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## Review of *Mansfield Park: An Annotated Edition*

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## Review of *Mansfield Park: An Annotated Edition*

### **Comments**

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## BOOK REVIEW

### **Mansfield Park: An Annotated Edition**

DEIDRE SHAUNA LYNCH, ed.

London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016

532 pp., (hardback) ISBN 978 0 674 05810 1, \$35

The final edition of Harvard University Press's annotated Jane Austen novels, *Mansfield Park*, is a gorgeous object—an oversized volume fit to grace the best coffee tables. It is fitting that this is the last of the series, since it is most likely the least popular and arguably the most complicated of Austen's novels. Deidre Shauna Lynch's annotations, however, break down those complications carefully, leading readers to historical contexts, definitions, and theoretical discussions while illustrating those frameworks with rich, full-colored paintings, drawings, and photographs, which virtually enmesh readers in the richness of the period. The book could be useful to new readers, Austen scholars, and devoted Janeites, helping any reader of *Mansfield Park* to better appreciate this "book of difficult beauty" (34).

Lynch's introduction lays out her aims in annotating this novel: to "take account of . . . the novel's stylistic and technical prowess and its profound capacity to disturb" (6); to "make Austen's engagements with the debates of the period visible to the twenty-first-century audience, so that they may draw their own conclusions about Austen's meanings" (19); and finally "to demonstrate that even after two centuries readers have been anything but unanimous about the novel's meanings and values" (20). Lynch introduces Fanny Price as a "new sort of heroine in English fiction" (8), explaining that "Austen tends to establish *who* an individual is by establishing *where* the individual is," by "exploring how it feels to be *inside* a room, a house, a family, or a society" (3) and describing a home "where some people learn lessons in domination and others lessons in obsequiousness" (15). For veteran readers of the novel, these ideas may not be revelations, but the annotations and lavish illustrations will educate, or at least entertain, even the most dedicated Austen scholar.

Since Jane Austen wrote *Mansfield Park* not long after the success of the most beloved, *Pride and Prejudice*, she must have felt free to experiment with "a complete change of subject," as she wrote to her sister, Cassandra.<sup>1</sup> Though sales of the novel were strong, the "opinions" Austen collected about this novel (pp 510-12) reveal that her brothers preferred "P. & P." and that her mother thought the heroine "insipid." The varied attitudes Austen recorded about her third published novel anticipate the "dissent and controversy" (34) *Mansfield Park* has enjoyed over the past two hundred years. The continued debates, however, reveal the inherent complexity and richness of the novel.

Lynch's annotations can help twenty-first-century-readers to navigate the depths: contextualizing class distinctions, marriage laws and customs, money matters, and the like. Major themes in the novel dealing with religion, colonialism, the theatre, and "improvement" are explained with detail and ample references for further study. Beyond the recurring debates about the role of religion and the clergy we witness throughout the novel, the notes touch on the Evangelical movement, sermon writing, elocution, and the controversy over pluralism that Austen's readers might have understood. At the center of the Mansfield enterprise is the

colonial plantation in Antigua, also Lynch deftly summarizes critical debates about Austen's support or criticism of colonialism throughout the volume, referencing scholars to turn to for additional reference. The characters' rehearsing for a home production of *Lovers' Vows* captures the action for several chapters, and the notes on those pages clarify the nuances that might have been more accessible to the early readers more familiar with the popular pastime. Various conversations about "improvement" of property (but also hinting at manners) are explained and illustrated with an example of Humphrey Repton's famous "red books" created to pitch landscape ideas to his clients (92-5), and a diagram explaining the "ha-ha" the characters encounter during their trip to Sotherton (133). In much the same way, we learn more about card playing, harp playing, and dancing—all of which help to reveal myriad methods Austen used to develop her characters and plots.

The breath-taking aspect of this annotated volume, however, must be the pictures. Some are informational: a sample of a "crossed letter" (55), various paintings of naval battles and the town of Portsmouth, a woman's "workbox" (191), and paintings of grand homes that might have been models for Mansfield and Sotherton. The famous silhouette of Edward Knight's adoption and the three portraits of the author are important for any grand volume of Austen's novel. But the Cruikshank and Gillray satirical illustrations of the social elite seem to bring the irony of the work alive, while the Brock, Thompson, and Bentley illustrations reveal a Victorian understanding of the novels.

Spending a few hours with this edition of *Mansfield Park* will at the very least lure the reader into the critical, artistic, and historical world of this complex novel while compelling the Austen lover to purchase the other five volumes in the collection.

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<sup>1</sup> 29 January 1813.