



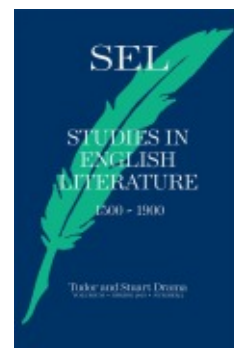
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Rehabilitating Sir Thomas Bertram

J. A. DOWNIE

I

Jane Austen is a satirical novelist. It may seem strange that this needs to be said, but in view of the recent proliferation of studies that have sought to privilege her social criticism, it is important to appreciate the way in which her social criticism is couched. As Alistair M. Duckworth has memorably explained, in recent years Austen has been constructed as a “progressive” author, and *Mansfield Park* in particular has been the site of radical revisionist readings.¹ Thus Margaret Kirkham asserts that “*Mansfield Park*, far from being the work of conservative quietism that much twentieth-century criticism has turned it into, embodies Jane Austen’s most ambitious and radical criticism of contemporary prejudice in society and in literature,” while Claudia L. Johnson contends that “Austen’s enterprise in *Mansfield Park* is to turn conservative myth sour, as she surely need not have done were her allegiances to the world of the country house as assured as is generally agreed.”² Critics have queued up to uncover feminist, liberal, even radical tendencies beneath the seemingly placid surface of the imagined world of Austen’s novel.

In searching for the subversive beneath the apparent conservatism of *Mansfield Park*, however, those who represent Austen as a progressive author do not appear to me to have sufficiently considered the possibility that the reformative agenda underpinning the novel might indeed have been conservative

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in inspiration also, as in the satire of her eighteenth-century radical-conservative predecessors Jonathan Swift and Samuel Johnson. My larger question is whether the target of Austen's satire in *Mansfield Park* is patriarchy itself or merely Sir Thomas Bertram's personal shortcomings as a father. Though it might offend those who read the novel as a satire of patriarchy rather than as a satire of a failure of patriarchy in a specific instance, there are good grounds for assuming that it is the latter rather than the former. That all is not well in the imagined world of *Mansfield Park* cannot be gainsaid. At the end of the novel, Tom, Sir Thomas's spendthrift eldest son and heir, is recovering from a dangerous illness brought on by "a neglected fall, and a good deal of drinking" at Newmarket; Maria, Sir Thomas's eldest daughter, recently married to the wealthy Mr. Rushworth but disgraced on account of her adulterous relationship with Henry Crawford, has been divorced; and Julia, his younger daughter, has eloped with the Honourable John Yates. It is in these difficult circumstances that Sir Thomas finally comes to realize that "Fanny was indeed the daughter that he wanted."³

There can be no doubt that the blame for what has occurred, down to the depravity of Mrs. Rushworth, is laid squarely at the door of Sir Thomas Bertram. Yet it is important to appreciate the way in which Austen presents the case against him. "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery," the final chapter (in)famously opens; "I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest" (p. 533). Prominent among the former—those who are "not greatly in fault themselves"—is Sir Thomas: "Sir Thomas, poor Sir Thomas, a parent, and conscious of errors in his own conduct as a parent, was the longest to suffer" (p. 533). What appears to be straightforward authorial sympathy for "poor Sir Thomas, a parent" can always be deconstructed into irony, of course, and readers may feel that, as he is most to blame for his children's failures, there is a certain poetic justice in Sir Thomas being the principal one to suffer: "Wretchedly did he feel, that with all the cost and care of an anxious and expensive education, he had brought up his daughters, without their understanding their first duties, or his being acquainted with their character or temper" (p. 536).

Yet it appears that whatever our feelings on the subject of Sir Thomas may be, he is scarcely being fair to himself. Right at the beginning of the novel, Austen makes it quite clear that "in every thing but disposition, [Maria and Julia] were admirably taught.

Sir Thomas did not know what was wanting," Austen goes on, "because, though a truly anxious father, he was not outwardly affectionate, and the reserve of his manner repressed all the flow of their spirits before him" (p. 22). I shall briefly consider in due course the extent to which Austen in *Mansfield Park* explores how far "disposition," let alone manners or morals, can be taught or learned. At the moment, I am more concerned with whether, given the circumstances I have just outlined, Austen is prompting us to sympathize with, if not actually to feel sorry for Sir Thomas. He is, after all, a kind man who means well. When Fanny Price arrives at Mansfield Park, "Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram received her very kindly, and Sir Thomas seeing how much she needed encouragement, tried to be all that was conciliating." Unfortunately, Sir Thomas, habitually finding it difficult to show affection, "had to work against a most untoward gravity of deportment" (p. 13). The conflicting impulses at play in Sir Thomas's makeup are finely captured, in what virtually amounts to an oxymoron, in Austen's description of his "solemn kindness" (p. 234).

A good example of Sir Thomas's "solemn kindness" at work occurs early in the novel when, on the eve of his departure for the West Indies, he encourages Fanny to write to her brother William to invite him to Mansfield: "This was so thoughtful and kind!"—and would he only have smiled upon her and called her 'my dear Fanny,' while he said it, every former frown or cold address might have been forgotten" (p. 37). As this is rendered in free indirect discourse, it is particularly effective in reminding us how the object of his charity, Fanny, views Sir Thomas. This is of some significance, because even Sir Thomas's generous impulse in offering to take upon himself the expense of bringing up Fanny Price has been held against him by recent critics. Yet it is important not to overlook the fact that Austen requires the reader to appreciate and to acknowledge Sir Thomas's good qualities. The way in which she insinuates this is typical of Austen's expository technique in *Mansfield Park*. The novel opens with an authoritative, third-person narrator offering reliable information about her characters, albeit not without irony. In introducing Sir Thomas, however, Austen exploits the characteristic eighteenth-century device of thesis and antithesis: "Sir Thomas Bertram had interest, which, from principle as well as pride, from a general wish of doing right, and a desire of seeing all that were connected with him in situations of respectability, he would have been glad to exert for the advantage of Lady Bertram's sister; but her husband's profession was such as no interest could reach; and before he had

time to devise any other method of assisting them, an absolute breach between the sisters had taken place" (p. 4). Here we see Sir Thomas's strengths and weaknesses carefully balanced, and it will not do to discount the former in order to focus exclusively on the latter. Sir Thomas is proud, certainly, but he is also principled. While his pride requires him to do what he can to avoid being embarrassed by any of his connections, however distantly related by marriage—he is, after all, a substantial member of the landed gentry as well as a Member of Parliament—he is also motivated by "a general wish of doing right," and it is Sir Thomas's sense of rectitude that is privileged by Austen.

This should not be overlooked. Once relations between the repentant Mrs. Price and her sisters have been re-established as a consequence of a letter from Mrs. Price to Lady Bertram, "which spoke so much contrition and despondence, such a superfluity of children, and such a want of almost every thing else," Mrs. Norris canvasses the idea that, between them, the Mansfield family ought "to undertake the care of her eldest daughter" (p. 5). "Lady Bertram agreed with her instantly," but "Sir Thomas could not give so instantaneous and unqualified a consent. He debated and hesitated" (p. 6). I am quoting purposely Austen's words because it seems to me that the reasons she gives for Sir Thomas's hesitation are crucial to a valid estimate of his character. That Austen takes particular pains to lead the attentive reader to interpret Sir Thomas's motives correctly is apparent in the way in which she makes Mrs. Norris leap to a wrong conclusion. Given her own character, she immediately assumes that her wealthy brother-in-law's reluctance to commit himself is founded on a selfish consideration. "You are thinking of your sons—but do not you know that of all things upon earth *that* is the least likely to happen; brought up, as they would be, always together like brothers and sisters? It is morally impossible. I never knew an instance of it. It is, in fact, the only sure way of providing against the connection" (p. 7).

Now Austen had already made it absolutely clear that although the idea "of cousins in love, &c." had indeed occurred to Sir Thomas, he had been unable to "state his objections" to sending for Fanny Price before being interrupted by Mrs. Norris (p. 6). What Mrs. Norris fails to take into account and what Sir Thomas is therefore obliged to enunciate are his *unselfish* doubts about undertaking such "a serious charge": "I only meant to observe, that it ought not to be lightly engaged in, and that to make it really serviceable to Mrs. Price, and creditable to ourselves, we

must secure to the child, or consider ourselves engaged to secure to her hereafter, as circumstances may arise, the provision of a gentlewoman” (pp. 7–8). For the second time in the opening few pages of *Mansfield Park*, Austen uses a distinctive rhetorical device to emphasize the way in which Sir Thomas Bertram’s mind works. He carefully weighs the pros and cons before making his decision, with genuinely generous inclinations being balanced, understandably enough, against more selfish considerations: “a girl so brought up must be adequately provided for, or there would be cruelty instead of kindness in taking her from her family. He thought of his own four children—of his two sons—of cousins in love, &c.” (p. 6).

However much some of them might have found Sir Thomas’s strict sense of moral rectitude a trifle wearing, there is little indication that any of the characters in *Mansfield Park* would have regarded it as a source of ridicule. While the mere presence of Sir Thomas Bertram is clearly sufficient to account for a diversity of feelings among the members of his immediate family and those closely connected with it, he is not portrayed as a figure of fun. Take what happens at the end of volume 1 when Julia interrupts the theatricals “with a face all aghast” to announce Sir Thomas’s arrival home (p. 202). For an instant, “jealousy and bitterness had been suspended: selfishness was lost in the common cause” (p. 205). Why? Everyone except the Honourable John Yates, who is unused to being “with those who thought much of parental claims,” realizes that the game is up (p. 207). Even the Crawfords, who have not met Sir Thomas Bertram either, “from better understanding the family and judging more clearly of the mischief that must ensue ... soon agreed on the propriety of their walking quietly home and leaving the family to themselves” (p. 207). As for the younger members of the Mansfield family itself, they are so apprehensive of Sir Thomas’s disapprobation of what they have been doing that Austen invites her readers to imagine “the sensations of her children upon hearing [Lady Bertram] say, ‘How do you think the young people have been amusing themselves lately, Sir Thomas? They have been acting. We have been all alive with acting’” (p. 211).

A great deal of unnecessary fuss has been made about the Mansfield Park theatricals.⁴ As Edmund remarks to Tom, simply to attempt private theatricals “as *we* are circumstanced” would be “more than injudicious,” as well as being “imprudent ... with regard to Maria, whose situation is a very delicate one, considering every thing, extremely delicate” (p. 147). This is compounded by

the choice of play, for *Lovers' Vows* is indeed "a little too warm" for private theatricals, especially as it will involve the Bertram family's elder daughter ("But what do you for women?" said Edmund gravely, and looking at Maria" [pp. 166, 163]). And of course Henry Crawford's "selfish vanity" has made Julia angry and jealous of Maria so that "the sister with whom she was used to be on easy terms, was now become her greatest enemy" (pp. 227, 190). All this is undoubtedly true. But these considerations are secondary to the overriding one that should have been governing the young people's actions, and it is this which Fanny, for all her "jealousy and agitation," never ceases to appreciate: "she could never have been easy in joining a scheme which, *considering only her uncle*, she must condemn altogether" (p. 187, emphasis added).

With the exception of Lady Bertram, then, whose "own time had been irreproachably spent [doing nothing] during his absence," the unexpected arrival home of Sir Thomas spreads consternation throughout the entire Mansfield family (p. 210). Even Mrs. Norris instinctively whisks away Mr. Rushworth's pink satin cloak as Sir Thomas enters the room. Why are the young people so disconcerted? What troubles them is their consciousness of having behaved not merely inconsiderately but with impropriety. We had been told, even before they decided upon *Lovers' Vows*, of "the selfishness which, more or less disguised, seemed to govern them all" (p. 154). As Edmund vainly points out to Tom in an attempt to forestall further mischief: "It would be taking liberties with my father's house in his absence which could not be justified" (p. 149). Maria's improper conduct with regard to Henry Crawford is therefore merely a secondary, if nonetheless important, consideration. Even had Maria's situation not been so delicate, it would still have been morally reprehensible for the Bertram children to undertake anything of which they knew their father would disapprove. That this is the interpretation Austen wishes us to reach is confirmed when Fanny, speaking more angrily than she had ever spoken before, subsequently informs Crawford in no uncertain terms that, as Sir Thomas "disapproved it all so entirely when he did arrive ... in my opinion, every thing had gone quite far enough" (p. 263).

Interestingly, Mrs. Grant supplies an apparently disinterested opinion on the head of the Mansfield family in response to Mary Crawford's flippant comments that "Sir Thomas is to achieve mighty things when he comes home": "You will find his consequence very just and reasonable when you see him in his family, I assure you. I do not think we do so well without him. He has a

fine dignified manner, which suits the head of such a house, and keeps every body in their place. Lady Bertram seems more of a cipher now than when he is at home; and nobody else can keep Mrs. Norris in order" (pp. 189–90). "I do not think we do so well without him" is a telling phrase that would bear further investigation. It is not only on account of his estate in Antigua that Sir Thomas is absent from Mansfield Park. What is clearly implied by Austen, but easily overlooked, is that he has been away from home for long periods while his children were growing up. Around the time of Fanny's arrival at Mansfield, Lady Bertram gave up the house in town "which she had been used to occupy every spring, leaving Sir Thomas to attend his duty in Parliament, with whatever increase or diminution of comfort might arise from her absence" (p. 23). As Fanny tellingly observes to Edmund, "I cannot recollect that our evenings formerly were ever merry, *except when my uncle was in town*" (p. 230, emphasis added).

As there is little indication at the beginning of the novel that Mansfield Park is operating in a moral vacuum, it could be argued that many of the problems experienced by the Bertrams at least coincide with, if they are not actually occasioned by, Sir Thomas's absences. Julia is twelve and Maria thirteen at the time that Lady Bertram gives up the house in town, and we are told in no uncertain terms that "To the education of her daughters, Lady Bertram paid not the smallest attention" (p. 22). Perfectly aware of this, Sir Thomas relies instead on Mrs. Norris to supply what is wanting. Sadly, it is far too late and only with the benefit of hindsight that "he became aware how unfavourable to the character of any young people, must be the totally opposite treatment which Maria and Julia had been always experiencing at home, where the excessive indulgence and flattery of their aunt had been continually contrasted with his own severity." As Austen chooses to narrate this in free indirect discourse also, that Sir Thomas is finally forced to acknowledge to himself "how ill he had judged" is of significance (p. 535).

The consequences of Sir Thomas's grievous management are that although Maria and Julia are aware of how they ought to behave, their education has been insufficient for them to regard this as anything other than a tiresome duty. Perhaps the best of the several instances offered by Austen appears quite trivial. Although the selfishness of all the parties concerned in the ill-fated day at Sotherton Court is rendered utterly transparent, Julia is particularly unfortunate on finally abandoning the claustrophobic atmosphere of the house:

The remaining three, Mrs. Rushworth, Mrs. Norris, and Julia, were still far behind; for Julia, whose happy star no longer prevailed, was obliged to keep by the side of Mrs. Rushworth, and restrain her impatient feet to that lady's slow pace, while her aunt, having fallen in with the housekeeper, who was come out to feed the pheasants, was lingering behind in gossip with her. Poor Julia, the only one out of the nine not tolerably satisfied with their lot, was now in a state of complete penance, and as different from the Julia of the barouche-box as could well be imagined. The politeness which she had been brought up to practise as a duty, made it impossible for her to escape; while the want of that higher species of self-command, that just consideration of others, that knowledge of her own heart, that principle of right which had not formed any essential part of her education, made her miserable under it.

(p. 106)

As this is authoritative, third-person narrative and not free indirect discourse, Austen's sentiments on the matter not only seem perfectly clear, they are also deeply revealing about her attitude to the education of Sir Thomas's daughters. However much it goes against the grain, Julia knows her duty too well simply to make an excuse and rush off to rejoin the other young people. Unfortunately, her education has not extended to the formation of a genuine moral sense—of “that principle of right” that should regulate her behavior—therefore she chafes under any constraint on her conduct. The consequences of Maria and Julia being “admirably taught” in “every thing but disposition” are felt throughout Sir Thomas's absence in Antigua because, liberated from their father's controlling influence once more (as they had been when he was in town attending Parliament), their sense of duty is inadequate to override their natural propensity to be governed entirely by self-interest.

It is in these extraordinary circumstances that the Bertrams are introduced to the fashionable and worldly Crawfords. The authoritative judgment that Austen finally delivers upon the man who, at the height of his folly, aspired to the hand of Fanny Price, is damning: “Henry Crawford, ruined by early independence and bad domestic example, indulged in the freaks of a cold-blooded vanity a little too long” (p. 540). She is too clever a novelist, however, to tell the reader openly what to think at the outset. Once again, the way in which Crawford is introduced is telling.

Describing in her best ironic style how Mary Crawford, “mostly used to London,” ends up in rural Northamptonshire, Austen emphasizes her brother’s selfishness. She “resolve[d] to hazard herself among her other relations” only after she has tried and failed to persuade him “to settle with her at his own country-house.” “To any thing like a permanence of abode, or limitation of society, Henry Crawford had, unluckily, a great dislike,” Austen explains; “he could not accommodate his sister in an article of such importance” (p. 47).

After such a carefully worked introduction as this, readers would be advised to be on their guard as far as the Crawfords are concerned, and these first impressions are of course speedily reinforced in the light of their subsequent conduct. Interestingly, we are given authoritative insight into Mary’s character early on: “She had none of Fanny’s delicacy of taste, of mind, of feeling; she saw nature, inanimate nature, with little observation; her attention was all for men and women, her talents for the light and lively” (p. 94). It is therefore scarcely surprising to find her criticizing the relations with whom she has been living, making dreadful *double entendres* when talking about admirals of the fleet, and demonstrating her inability to treat even “serious subjects” appropriately. In the circumstances, when Austen refers to “the really good feelings by which she was almost purely governed,” it is as if she is damning Mary Crawford with faint praise (p. 173).

In comparison with Austen’s treatment of her brother, Mary Crawford gets off lightly, however. The most that can be said for Henry Crawford, apart from his being a “man of fortune” (p. 46), is that he is a gentleman-like man “with a pleasing address” (p. 51). He is “not handsome” (p. 51); “Nobody can call such an under-sized man handsome” (p. 119). Fanny certainly does not think so. Indeed Mr. Crawford’s “corrupted mind” is sufficient to make Fanny “quite hate him,” because he “can feel nothing as he ought” (pp. 263, 261, 265). True, Austen uses a variety of narrative devices in order to make her points rather than simply resorting to her own authorial voice. Mostly it is rendered in the free indirect style; sometimes the same technique gives voice to Maria and Julia’s collective opinions; occasionally, it is presented as the view of the Mansfield family in its entirety. But just in case we are in any doubt, Austen patently cannot resist giving the reader the benefit of authoritative, third-person narrative. Writing of his enthusiasm for the idea of acting, she notes that “Henry Crawford, to whom, in all the riot of his gratifications, it was yet an untasted pleasure, was quite alive at the idea” (pp. 144–5).

Mary Waldron has observed, "It is usual to regard the Crawfords as representatives of the outer, more wicked, world which is about to attack the moral stronghold of Mansfield ... But it should be remembered that there is in fact nothing much to attack."⁵ Here we see the importance of appreciating Mrs. Grant's perception that Mansfield Park was quite a different place when Sir Thomas was away from home. As the Honourable John Yates quickly discovered, "there was a something in Sir Thomas" sufficient to turn Mansfield Park into a "moral stronghold" when the head of the household was in residence—"never in the whole course of his life, had he seen one of that class, so unintelligibly moral, so infamously tyrannical as Sir Thomas" (p. 224). "Sir Thomas's return made a striking change in the ways of the family, independent of *Lovers' Vows*," Austen observes; "Under his government, Mansfield was an altered place" (p. 229). The theatricals would never have been dreamt of, much less have taken place, had Sir Thomas been in residence. His absence presents the opportunity for the moral fiber of the members of his family to be tested. And sadly, it is mainly found wanting. Despite his insistence that he has "quite as great an interest in being careful of his [father's] house as [Edmund] can have," Tom proves to be a poor steward, and even Edmund allows his infatuation with Mary Crawford to cloud his judgment (p. 149). As for the Mansfield women, including Mrs. Norris, they turn out to be a sorry bunch. The best that can be said of Lady Bertram, whom Mrs. Grant tellingly calls "a cipher," is that, while failing to exercise any parental authority of her own, she has spent her time "irreproachably" in her husband's absence. In addition to falling out over Henry Crawford, Maria and Julia, freed from their father's control and flattered by Mrs. Norris, have indulged their selfish instincts to the full. As for Mrs. Norris herself, Austen remarks in full, authoritative, third-person mode that "her judgment had been so blinded" during her brother-in-law's absence that there was little chance of her being "incommoded by many fears of Sir Thomas's disapprobation" (p. 210).

What, then, of Fanny Price? Is she exempt from the impropriety that appears to permeate the Mansfield household? Interestingly, she is virtually the only one represented by Austen as concerned about her own conduct. Fanny asks herself, "Was she *right* in refusing what was so warmly asked, so strongly wished for? Was it not ill-nature—selfishness—and a fear of exposing herself?" (p. 179). Austen carefully explains the reason for Fanny's anxiety: "It would be so horrible to her to act, that she was inclined to sus-

pect the truth and purity of her own scruples" (p. 179). Even after she has succeeded in convincing herself that she has not "done wrong herself," Fanny is "disquieted in every other way" because she is "full of jealousy and agitation" on account of Edmund's infatuation with Mary Crawford (pp. 186–7). While Austen does not offer her own authoritative opinion on Fanny's conduct, she has Edmund speak to Sir Thomas on Fanny's behalf: "'We have all been more or less to blame,' said he, 'every one of us, excepting Fanny. Fanny is the only one who has judged rightly throughout, who has been consistent. *Her* feelings have been steadily against it ['the whole acting scheme'] from first to last. She never ceased to think of what was due to you. You will find Fanny every thing you could wish'" (p. 219). And of course by the end of the novel, that is precisely what Sir Thomas has discovered.

It is because of Fanny's rectitude, one assumes, that Margaret Kirkham emphasizes the feminist thrust of *Mansfield Park*. "We see that Sir Thomas Bertram is wrong about really everything, whereas Fanny Price is right about nearly everything," she argues, "yet do not connect Austen's affirmation of Fanny's rationality with her feminist purposes."⁶ The problem with this analysis is that it fails to consider that Austen's purpose in the novel might be to reinforce rather than to undermine patriarchal authority. If Fanny, despite her jealousy and agitation, is right about nearly everything, then the values she upholds—her very beliefs—correspond with Sir Thomas's, because he has informed the way in which she views the world. Her conduct is guided by her appreciation of her uncle's thoughts and feelings on any given subject. Thus she not only "never ceased to think of what was due to" Sir Thomas in his absence, but also she understands why, upon reading *Lovers' Vows*, the acting scheme is so objectionable: "Her curiosity was all awake, and she ran through it with an eagerness which was suspended only by intervals of astonishment, that it could be chosen in the present instance—that it could be proposed and accepted in a private Theatre! Agatha and Amelia appeared to her in their different ways so totally improper for home representation—the situation of one, and the language of the other, so unfit to be expressed by any woman of modesty, that she could hardly suppose her cousins could be aware of what they were engaging in" (p. 161). Tom and Maria and Julia are of course perfectly aware of what they are doing. Unlike Fanny, they are not only prepared but also eager to seize the opportunity presented by their father's absence to shuffle off the constraints his moral sense imposes on their behavior. Sir Thomas recognizes the short-

comings of his elder son and his two daughters, and appreciates the fact that he “feel[s] many scruples which my children do *not* feel, is perfectly natural” (p. 218). Yet this should not lead us to assume that Austen is somehow satirizing Sir Thomas’s values; rather the reverse.

In particular, Sir Thomas is concerned about the welfare of his daughter, Maria. On his return home, it does not take him very long to realize that “Mr. Rushworth was an inferior young man, as ignorant in business as in books.” Taking the time to try “to understand *her* feelings,” he quickly discovers “that indifference was the most favourable state they could be in.” “Advantageous as would be the alliance, and long standing and public as was the engagement, her happiness must not be sacrificed to it.” With “solemn kindness” he offers to “act for her and release her” from the engagement, regardless of “every inconvenience,” “if she felt herself unhappy in the prospect of it” (pp. 233–4). The reader has been given ample opportunity by this stage to understand Maria’s mind. Austen has even let it be known that she “wanted neither pride nor resolution” (p. 226). It is therefore scarcely a surprise that, after “a moment’s struggle,” Maria, telling him “he was quite mistaken,” rejects her father’s generosity (p. 234). From this passage, it could be argued that it would have been better for all concerned if Sir Thomas had been more, rather than less, authoritarian. Sensing that something was not right and disregarding how awkward or socially embarrassing it would have been to him, he offers to save Maria from herself, only to be rebuffed. That is not how recent critics have represented it, however. On the contrary, according to Janet Todd, “Sir Thomas’s flaw is most evident when he lets ambition silence him over Maria,” as “he is quick to accept her perfunctory assurances, feeling ‘very happy’ to secure an alliance ‘which would bring him such an addition of respectability.’”⁷

While Sir Thomas tries unsuccessfully to persuade Maria not to marry a fool, he attempts to persuade Fanny, against her better judgment, to marry a reprobate. When she remains unconvinced by his repeated appeals “to her reason, conscience, and dignity,” he packs her off to Portsmouth (p. 428). Even though he stops short at forcing Fanny to marry against her will, it is possible, of course, to interpret Austen’s description of Sir Thomas’s “medicinal project upon his niece’s understanding” as an attack on patriarchy (p. 425). Austen makes it clear that Sir Thomas “was master at Mansfield Park. When he had really resolved on any measure, he could always carry it through” (p. 427). Before leap-

ing to this conclusion, however, we should remember that Sir Thomas has no knowledge or awareness of Crawford's "selfish vanity," let alone the unscrupulous way in which he has trifled with his daughters' affections. Sir Thomas regards Crawford as "a young man of sense, of character, of temper, of manners, and of fortune, exceedingly attached to [Fanny], and seeking [her] hand in the most handsome and disinterested way" (p. 368). He may be utterly wrong about Crawford, but Fanny's determination to reject him and his "good estate" is beyond Sir Thomas's comprehension. Given these circumstances, how could Fanny possibly hope to persuade Sir Thomas of Crawford's moral bankruptcy, more especially as "Maria and Julia—and especially Maria, were so closely implicated in Mr. Crawford's misconduct, that she could not give his character, such as she believed it, without betraying them." Thus when Sir Thomas asks her whether she has any reason "to think ill of Mr. Crawford's temper," "[s]he longed to add, 'but of his principles I have;' but her heart sunk under the appalling prospect of discussion, explanation, and probably non-conviction" (p. 366).

In much the same way that Henry Fielding's Mr. Allworthy has been criticized for not being all-knowing also, critics have condemned Sir Thomas for not being omniscient. He cannot understand Fanny's reluctance to seize this golden opportunity to ensure her future status as a gentlewoman for the simple reason that he has no inkling of "Mr. Crawford's misconduct." "This is very strange!" said Sir Thomas, in a voice of calm displeasure. "There is something in this which my comprehension does not reach" (p. 364). Ultimately, the case against Sir Thomas appears to be based on the fact that, although unquestionably master in his own house, he cannot control his children's propensities. However much they are reminded of their duties and responsibilities, the one thing they cannot be taught is disposition. As Maria explains to Crawford during the ill-fated expedition to Sotherton, "that iron gate, that ha-ha, give me a feeling of restraint and hardship" (p. 116). Unfortunately, restraint and hardship are precisely the two qualities that Tom, Maria, and Julia find detestable, and they kick against the pricks.

II

Sir Thomas is of course the owner not only of Mansfield Park but also of an estate in Antigua, and recent critical interpretations of Austen's novel have been informed by what is taken to

be its “political unconscious.” While there is not one iota of authority in the text of *Mansfield Park* to suggest that Sir Thomas has to visit Antigua because of “problems with the slaves on the plantations”—or even that “his West India Estate” is a sugar plantation worked by slaves, though contemporary readers were likely to have understood that this was indeed the case—it is the reason given in Patricia Rozema’s film, “Based on JANE AUSTEN’S Novel ‘MANSFIELD PARK,’ Her Letters, and Early Journals.”⁸ Since critics started asking questions about the possible colonial dimension of *Mansfield Park*, and more particularly since the publication of Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* in 1993, it has been widely assumed that “The Bertrams could not have been possible without the slave trade, sugar, and the colonial planter class.”⁹

This has informed not only assessments of Sir Thomas’s character, but interpretations of *Mansfield Park tout court*. Thus it has been widely assumed, without any explicit authority from the text, that “There is something distinctly ‘modern-built,’ *nouveau*, and West Indian about Sir Thomas and his social standing.”¹⁰ True, *Mansfield Park* is described as “a spacious modern-built house, so well placed and well screened as to deserve to be in any collection of engravings of gentlemen’s seats in the kingdom” (p. 55), and “West Indians” undoubtedly bought estates in England with fortunes made from sugar plantations worked by slaves. Yet there is no indication in the text of *Mansfield Park* that the Bertrams are *nouveaux riches*. Austen offers no information about the origins of the family’s wealth, but from the invention of the title by James I in 1611 onwards, baronetcies were conferred exclusively upon the owners of substantial landed estates in England, and Sir Thomas’s includes “a real park five miles round,” as well as the rights of presentation to two livings (p. 55). He is also a Member of Parliament. Given these circumstances, there seems little reason to assume that he is one of “the almost endless creations of the last century” against whom Sir Walter Elliot fulminates in *Persuasion*.¹¹

Recent critics have also been inclined to misrepresent Sir Thomas’s reaction to Fanny’s question about the slave trade. While it is clear from the text of the novel that Sir Thomas returns repeatedly of an evening to his experiences in the West Indies—why else would Fanny say “I love to hear my uncle talk of the West Indies. I could listen to him for an hour together” (p. 230)—critical attention has been largely restricted to the implication of “the dead silence” with which her question was seemingly greeted. If the dialogue between Edmund and Fanny is quoted

in its entirety, however, it becomes apparent that the silence is not Sir Thomas's:

"Your uncle is disposed to be pleased with you in every respect; and I only wish you would talk to him more.—You are one of those who are too silent in the evening circle."

"But I do talk to him more than I used. I am sure I do. 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."

(pp. 231–2)

The silence of the Bertrams, then, is the silence, not of Sir Thomas, who in fact would have been pleased "to be inquired of farther," nor of Edmund, nor even of Fanny herself, timid as she is, but specifically of Julia and Maria who, utterly uninterested in either the subject of the slave trade or their father's experiences in the West Indies, sit in dead silence "in the family circle" of an evening. Once again, Austen's point appears to be not about the slave trade but about the manners of Sir Thomas's daughters.

III

What, then, are we to make of the way in which Austen's social criticism is presented in *Mansfield Park*? While the unattractive or morally reprehensible characters in the novel either fail to understand or purposely reject Sir Thomas's values, they are wholeheartedly embraced by Edmund and Fanny. True, Edmund wavers when infatuated with Mary Crawford. The "charm" is finally "broken" when he comes to realize that she regards Crawford's adulterous liaison with Mrs. Rushworth "only as folly, and that folly stamped only by exposure" (p. 526). Brought finally to face up to Mary Crawford's flawed moral outlook, Edmund is forced

to accept that “Her’s are faults of principle, Fanny, of blunted delicacy and a corrupted, vitiated mind” (p. 458). The central issue as far as interrogating Austen’s ideology in *Mansfield Park* is concerned would appear to me to be this: does she mean her readers to accept or to reject Edmund’s mature assessment of Mary Crawford’s manners?

This is of prime importance to an understanding of the novel because Austen makes it quite clear that, as it was Edmund who had “formed [Fanny’s] mind and gained her affections, he had a good chance of her thinking like him” (p. 76). He is so successful in this that he is never entirely happy unless Fanny and he are of one mind on any given subject. He has no inkling, of course, that Fanny is in love with him and therefore jealous of Mary Crawford. Sir Thomas, in turn, has formed Edmund’s mind. As far as Sir Thomas is concerned, Edmund is his only unqualified success as a parent. Edmund appreciates his duties both as a son and as a prospective clergyman, and there is little indication in the text of *Mansfield Park* that the values that Sir Thomas has inculcated in Edmund—the ideology—is not shared by Austen herself. As for Fanny, far from her seeking to undermine Sir Thomas’s patriarchal authority, she appears to wish to uphold it on all occasions. She not only respects his values, she actively strives to reaffirm them. When critics observe that Fanny’s judgment is usually sound, therefore, presumably they also have to accept that her judgment is likely to accord with Sir Thomas’s. Thus the full burden of Edmund’s remark to Sir Thomas on his return from the West Indies that I have already quoted is of especial significance: “Fanny is the only one who has judged rightly throughout, who has been consistent,” he explains. “Her feelings have been steadily against [the acting scheme] from first to last.” Why? Because Fanny is principled in the same way that Sir Thomas is principled.

The Crawfords, by contrast, are utterly unprincipled, and therefore Austen describes both of them as having “corrupted” minds. For this reason, Mary Poovey is right to conclude that “The Crawfords epitomize the external challenge to Mansfield Park and the values it *ideally* superintends; for though Henry Crawford owns an estate in Norfolk, he does not fulfill his patriarchal responsibilities.”¹² That is why Crawford tries to interest Fanny in matters concerning his Norfolk estate during their walk to the dockyard at Portsmouth. Questions of tenancy and stewardship might appear extraneous to Austen’s social criticism were it not for the ideological burden she places upon them. Crawford asks

Fanny to advise him whether he should lease land to “an honest man, to whom I have given half a promise already,” rather than to the “hard-hearted, griping fellow” recommended by his steward. “I advise!,” Fanny replies, “you know very well what is right ... We have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be” (p. 478).

In suggesting that Crawford merely has to look to his own conscience in order to understand how he should conduct himself both as a landlord and as a Christian, Fanny offers a clear indication of the ideology that underpins *Mansfield Park*. Crawford fails in his paternalistic duties because he is basically an absentee landlord who cares little for the welfare of his dependents. In its turn, an ideology in which everyone knows and accepts their places in the social hierarchy is founded on a benevolent paternalism reinforced by religion. Whether, as some recent critics have argued, Sir Thomas is an evangelical Christian, it can scarcely be doubted that Christian morality is central to Austen’s purpose in *Mansfield Park*, and that this is why she satirizes the unprincipled, “corrupted” minds of the Crawfords. The nobility and gentry who together constituted the English ruling class were not only landowners; they were expected, in theory at least, to care for their dependents both materially and spiritually. As Paul Langford points out, whether simply as landlords or as magistrates, the “emphasis was on the sense of responsibility, the benevolence, and the integrity of those involved.” At the turn of the nineteenth century, however, complaints about the failure of the rural ruling class to discharge its responsibilities effectively were being aired with increasing frequency. “Its failure was nothing if not a moral failure,” Langford observes, “an abandonment of its duty to lead and educate by example.”¹³

It is important to give some indication of the reasons for Austen’s implied criticism of Crawford’s failings as a landlord because much recent criticism of Austen’s novels appears to me to be seriously compromised on account of a basic misunderstanding of the social structure of English society at the turn of the nineteenth century. In stark contrast to Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* or Knightley in *Emma*, Crawford is shown to care little for the welfare of his dependents. This implied criticism is so central to the ideological context of *Mansfield Park* that, apart from the exchange between Fanny and Crawford at Portsmouth, it is virtually unspoken. Given this rhetorical reticence on Austen’s part, critics are of course free to interpret *Mansfield Park* as an attack on paternalistic values if they wish. I find the argument

that Austen's project in the novel was to satirize or subvert the moral principles that Sir Thomas represents difficult to sustain, however, if for no other reason than that, as I have explained, these are the very principles that Edmund and Fanny also wish to uphold.

Those who maintain that Austen seeks to undermine these values, therefore, need to ask themselves this question: Does Austen mean her readers to question *and to reject* the moral outlook espoused by all three of these central characters in *Mansfield Park*? In commenting on earlier critics who believed "that Jane Austen was subversive of the accepted values of her class and society," Terry Lovell argued instead that *Mansfield Park* "supports and affirms the most orthodox values of gentry society." Given Austen's family background, this is scarcely surprising. As Lovell explained, "[t]he Austens had innumerable family connections with the wealthier gentry, and as such they were typical of those who followed professions in the church, law, or the armed services."¹⁴ Edmund, like Austen's father, and her brothers James and Henry, is destined for a career in the church. To Mary Crawford's chagrin, however, Edmund has "no idea but of residence." This chimes in with Sir Thomas's alleged evangelical sentiments. "I should have been deeply mortified," he explains, "if any son of mine could reconcile himself to doing less." The reason he gives is telling: "a parish has wants and claims which can be known only by a clergyman constantly resident, and which no proxy can be capable of satisfying to the same extent" (pp. 288–9).

The political ideology espoused in *Mansfield Park* is indeed a paternalistic one, in which a range of social responsibilities accompanies the possession of large estates such as Sotherton Court or Mansfield Park or Henry Crawford's "good estate in Norfolk" (p. 46). In all of her novels, including *Persuasion*, Austen satirizes those who fail to discharge these duties adequately. At the same time, she praises ideal landlords who have the welfare of their tenants and dependents at the forefront of their concerns. Austen does not seek to challenge this ideology, even in *Mansfield Park*. Austen's "enterprise" in this novel is not "to turn conservative myth sour"; rather, it is to reveal, through satire, the discrepancy between how things are and how, according to the conservative ideology she espouses, they should ideally be. Her satire demonstrates how, if it is abused, the system can fail to live up to its ideals.¹⁵ And it is not only Henry and Mary Crawford who abuse the system. In *Mansfield Park*, Austen systematically reveals the shortcomings of most of the Mansfield family, including Sir

Thomas himself. Sir Thomas learns from his mistakes, however, and at the end of the novel he is striving to rectify them. That is the reason why, as she puts it in conclusion, Austen is “impatient to restore every body, *not greatly in fault themselves*, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest” (my emphasis). And foremost among those she desires to rehabilitate is Sir Thomas Bertram.

NOTES

¹Alistair M. Duckworth, “Jane Austen and the Construction of a Progressive Author,” *CE* 53, 1 (January 1991): 77–90, 77. See also the preface to Duckworth’s *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen’s Novels* (rev. edn. [1971; rpt. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1994], pp. vii–xxxii, viii–xii).

²Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism, and Fiction* (Brighton and Totowa NJ: Harvester Press, 1983), p. 119; and Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 97.

³Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. John Wiltshire, Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 494, 546. (All subsequent references will refer to this edition and will be cited by page number parenthetically in the text). It should, perhaps, be noted that Austen’s use of “wanted” clearly carries the archaic connotation “to be lacking or missing; not to be forthcoming; to be deficient in quantity or degree” (OED, 2d edn., s.v. “to want,” 1.a.). Austen is suggesting that Fanny is the daughter Sir Thomas lacks. She uses “want,” either as a noun or a verb, to mean “lack” on several occasions in *Mansfield Park* (for example, pp. 5, 22).

⁴See Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate*, p. 39n5, for a list of critics who have written about the theatricals.

⁵Mary Waldron, *Jane Austen and the Fiction of Her Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), pp. 91–2.

⁶Kirkham, p. xvi.

⁷Janet Todd, *The Cambridge Introduction to Jane Austen*, Cambridge Introductions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), pp. 78–9.

⁸*Mansfield Park*, directed by Patricia Rozema, United States/United Kingdom, 1999.

⁹Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), p. 94.

¹⁰Brian Southam, “The Silence of the Bertrams,” *TLS*, 17 February 1995, rpt. in Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. Johnson (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), pp. 493–8, 494.

¹¹Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. Todd and Antje Blank, Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), p. 3. My argument in this paragraph follows from the more extended discussion of Sir Thomas Bertram’s social standing offered in J. A. Downie, “Who Says

She's a Bourgeois Writer? Reconsidering the Social and Political Contexts of Jane Austen's Novels," *ECS* 40, 1 (Fall 2006): 74–9.

¹²Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 213, emphasis added.

¹³Paul Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman, 1689–1798* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 376.

¹⁴Terry Lovell, "Jane Austen and Gentry Society," in *Literature, Society, and the Sociology of Literature: Proceedings of the Conference Held at the University of Essex, July 1976*, ed. Francis Barber, John Coombes, Peter Hulme, David Musselwhite, and Richard Osborne (Colchester: Univ. of Essex, 1977), pp. 118–32, 118.

¹⁵The larger question of whether Austen had changed her mind by the time she came to write *Persuasion* and *Sanditon* is beyond the scope of the present essay. It is a topic to which I intend to return.