (III, x, 402).
- xxvii. The chronology of *Mansfield Park* can be fairly precisely worked out. Jane Austen used almanacs (those of 1808 and 1809). See the Appendix to R.W. Chapman’s text, pp. 553-6. (But she cheats about the date of Easter.)

- xxviii. There is a slight conflict in the evidence. On the one hand, Mary's statement together with Henry's fixed resentment, and his resolute determination not to do the "honorable" thing, strongly support my reading of events. On the other hand, it is stated as a fact that he "had quitted his uncle's house, as for a journey, on the very day of her [Maria] absenting herself" (III, xvi, 451). Maria certainly knew where to find him; but he was not expecting to become responsible for her. It does rather look as if they had a secret assignation — but see III, xvii, 468 which indicates that this was not so. Convention would say that "he seduced her"; but it is clear that Maria let the affair become public in order to entrap him. Thus it is more correct to say "She seduced him." (Certainly that is how Henry and Mary saw it.)
- xxix. R.W. Chapman wrote: "I am confident that Jane Austen could have told us, if she had chosen, just where he [Henry Crawford] kept his mistress" (1948, 196). I incline more to the belief that she *has* told us. Henry's trips to Everingham, together with his plan to live with Fanny near Mansfield, indicate fairly definitely where Henry's sexual safety-valve is. (It was a serious miscalculation on his part not to go there again as he said he would.) *Direct* reference to something as gross as this, was not necessary to Jane Austen's design, because the actual existence of a mistress could have been hidden from Fanny as long as Henry wanted to hide it. (But on this view, the plan to "let Everingham" — II, xii, 295 — was a passing fancy that was bound to be abandoned.)
- xxx. This language confirms the Puritan-Evangelical ethos of Mansfield.
- xxxi. 1948, 196.
- xxxii. This is a "Platonic" judgement. Being both of them morally *bad*, their love for one another can only make them "really" worse. But orthodox sermon-wisdom of this kind, has nothing

to do with “happiness” (or with “punishment”) in the ordinary sense. Jane Austen would never say that Mr. and Mrs. Elton made one another “unhappy.” But it is clearly her view (and Mr. Knightley’s) that they made one another “worse” (cf. *E*, III, ii, 331).

xxxiii. The contrast between the fates of the “prodigal son” Tom, and the prodigal daughter (even if she had been “penitent”) is very striking.

xxxiv. There is no fully realized example of a Christian minister who deserves his ordination in Jane Austen’s work. It seems *probable* that Henry Tilney is a good Christian by her standards, but we never see him in his parish-work; it is also likely that Mr. Howard would have been a proper exemplar if she had finished “The Watsons.” (She may have hoped that some readers of *Mansfield Park* who were familiar with “Lover’s Vows” would recognize the contrast between Edmund and “Anhalt.”)

xxxv. It is, of course, quite unthinkable — though some critics have managed to think it — that Edmund should hold *both* the living of Thornton Lacey, and that of Mansfield. Jane Austen certainly believed she had settled that question when Sir Thomas gave his opinion about the duty of a parish priest (II, vii, 248).

xxxvi. If I am not mistaken, Jane Austen has deliberately embodied in *Mansfield Park*, the “starched notions” of her sister Cassandra (cf. *Letters*, 1952, 300; 1997, 203). Cassandra naturally preferred this novel above all the others. Jane’s own views were more deeply marked by the sense of “original sin,” and the conscious need for universal forgiveness.