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LOVE, DONNA SNIDER. The Beauty of Paradox: Mansfield Park and Christianity. (1977) Directed by: Dr. James E. Evans. Pp.65.

The purpose of this study is to explain why Jane Austen, the creator of Elizabeth Bennett in Pride and Prejudice, presented the readers of Mansfield Park with so seemingly unattractive a heroine as Fanny Price. Rather than being the failure many critics perceive, Fanny is a relatively successful portrayal of a Christian heroine--one who embodies the paradoxes of Christianity. Fanny is the mourner, the meek, the poor in spirit, spoken of in the Beatitudes.

One significant Christian tradition, the paradox of exterior beauty masking inner corruption, is illustrated admirably by Austen in her portrayal of Mary and Henry Crawford, as well as in the novels and minor works which preceded Mansfield Park. Because good, conversely, is not always outwardly attractive, Fanny and Edmund Bertram are characterized as stiff, dry and uncomfortable people.

Two complementary themes in the Gospels which also underlie Mansfield Park are the complete dependence on God which leads to surrender of concern for worldly security, and the concern for others rather than for self. Austen illustrates that the worldly wisdom of self-seeking is ultimately destructive and that a life of self-sacrifice is the only means of salvation. She shows restraint to be true freedom, since it is only in the fetters of Christ that man escapes the bondage of sin.

Another major concern of the novel is showing that good can arise from evil situations. Edmund's and Fanny's happiness is the eventual

11

result of the anguish caused them by the Crawfords and of the wisdom they distill from that anguish. But while evil is seen as productive of good, the evil itself is condemned, as are all evildoers. The Christian forgiveness of the sinner which we find in the New Testament is almost entirely absent in Mansfield Park, where the emphasis is on judgment rather than mercy.

While this absence remains a significant barrier to a sympathetic reading of Mansfield Park, it does not mean that the novel is a failure. Though it lacks the sparkle of Pride and Prejudice or the warm glow of Persuasion, Mansfield Park has its own particular beauty in the strong contrast between good and evil and in the vitality of the struggle between the two. Nowhere in Austen's other works is evil so truly threatening, or does good hold such tenuous control. And yet the evil forces in the novel are defeated by Austen's "weakest" heroine. In the novel, as in Christian experience, weakness is strength, restraint is freedom, the surrender of one's life is the gaining of life, and good can often result from evil. The beauty of Mansfield Park is the beauty of paradox; the paradoxes of Mansfield Park are those of Christian life.

THE BEAUTY OF PARADOX:

MANSFIELD PARK AND

CHRISTIANITY

by

Donna Snider Love

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Greensboro  
1977

Approved by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis director, Dr. James E. Evans, for his encouragement, assistance, and most kind cooperation in the writing of this paper. I would also like to thank Dr. Walter H. Beale and Dr. Randolph McGuire Bulgin for their time and many valuable suggestions.

533441

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
APPROVAL PAGE . . . . .	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS . . . . .	iii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION: "THE GRACE OF UNCERTAINTY" . . . . .	1
II. SEDUCTIVE BEAUTY . . . . .	12
III. THE LOSS THAT IS GAIN . . . . .	25
IV. THE EVIL THAT BRINGS GOOD . . . . .	44
V. CONCLUSION . . . . .	54
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	63

facture of irony he calls it "and sees it as a clear testimony from her spiritual point of view." Kingsley also calls, "What business of love devotion?" as if he had not no resemblance between the nature of Northanger Park and that of Fanny Hill and Franklin's or of Northanger Abbey.<sup>2</sup> Kingsley's is the popular attitude toward the novel. I hope to show that not only is Northanger Park a more successful novel than most critics believe, but that further, there are many parallels in earlier works for elements in the novel often overlooked completely and characteristic of Austen's time and point of view.

At the center of the origin of Northanger Park stands Fanny Price, and seems to be the cause of Northanger Park's position as a problem

<sup>1</sup>Jane Austen: Irony or Defense and Discrepancy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1932), p. 179.

<sup>2</sup>The Spectator, No. 2743 (Oct. 4, 1957). Cyt. in Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Len Gougeon (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1953) pp. 143-144.

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## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION: "THE GRACE OF UNCERTAINTY"

The Heart of the Wise is in the House of Mourning, but the Heart of Fools is in the House of Mirth.

-Thomas Sherlock, 1755

Mansfield Park has emerged in Austen criticism as its author's problem novel. Her admirers approach it gingerly; her detractors, with what borders on downright malice. Marvin Mudrick, who praises Pride and Prejudice highly, speaks of Mansfield Park in terms of failure--the failure of irony he calls it--and sees it as a clear departure from her previous point of view.<sup>1</sup> Kingsley Amis asks, "What Became of Jane Austen?" as if he can see no resemblance between the author of Mansfield Park and that of Pride and Prejudice or of Northanger Abbey.<sup>2</sup> While such is the popular attitude toward the novel, I hope to show that not only is Mansfield Park a more successful novel than most critics believe, but that further, there are many precedents in earlier works for elements in the novel often considered completely uncharacteristic of Austen's tone and point of view.

At the center of the enigma of Mansfield Park stands Fanny Price, who seems to be the cause of Mansfield Park's position as a problem

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<sup>1</sup>Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 179.

<sup>2</sup>The Spectator, No. 6745 (Oct. 4, 1957), rpt. in Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Ian Watt (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1963) pp. 141-144.



novel, for critics who begin by attacking the novel usually wind up by attacking Fanny. This paper began as an inquiry into the origins of this problematical heroine. Why, after the creation of such a vital and attractive heroine as Elizabeth Bennett, did Austen feel compelled to create one so antithetical to her previous heroine, and so at variance with much that we know about Austen, much that would indicate her enjoyment of wit, confidence, and robust health. That she could have been anything like Fanny Price seems impossible to imagine. Could Fanny Price have written some of the biting pieces of the juvenalia, convulsing her family as she read them aloud? Could she, without fatigue, have danced twenty dances in one evening, as Austen is reported to have done?<sup>3</sup> Again, it seems incomprehensible. Fanny is weak, frail, timid, sickly, and as a result, a rather unattractive protagonist.

Lionel Trilling, in an effort to explain Fanny's frailty and weakness, suggests (quoting T. E. Hulme) that here is an "almost anti-vital element" about the divine; but he comes closer to explaining the reason for Fanny's frailty when he quotes Henry James, who said of one of his characters, "Her grace of ease was perfect, but it was all grace of ease, not a single shred of it grace of uncertainty or of difficulty."<sup>4</sup> This is what may have struck Austen about her own

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<sup>3</sup>Jane Aiken Hodge, Only a Novel: The Double Life of Jane Austen (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1972), p. 82.

<sup>4</sup>"Mansfield Park" in The Opposing Self (New York: Viking Press, 1955), rpt. in Watt, pp. 129, 135.

novel, Pride and Prejudice, prompting her to say, after hearing it read aloud, that it was too light and bright, and needed shade.<sup>5</sup>

In Mansfield Park Austen seems to confront this problem and to attempt to add shade to her sparkling style of Pride and Prejudice. A world in which the good is always beautiful, witty, graceful, at ease with itself and society is very attractive, but Austen was also aware of another vision--one in which loveliness and facile charm cover an inner nature that is filled with corruption. The image of gilding is often used to represent this idea, and Mary Crawford herself uses it in Mansfield Park. In this, Austen may have been the forerunner of an early Victorian theme which Richard Altick discusses in Victorian People and Ideas. After describing the morally corrupt dandyism which prevailed among the rich during the Regency (the period in which Mansfield Park was written), he cites several examples, in Carlyle and Dickens, of the image of "a morally bankrupt soul clothed in the showy regalia of current fashion; clothes which, no less than rags, failed to conceal the rottenness underneath."<sup>6</sup>

This is the vision of Mansfield Park. It is also a vision in which, conversely, the good are seen in terms of poverty, both of purse and spirit. Fanny is, in economic terms, the poorest of the Austen heroines; she is also awkward, stiff, shy, and self-doubting. The hero is dull, humorless, and a second son, i.e. poorer than heroes such as Darcy and Knightley. Both are very unheroic, and I

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<sup>5</sup>R. W. Chapman, ed., Jane Austen: Selected Letters 1796-1817 (London: Oxford University Press, 1955) p. 134.

<sup>6</sup>(New York: W. W. Norton, Inc., 1973), p. 8.

contend that Jane Austen intended them to be. They are in the concrete what the Beatitudes are in the abstract--one expression of the difficult and paradoxical nature of Christianity. By opposing Fanny and Edmund to Mary and Henry Crawford, Austen sets up the basis for her illustration of some of the major Christian paradoxes--the joy that begins in mourning, the beauty and strength of the awkward and the weak, and the saving of life that begins with its loss.

That Christianity is the basis for Jane Austen's moral vision has been accepted without question by many critics,<sup>7</sup> though Joel Weinsheimer takes rather violent exception to this assumption, speaking of "a socially oriented agnosticism or a meta-socially oriented theism or both."<sup>8</sup> While it is not impossible that the daughter of an Anglican clergyman growing up in rural England in the last quarter of the eighteenth century could have a moral vision more deistic or agnostic than Christian, it is certainly not very likely. It is useful to remember, as Donald Greene suggests in The Age of Exuberance, that eighteenth-century writers for the most part are:

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<sup>7</sup>Such as Robert A. Colby in the chapter (III) on Mansfield Park in Fiction With a Purpose: Major and Minor Eighteenth Century Novels (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1967), p. 100; Lionel Trilling in "Mansfield Park"; and Alistair Duckworth in The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), p. 80. One of Austen's contemporary reviewers, Richard Whately, commended "Miss Austin" (sic) for "being evidently a Christian writer" in The Quarterly Review, 24 (January 1821), p. 352.

<sup>8</sup>"Mansfield Park: Three Problems," Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 29 (1974), p. 198.

still writing for an audience thoroughly indoctrinated from childhood onward, with the King James Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, the Articles, Creeds, and Catechism (and The Whole Duty of Man and, later, The Pilgrim's Progress)--as, of course, the great majority of educated Englishmen and Americans were until at least the late nineteenth century--and they, the writers, are equally well<sup>9</sup> acquainted with them and accept their teachings whole-heartedly.

Furthermore, there is the fact that Christianity in the eighteenth century was socially oriented. James Downey, in his study of eighteenth-century sermons, says that although later writers criticized eighteenth-century preachers for emphasizing morality rather than Christ,

. . . the rationale behind such preaching was all too apparent. If the end of religion was the creation of a more harmonious society, then the sermon--the principal instrument of instruction in the Protestant tradition--had to be made consequential to the needs of social living.

Downey states that Christianity, as redefined by Archbishop Tillotson (probably the most influential divine of the day),

ceased to a mysterium tremendum et fascinans. The church seemed almost to become a society for the reformation of manners, a place where kindred spirits met<sup>10</sup> to have their moral sensibilities tuned to a finer pitch.

So if then, the Christianity in Mansfield Park appears to be more like a form of "meta-socially oriented theism," it is because of Austen's eighteenth-century heritage in which religion was considered largely in terms of social duties and moral sensibilities.

It is not necessary, however, to assume Austen's Christian viewpoint merely upon the likelihood that she reflected the views

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<sup>9</sup>The Age of Exuberance: Backgrounds to Eighteenth Century English Literature (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 93.

<sup>10</sup>The Eighteenth-Century Pulpit: A Study of the Sermons of Butler, Berkeley, Secker, Sterne, Whitefield and Wesley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 10, 12.

of her age. There is abundant evidence to be found in the language of Mansfield Park, as well as in Austen's other novels, that she was indeed an orthodox Christian. C. S. Lewis notes this in his reading of Sense and Sensibility. He quotes a long passage, which I will not duplicate, and comments on its religious tone (which he thinks strikes an unfamiliar note in Austen's works):

It [the language] makes explicit, for once, the religious background of the author's ethical position. Hence such theological, or nearly theological words such as penitence, even the tor<sup>11</sup>ture of penitence, amendment, self-destruction, [atonement to] my God.

The language of Mansfield Park similarly has a theological tone. Greene says, for example, "All thoughtful Christians of the time knew their Epistle to the Romans, and no modern student should attempt to expound their religious positions without digesting it."<sup>12</sup> If we compare the language of the opening chapters of Romans to Mansfield Park, the result is striking. David Lodge notes that the word judgment occurs 37 times in the novel, and that related words, such as justice, justifiable, judicious, etc., make up a total of 116 occurrences in all.<sup>13</sup>

In the first twelve verses of Romans, Chapter 2, some form of to judge appears eight times, while just and justify appear in verse 13.

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<sup>11</sup>C. S. Lewis, "A Note on Jane Austen" Essays in Criticism, 4 (1954), rpt. in Watt, p. 27.

<sup>12</sup>Greene, p. 123n.

<sup>13</sup>Language of Fiction: Essays in Criticism and Verbal Analysis of the English Novel (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), p. 104. Lodge also comments on the religious tone of the language of Sir Thomas in Mansfield Park. After quoting one passage from Chapter XXXVII, he says the words he italicized (good, right, better, and so forth) "are of course susceptible of a secular meaning: it is the grave insistence upon them, the tone of solemn deliberation, which makes them reverberate with an almost religious significance" (Lodge, p. 101).



Chapter 3 continues in the same vein; in verses 4-30, just or justify occur eight times, and some form of judge three times. Misery, guilty, evil and good, also important words in the novel, appear in these verses.

These passages from the King James Bible refer to the judgment of God, His justice, and the misery of evil-doers. Misery is a word often used to describe the result of sin, not only in the King James Bible, but also in the Book of Common Prayer. The Litany opens with eight verses which all contain the phrase "miserable sinners;" in the General Confession sinners are "miserable." Misery is a frequently used word in Mansfield Park, and while it is sometimes used to describe Fanny's discomfort or unhappiness over some injustice done her, it is used again and again at the novel's end like a refrain, to describe the condition of the sinners and those connected with them after the elopement. Of the Mansfield group, after Fanny returns from Portsmouth, the author says, "It had been a miserable party, each of three believing themselves most miserable (MP 448).<sup>14</sup> She begins Chapter XVII of Vol. III with the passage, "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery . . ." (p. 461). Both words are important to the tone of the novel, and though only used together this once, by implication they are connected all through the closing chapters. And Mary Crawford's comment in Chapter XIV of Vol. III, that "Varnish and

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<sup>14</sup>This and all subsequent quotations from Austen's novels are from the 3rd edition of R.W. Chapman's five-volume The Novels of Jane Austen: The Text Based on Collation of the Early Editions (London: Oxford University Press, 1933). Quotations from Austen's minor works are from Chapman's The Works of Jane Austen: Volume VI Minor Works (London: Oxford University Press, 1954).

gilding hide many stains, " (MP 434), is not only an ironic metaphor, but serves to set her flippant remark in sharp relief against the grievousness of the situation and the real misery of the Bertram family.

It is interesting to compare the use of these two words together and their context in a sermon by Thomas Sherlock (whom Austen records in a letter having read) in which he speaks of a "Godly sorrow" which leads to repentance. He says,

Were you truly sensible of your Guilt, there would need no Art to produce Sorrow, you would want no Rules to limit your Grief by, Nature would be your best Instructor, and teach you to lament your Misery and your Guilt with unsought-for Tears and Groans.

Sherlock says this "Godly sorrow" is followed by repentance, and that this "Repentance unto Life" is the only way by which man may "save his soul alive."<sup>15</sup> It is useful to keep this in mind while reading the opening paragraphs of Chapter XVII of Vol. III, the "guilt and misery" chapter of Mansfield Park. The third paragraph begins,

It is true that Edmund was very far from happy himself. He was suffering from disappointment and regret, grieving over what was, and wishing for what could never be. She knew it was so, and was sorry; but it was with a sorrow so founded on satisfaction, so tending to ease, and so much in harmony with every dearest sensation, that there are few who might not have been glad to exchange their greatest gaiety for it (MP 461).

This is a difficult passage. One's immediate reaction is distaste for Fanny's apparent gloating over her triumph. How can she feel satisfaction or ease when Edmund is unhappy? Such passages lead critics

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<sup>15</sup>Several Discourses Preached at the Temple Church (London: 1755), II, 165. R. W. Chapman indicates on p. 37 of Jane Austen: Facts and Problems (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), that Jane Austen was familiar with Sherlock's sermons.

to attack the novel; Kingsly Amis calls Fanny "vicious", for example.<sup>16</sup> Actually the passage shows the fulfillment of the promise made to the Christian regarding the final result of "Godly sorrow" in St. John 16:20: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy." Fanny's sadness is another reiterated theme of the novel; she lives much of the time in "solitary wretchedness" (MP 320), she is "alone and sad and insignificant" (p. 159). But at the end of it all she comes through; she survives her unhappiness, her aunt's persecution, and her temptation in Portsmouth (which significantly occurs during Lent and ends around Easter), though she comes close to falling. Edmund, however, has his eyes opened; he begins to leave the mirth of the world and experience the grief that will later turn to joy for him as well.

It is only in the light of this concept of "Godly sorrow", or of the Beatitude "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted," that some aspects of Mansfield Park begin to make sense. That Austen was seeking to write a Christian novel, and to make it consonant with the paradoxical nature of the Christian faith is a theory which seems to illuminate some of the mysteries of the novel, and helps explain some of our ambivalent feelings toward it. As a Christian, perhaps Jane Austen was right to be suspicious of the lure of the light and lively--she may have felt that in creating Elizabeth Bennett she had come perilously close to the mirth of the world and needed to retrace her steps.

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<sup>16</sup>"Whatever Became of Jane Austen?" pp. 141-142.



It is this dark side of Christianity--that of the good for example, which is neither beautiful, nor attractive, nor congenial: and that of the godly sadness--that Jane Austen confronts in creating her hero and heroine. Fanny is the Christian mourner who weeps as the world rejoices; she is the epitome of poverty of spirit and of meekness. That she is less attractive than her foil Mary Crawford is probably unavoidable and intentional. In creating Fanny, Austen may have been attempting, like Samuel Richardson in Clarissa, to create a heroine whose aims and views were not centered in this world's showy dross, and whose convictions would thus make her life in this world less than comfortable at times. Clarissa is also a Christian heroine, and also, like Fanny, an unpalatable one for most readers. As Robert Palfrey Utter and Gwendolyn Bridges Needham demonstrate in Pamela's Daughters, many contemporary readers miss the point of Clarissa entirely. They see the heroine's moral compunctions as mere intractability and over-fastidiousness, and they see the end of the novel as merely a bald allegory on the theme of death as the wages of sin. They overlook the fact that she has not sinned, and that although she dies--as do all mortals eventually--death for her is swallowed up in victory.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps Fanny is less palatable because she is not called upon to die in order to attain her happiness. But to turn away from either Clarissa or Fanny Price because one finds them dull or unattractive, without seeing that they are given the qualities which may make them so for a reason, is a mistake on the reader's part, and he loses

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<sup>17</sup>(New York: The MacMillan Co., 1936), pp. 267-268.

thereby. If Fanny Price is unattractive, it is partly because she is a vehicle for exploring some facets of Christianity which arouse in us ambivalent feelings. Saints and martyrs are better kept at a comfortable distance. Mrs. Rushworth's London friends, "a family of lively, agreeable manners, and probably of morals and discretion to suit," would make far more pleasant company, just as Mary Crawford does, than Fanny Price.

It is this, then, that Austen was seeking to explore in Mansfield Park: the deceptive beauty of evil and the awkwardness and unattractiveness that often characterize the good, the turning aside from life that for the Christian results in life; the vain self-seeking that ends in loss and the self-denial that ends in gain. These are some of the paradoxes of Christianity and of Mansfield Park, and it is only in considering Austen's religion that we can truly understand her novel.

## CHAPTER II

## SEDUCTIVE BEAUTY

. . . Pleasing was his shape,  
And lovely; never since of serpent kind  
Lovelier . . .

Paradise Lost, Book IX

It is likely that Austen was familiar with this passage from Paradise Lost; <sup>18</sup> she must at any rate have been familiar with the tradition behind them, of the seductive beauty of the serpent in the garden, and of the tradition that the devil assumes pleasing shapes. Certainly her novels indicate that she was aware of these conventions. Mansfield Park is by no means the first such example of this motif in her works. There is, for instance, this passage from the early work, Catherine (or Kitty) and the Bower, which describes the first meeting of Catherine and Mr. Stanley:

There was a novelty in his character which to her was extremely pleasing; his person was uncommonly fine, his spirits and vivacity suited to her own, and his manners at once so animating and insinuating, that she thought it must be impossible for him to be otherwise than amiable, and was ready to give him credit for being perfectly so (Volume VI, p. 234).

The language used to describe this first meeting is reminiscent of Milton's description of the meeting between Eve and the serpent: there is the pleasing appearance of the tempter, his subtle, insinuating manner, and the assumption by the victim that where attractiveness and amiability are found, everything else may be assumed. Austen's

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<sup>18</sup>R. W. Chapman, Facts and Problems, p. 39.

description of how the Crawfords' charm affects Mrs. Grant's judgment is recorded in Chapter IV:

Mary Crawford was remarkably pretty; Henry, though not handsome, had air and countenance; the manners of both were lively and pleasant, and Mrs. Grant immediately gave them credit for everything else (MP 41-42).

Darrell Mansell compares Mansfield Park to the Garden of Eden, and the Crawfords to the wily serpent. According to Mansell, the Crawfords are not the only characters in Austen's works to be tinged with the faint odor of sulfur. Willoughby, the romantic scoundrel in Sense and Sensibility, is one of several heroes whose beauty and wit are suspect. Like Wickham in Pride and Prejudice, he has the Satanic characteristic of appearing from nowhere, with no apparent relations in the world;<sup>19</sup> when he disappears into the stormy night, after his last interview with Elinor, he is like a spirit of darkness returning to its native element. Henry Crawford resembles in this respect his two forerunners. Mansell says of him

. . . there have indeed been times when he threatened to evaporate into some all-pervasive principle of wickedness swirling about the world in a Satanic mist. He once tells the assembled company at the Park that 'From Bath, Norfolk, London, York-- wherever I may be . . . I will attend you from any place in England . . .' (p. 193). Indeed his provenance has always seemed much grander than the house of a vicious Admiral (41).<sup>20</sup>

In keeping with the Christian tradition of the devil's ability to assume pleasing shapes, all of these false heroes share a protean quality that allows them to be the pleasant, insinuating and dangerous

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<sup>19</sup> The Novels of Jane Austen: An Interpretation (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1973), pp. 143, 85.

<sup>20</sup> Mansell, p. 137.

fellows they are. Like Mr. Stanley, Frank Churchill can (as Emma predicts) "adapt his conversation to the taste of everybody, and has the power . . . of being universally agreeable." (E, 190-191). Whenever a gentleman in any of Austen's novels is introduced in such terms, it is well to be on one's guard. Liveliness, excessive beauty, wit, facile conversation, and the ability to adapt oneself to the company or situation of the moment are danger signals for Austen. Henry, when we meet him has all but one, and appears to have the power to assume that one at his convenience. Indeed, he seems to transform himself right before one's eyes:

Her brother was not handsome; no, when they first saw him he was absolutely plain, black and plain; but still he was the gentleman, with a pleasing address. The second meeting proved him not so very plain . . . he had so much countenance, and his teeth were so good, and he was so well made, that one soon forgot he was plain; and after a third interview, after dining in company with him at the parsonage, he was no longer allowed to be called so by anybody (MP 44).

He clearly has the power to make himself attractive, and his blackness is strong proof of an association with the black arts of evil.

In addition to their chameleon nature, the false heroes in Austen's novels have another characteristic in common--their facility with language. No wittier group was ever assembled. Wickham, in direct contrast to the taciturn Mr. Darcy, has more than his share of glibness. Elizabeth finds him

perfectly charming . . . he had all the best part of beauty, a fine countenance, a good figure, and a very pleasing address. The introduction has followed up on his side by a happy readiness at the same time perfectly correct and unassuming (PP 72).

Emma thinks nearly the same thing upon her introduction to Frank Churchill. There is never anything overdone or flashy about Austen's

"false heroes" (Mansell's term). They are, if anything, almost too perfect in their appearance and outward manners--as if all had been manufactured on some great assembly line. Mary Crawford, the same sort of creation as Wickham, Willoughby, and her brother, shares their perfection and their way with words:

Her harp arrived, and rather added to her beauty, wit and good humor; for she played with the greatest obligingness, with an expression and taste which were peculiarly becoming, and there was something clever to be said at the end of every air (MP 64).

How very ironic and how very fitting, that she should play the harp.

As Q. D. Leavis has pointed out, Austen had already created, in the character of Lady Susan's villainess-heroine, a prototype for Mary Crawford. Lady Susan is much less subtle, much more gross in her corruption and deceitfulness; and from this character one can learn much about Mary Crawford.<sup>21</sup> Take for example, her conversation; Mrs. Vernon writes of Lady Susan in one letter,

She is clever and agreeable, has all that knowledge of the world which makes conversation easy, and talks very well, with a happy command of language which is often used, I believe to make black appear white (Volume VI, 251).

Austen's characterization of Mary Crawford is more subtle, however. There is nothing, for instance, in Mansfield Park, to compare with the sharp contrast between Lady Susan's oily charm in company and her evil cynicism when writing to a like-minded friend. Nor is there in Mary any evidence of any conscious effort to deceive. Lionel Trilling sums up the distinction very well when he says that

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<sup>21</sup>"A Critical Theory of Jane Austen's Writings, " Scrutiny 10 (1941), p. 119.



although on a first reading of Mansfield Park Mary Crawford's speeches are all delightful, they diminish in charm as we read them a second time. We begin to hear something disagreeable in their intonation; it is the peculiarly modern bad quality which Jane Austen was the first to represent--insincerity.

Trilling suggests that unlike earlier heroines, Mary Crawford does seem to know the person she should be, and this subtlety makes her all the more dangerous. This is different, he says, from the hypocrisy of some of the characters in earlier novels.<sup>22</sup> Lady Susan's poker-faced lies and bald deceptions are always countered with her revealing letters to her friend Mrs. Johnson, and while we may marvel at the audacity of her glib tongue, we are never deceived by it. Although Mary's letters to Fanny in Portsmouth do much to confirm our growing suspicion about her amiability, in dialogue Austen always successfully casts the spell of Mary's charm over everything she says, however objectionable.<sup>23</sup> One need only look at the list of critics who have compared Mary to Elizabeth Bennett to appreciate the power with which Austen has imbued her.<sup>24</sup>

The word power (or powers) occurs often in descriptions of Lady Susan, and sometimes significantly in describing her successor. Mrs.

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<sup>22</sup>Trilling, p. 133.

<sup>23</sup>And she does, as Kenneth Moler suggests in Jane Austen's Art of Illusion (Lincoln, Nebr.: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), pp. 136-137, have some objectionable things to say, especially about money and marriage.

<sup>24</sup>The most notable is Marvin Mudrick, p. 169. Others are Henrietta Ten Harmsel, Jane Austen: A Study in Fictional Conventions (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1964), pp. 106-107; and Lloyd Brown, Bits of Ivory: Narrative Techniques in Jane Austen's Fiction (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), p. 124-125. W.A. Craik in Jane Austen and Her Time (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, Ltd., 1969), p. 111, makes the comparison, but by way of disagreement. Mrs. Craik comments that Mary's conversation puts her more in mind of Isabella Thope than Elizabeth Bennett.

Vernon speaks of "those attractive powers for which Lady Susan is celebrated (Volume VI, 247), and Reginald, delightedly of "those bewitching powers" (248). Lady Susan, like Henry Crawford, appears to have much control over her appearance--except that for her it takes the form of a Dorian Gray type of perpetual youth and beauty--you may search her face in vain for signs of age or suffering. Mary Crawford is beautiful in a rather more ordinary way (though Edmund and Fanny discuss, soon after meeting her, a fascination about her face as she talks). Unlike Fanny, however, she never appears tired, or fagged, and says herself that nothing tires her but doing what she dislikes (MP 68). Her indefatigability is a part of what Mansell calls the blank, glossy exterior of the false hero.<sup>25</sup> While this exterior has about it an imperturbable sameness, it has at the same time a plastic quality which allows for the assumption of whatever guise proves convenient for the moment. Such perfect complaisance and accommodation enables their possessor to lull his victims into easy seduction. Edmund says of Mary, "How well she walks! and how readily she falls in with the inclination of others! joining them the moment she is asked" (MP 112). He has known her only two months, and already he is hypnotized.

Both Mary Crawford and Lady Susan have the power through their charm of making black appear white, and both are quite aware of it.

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<sup>25</sup>Mansell, p. 161. According to Mansell, the image imposed on the exterior is provided by those around him. I agree with this view only in part; the false hero must have this protean nature, must be able to assume various facades. He tailors his artifices to suit those around him. That the deception is mostly in the eyes of the beholder, I do not accept.



Lady Susan says, "There is exquisite pleasure in subduing an insolent spirit, in making a person predetermined to dislike, acknowledge one's superiority" (Volume VI 254). And she later writes,

It is true that I am vain enough to believe it within my reach. I have made him sensible of my power and can now enjoy the pleasure of triumphing over a mind prepared to dislike me, and prejudiced against all my actions (Volume VI 257).

Consider, in comparison, Mary Crawford's enjoyment of her power in coercing Edmund into acting: "His sturdy spirit to bend as it did! Oh! it was sweet beyond expression" (MP 358). When she knows of her brother's feelings for Fanny, remembering the wake of broken hearts he has left behind him, she says to her, "And then, Fanny, the glory . . . of having it in one's power to pay off the debts of one's sex!" (MP 363). And in the end, when Edmund finally begins to perceive Mary truly, he sees her playful smile at last as dangerous, as "seeming to invite in order to subdue" (MP 459). For both Lady Susan and Mary Crawford, it would seem, the epitome of any relationship is not love, but the exercise of power. Nor is it limited to their relationships with men. Even Fanny feels its attraction when Julia and Mrs. Rushworth have gone, and goes to her "every two or three days; it seemed a kind of fascination; she could not be easy without going" (MP 208).

The "bewitching" of Reginald de Courcy in Lady Susan and of Edmund Bertram in Mansfield Park follow much the same course, beginning with disapproval, then a tendency to excuse, then admiration. Mrs. Vernon notes the effect on Reginald in her letter to her mother, in which she speaks of "proof of her dangerous abilities" in "this perversion of Reginald's Judgement" (Volume VI 255). She tells of

her initial wonder at Lady Susan's delicacy of manners, and then his progression to "terms of more extraordinary praise" when he finally says "that he could not be surprised at any effect produced on the heart of Man by such Loveliness and such Abilities" (Volume VI 256). In the last stage of his enchantment, he begins to attribute her errors to neglected education and early marriage. In much the same way, Edmund begins by finding fault with Mary on account of her remarks about her uncle, then excusing her on the grounds of evil influences, then admiring her to the point of wanting to marry her. In the case of both men, clear-sighted friends only stand helpless as each moves nearer and nearer the precipice. As Mrs. Vernon says helplessly of her brother, "Oh! Reginald, how is your Judgement enslaved!" (Volume VI 271), so Fanny observes of Edmund, "He is blinded, and nothing will open his eyes, nothing can, after having had truths so long before him in vain. --He will marry her, and be poor and miserable. God grant that her influence do not make him cease to be respectable" (MP 424). Mrs. Vernon gives up her brother's fate into the same hands: "We must commit the event to an Higher Power" (Volume VI 266).

Both Fanny and Mrs. Vernon recognize their own weakness in combating the evil power before them, and according to Christian doctrine, it is only by doing this--by relinquishing the situation to God as being out of human hands and beyond human power to correct--that evil may be overcome. As Thomas Sherlock observes, "the Holy Spirit . . . effectually helpeth our Infirmities, that when we are weak, we are strong." He also asserts that, "the Majesty and Power

of God are never more clearly seen than when he makes choice of the weak Things of the World to confound the Things which are mighty."<sup>26</sup>

The power of weakness was recognized by St. Paul to be one of the most compelling paradoxes of Christianity. To the Corinthians he wrote, "Since ye seek proof of Christ speaking in me, which to youward is not weak, but is mighty in you. For though he was crucified through weakness, yet he liveth by the power of God toward you." (II Corinthians 13:3-4). Austen says of Fanny, "Timid, anxious, doubting as she was, it was still impossible that such tenderness as hers should not, at times, hold out the strongest hope of success" (MP 471). Just as Lady Susan leaves us convinced of Frederica's eventual success through her attachment in marrying Reginald, so Fanny, the embodiment of weakness, timidity and simplicity, triumphs in her love and steadfastness over the iridescent beauty and wit of the bewitching Mary Crawford. St. Paul again provides an appropriate text:

God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty. And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought the things that are (I Corinthians 1:27-28).

Bringing to nought the things that are is integral to the process of Mansfield Park, as well as bringing to light the true value of things judged at nought in the novel. Mary Crawford, in the chapel scene at Sotherton, says that "A clergyman is nothing" and that in either the law or the military, "distinction may be gained, but not in the church" (MP 92). Edmund repeats the word nothing three times

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<sup>26</sup> Sherlock, II, 28 and I, 103. (The italics are Sherlock's).

in his reply to her, placing on it particular emphasis. Fanny's consequence in the Bertram household is, as she herself tells Edmund, set at nought, both by herself and everyone else. She says, "I can never be important to anyone . . . it would be delightful to feel myself of consequence to anybody!--Here I know I am of none" (MP 26-27). She is never considered, never consulted about anything--not even where she is to live; when Lady Bertram decides it is time for Fanny to stay with Mrs. Norris, Fanny is the last to be informed. Her family at Portsmouth is no better at judging her value than the one at Mansfield; here too, "Every flattering scheme of being of consequence soon fell to the ground." Her mother has no time for her, and her father "scarcely ever noticed her, but to make her the object of a coarse joke" (MP 389). Nor is there anyone else with whom she comes in contact during her exile who holds her in any esteem. The young women who at first are impressed by her association with a Baronet's family are soon offended, "for as she neither played on the pianoforte, nor wore fine pelisses, they could, on farther observation, admit no right of superiority" (MP 395). Like Anne Elliot in Persuasion, she "was nobody . . . her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way" (P 5).

Thus the world of Mansfield Park becomes a microcosm of the world of man, where the false and hollow are esteemed, and where for a time the power of evil appears triumphant, while the good are despised and subdued. The word judgment, used so frequently in the novel, has more than merely an eschatological emphasis, it is also used constantly to refer to the many evaluations of character and

situation that the characters must make every day. In Mansfield Park the moral judgment of nearly every character but Fanny seems to have been perverted. It is Fanny's judgment, however, that is seen by Sir Thomas as being in need of a cure; he thinks of her exile in Portsmouth as "a medicinal project upon his niece's understanding, which he must consider as at present diseased. A residence of eight or nine years in the abode of wealth and plenty had a little disordered her power of comparing and judging" (MP 369). Using the same terminology, Austen later says that Sir Thomas's cure comes close to proving fatal for Fanny (MP 413). Since, however, Fanny's judgment alone is whole, it is only a matter of time before the scales fall from even the most deluded eyes. Edmund, whom Fanny speaks of as having been blinded, says at last, "the charm is broken. My eyes are opened" (MP 456). Similarly Reginald de Courcy had written to Lady Susan, "The spell is removed. I see you as you are" (Volume VI 304). Sir Thomas's enlightenment is described again in terms of health and illness, although a new metaphor is also introduced: "Sick of ambitious and mercenary connections, prizing more and more of the sterling good of principle and temper, "he now appreciates his niece's value and looks forward to the match between her and Edmund as a thing of comfort (MP 471). He knows at last that all that glitters is not gold. The Bertram family has finally learned to judge the difference between sterling and gilt.

And it is indeed only gilt. Austen makes this very plain by presenting to us one character who is almost the personification of



evil, and who has no gilding, no soft wiles, no air of seduction, whatever. Mrs. Leavis argues convincingly that Austen almost never "wastes" a character--that when she writes or rewrites she reuses almost everything.<sup>27</sup> In considering Mansfield Park as an evolution of Lady Susan, one tries to identify the origins of Mrs. Norris. Somehow her spirit hovers over Lady Susan, and yet she is not there. Then it finally strikes one that Mrs. Norris is Lady Susan herself without the gilding. Lady Susan's persecution of poor Frederica is Aunt Norris's persecution of Fanny. To be sure, there is more to her character than that; there are few more vivid characters in Austen's rogues' gallery than Mrs. Norris. But the same meanness of spirit prevails in both, the same joy at arranging the lives of others, the same mercenary eye toward matchmaking, which makes them sisters under the skin. It is as if for an instant the charm is broken, and the wicked witch is robbed in a twinkling of her insubstantial beauty and finery. In the end we see that Mrs. Norris's power has been illusory. Her power over Fanny seems at an end, and while Fanny is the pillar on whom everyone else leans during the family's several crises, Mrs. Norris, with the household left to her charge, "had been unable to direct or dictate, or even fancy herself useful. When really touched by affliction, her active powers had been all benumbed" (MP 448).

The Christian commonplace of corruption lurking under a surface of facile beauty is richly embodied in the English literary tradition.

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<sup>27</sup>Leavis, p. 66.

An example may be found in the book of Revelation, in the description of the Harlot of Babylon, "arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication." (Revelation 17:4) This image is echoed later in Duessa, of The Faerie Queene, beautifully dressed in gold and gorgeous robes, who proves, when stripped bare, to be a creature of hideous repugnance. (Book I, Canto VIII, Stanzas 46-47). This convention is seen again in Milton's beautiful serpent, and again in Austen's charming villainess. To be fascinated by the glittering beauty of the serpent, hypnotized by the expression of his eye, and lulled by the sonority of his voice, is a fate common to the heroes and heroines of Western literature. That appearances must be mistrusted is one of the strongest traditions of Christian teaching, and one of the great preoccupations of Mansfield Park.

## CHAPTER III

## THE LOSS THAT IS GAIN

For men shall be lovers of their own selves. . .lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away. For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women . . . Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.

2 Timothy 3:27

While it is most unlikely that Jane Austen could have had this passage before her as a text for Mansfield Park, it is very likely she had at some point read it, and at any rate it does remind one very strikingly of the plot of the novel. Mansfield Park certainly has the silly women, Julia and Maria Bertram, who are ever learning, who can list the kings of England in chronological order and name the principal rivers of Russia, who know all that society can teach and it can profit them to learn, but whose acquaintance with anything resembling truth is minimal. They have the appearance of godliness; Austen says of the Bertram sisters, "Their vanity was in such good order, that they seemed to be quite free from it" (MP 35). But it is an art they have carefully cultivated, proceeding from no self-knowledge nor from any foundation in principle, but from self-love and self-seeking vanity. Henry Crawford's actions proceed from the same source; he elopes with Mrs. Rushworth not because he loves her but because she has piqued his vanity. And Fanny, knowing him to be a lover of pleasure rather than of God, has turned away from him.



As one re-reads this novel, the isolation of each character in this egotistical concern with his own cares and affairs impresses itself more forcefully. The vain preoccupation with self, with fulfilling one's own sensual desires, providing for one's own comfort and enjoyment, often at the expense of others, leads Henry Crawford, Mrs. Rushworth and Julia Bertram into error. And it is Edward's self-centered isolation that allows him to be deluded by Mary Crawford.

Austen's own prayers reflect her Christian view of self and the consideration of others. She prays, "Teach us to think humbly of ourselves, " and asks that she and other Christians be led to "Consider our fellow-creatures with kindness and to judge of all they say and do with that charity which we would desire from them ourselves" (Volume VI 458). In another prayer, in which she asks that human beings be taught to understand the sinfulness of their own hearts and evil habits, she speaks of "the discomfort of our fellow creatures" before the "danger of our own souls" as their unfortunate result. In her three rather long prayers still extant, one notes that when she is speaking in the first person, she always uses the plural form, and that her supplications are usually concerned directly with the needs of others--the sick, the suffering, prisoners, travellers, family, friends, strangers. She invariably recognizes the human condition as one of frailty and helplessness and acknowledges man's total dependence upon God's goodness. Thus, her meditations reflect the two great emphases of the gospels--reliance on God and concern for others.

Sallie McFague TeSelle, in Literature and the Christian Life, discovers two primary themes in the Synoptic Gospels. The first is

that the primary response of the followers of Jesus is their utter dependence on God--the ability to relinquish every thought of earthly security and leave all to Him. The second motif regards the attitude of the Christian towards other men.

Its prime note is service to the needs of others. It is a reversal of the worldly standards of success and value, for the last, the lowliest, the humble, those who wait on others, are considered first in the kingdom.<sup>28</sup>

The first theme may be construed to be one aspect of the second; if one centers his life around others and renounces self-love and self-seeking, reliance upon God for one's own needs seems a natural consequence. The Latitudinarians, a group of seventeenth-century divines whose writing had strong influence in the eighteenth-century, also emphasized the second principle. They taught that selfishness was the source of all the disorders of the world. Writing about Archbishop Tillotson, Martin C. Battestin comments, "Self-love in its various forms was detrimental to society--avarice, ambition, vanity, hypocrisy--was the object of the divine's sharpest censure."<sup>29</sup>

Self-preoccupation, the one great sin in Austen's canon, appears in her novels as well as in her prayers, and not only in Mansfield Park. Like the distrust of the too beautiful and perfect, one finds the theme of self-love surfacing earlier; for example, in Sense And Sensibility. Darrell Mansell suggests that the principal problem with

<sup>28</sup>(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 128.

<sup>29</sup>"The Christian Background" in The Moral Basis of Fielding's Art: A Reading of Joseph Andrews (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), p. 19.

Marianne Dashwood is not her liveliness or romantic sentimentality, but her selfishness. She simply does not care enough about those around her to uphold the social conventions in dealing with them. Her rudeness to Mrs. Jennings is just one small example of this trait, which is also reflected in her treatment of her mother and sister. Her disregard for her own health and safety in favor of the Byronic gesture of walking through a wild landscape in the rain is the ultimate expression of this selfishness. She speaks in the end, after a curative illness, of atonement, to her God, her sister, and all those around her. And, as Mansell points out, her marriage to Col. Brandon is the final surrender of her self-centered romantic illusions to a more commonplace society in which not only are conventions more observed, but others are more considered.<sup>30</sup>

Concern for others is by no means the prevalent mood of the characters of Mansfield Park; nothing is so striking as each character's complete self-absorption and isolation from the needs and feelings of his fellows. Among the numerous illustrative minor scenes in the book one finds in Vol. I, Chapter VII, for example, the account of one day at the Park. Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris have spent the day inventing wearisome tasks for Fanny while Edmund and Mary Crawford are out riding, Mary using the horse bought for Fanny. The evening finds the family in the drawing room--Maria is sulking because she was excluded from a dinner at the Grants; Mrs. Norris, disconcerted by her niece's bad temper, is taking out her displeasure on Fanny when Julia and Edmund return from the Grants'. Mrs. Norris

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<sup>30</sup>Mansell, p. 74

scolds Fanny for lolling on the sofa, complaining of her own exertions in cutting out calico. Julia defends Fanny, not out of love for Fanny, but to spite Mrs. Norris, and because she is in an exultant humor, having just spent the evening with Henry Crawford, while her sister was excluded. Lady Bertram complains of how hot she became sitting in the garden (while Fanny cut roses and walked two miles under the same sun). Only Edmund breaks through the isolation of self-absorption long enough to realize that Fanny is ill and try to do something to relieve her.

Volume I, Chapter XVII, however, has the most emphatic example of the isolation and insensitivity of each of Mansfield Park's characters, as these sentences from the last three paragraphs of the chapter reveal (at this point Maria has gained the part of Agatha, thus making Julia miserable, and Edmund has consented to play Anhalt to Mary Crawford's Amelia):

Maria felt her triumph, and pursued her purpose careless of Julia; and Julia could never see Maria distinguished by Henry Crawford, without trusting that it would create jealousy and bring a public disturbance at last. Fanny saw and pitied much of this in Julia; but there was no outward communication, and Fanny took no liberties. They were two solitary sufferers, or connected only by Fanny's consciousness. The inattention of the two brothers and the aunt to Julia's discomposure, and their blindness to its true cause, must be imputed to the fulness of their own minds. They were totally preoccupied. Tom was engrossed by the concerns of his theatre, and saw nothing that did not immediately relate to it. Edmund, between his theatrical and his real part, between Miss Crawford's claims and his own conduct, between love and consistency, was equally inobservant; and Mrs. Norris was too busy in contriving and directing the general little matters of the company, superintending their various dresses with economical expedient, for which nobody thanked her, and saving, with delighted integrity, half-a-crown here and there to the absent Sir Thomas, to have leisure for watching the behavior, or guarding the happiness of his daughters (MP 163).

Only Fanny is extroverted enough to see that something very wrong is happening; something that threatens the happiness of them all. She sees, but is helpless to change the situation. As usual, she is left out, has no influence, is set at nought, partly through her own efforts to avoid the corrupt pleasures of the play. "Everybody around her was gay and busy," Austen says; "she alone was sad and insignificant" (MP 159). Even Edmund seems seduced by the easy conviviality of the theatre: he "was in spirits from the morning's rehearsal, and little vexations seemed everywhere smoothed away" (MP 171). But Austen has already apprised us of the danger of such pleasures: "The morning wore away in satisfactions very sweet if not very sound" (MP 159). Only Fanny is not too preoccupied with seeking her own pleasure or planning her own intrigues to seriously worry over the possible consequences of Henry's inappropriate attentions to Maria, or to look with pity upon Julia's consequent sufferings, or to help Mr. Rushworth with his two-and-forty speeches. This is typical of the Bertram household, where, Edmund and Fanny excepted, self-interest usually reigns supreme.

And yet, ironically it is Fanny who is later accused by Sir Thomas of thinking only of herself in refusing Henry Crawford. He believes that she does so merely out of stubbornness, because Crawford is not "what a young, heated fancy imagines to be necessary for happiness" (MP 318). (This attitude is doubly ironic, since Henry's attractions for the young, heated fancy of his daughter prove so troublesome.) Sir Thomas urges Fanny to consider coolly the worldly advantages open to her through such a match. Clearly Fanny would be mad to refuse him for he has money, social position, appearance, and



a complaisant temper to recommend him, and he is in love with her. Sir Thomas and Fanny both are aware that this may be the only such offer she will receive; it is certainly above any she has a right to expect. To accept Crawford means triumph over her cousins, escape from Mrs. Norris, and physical comfort for the rest of her life. Sir Thomas expresses the only possible judgment the world can make of her refusal when he says she is "in a wild fit of folly, throwing away from you such an opportunity of being settled in life, eligibly, honorably, nobly settled, as will, probably, never occur to you again" (MP 319).

All the wisdom of the society in which Fanny lives tells her that it is her duty to marry Mr. Crawford. Even her Aunt Bertram rouses herself enough on this occasion to add her pearl of worldly wisdom. But it is worldly wisdom, and to yield to it would bring on disastrous results. It would be easy for the reader to be seduced, like Mrs. Norris, into thinking that had Fanny married Mr. Crawford, all would have lived happily ever after. But this would be to miss the point. Mr. Crawford is a man, as Fanny suspects he is, without sufficient principle to make himself or Fanny happy. And one knows, even as one enjoys the sentimental conclusions of such eighteenth-century classics as The Vicar of Wakefield, that the reformation of the rake is only the convention of a certain literary vogue, and though common enough therein, is relatively rare in human behavior. Mansfield Park, through the character of Henry Crawford, reveals this convention as a charming but dangerous fantasy.

Yet Fanny is urged by everyone to marry Henry Crawford; such is the nature of worldly wisdom. Mrs. Fraser, Mary Crawford's London friend, reaps the harvest of such wisdom in her own marriage. She, like Lucy Steele in Sense and Sensibility, is a sort of critique of pure reason--all head and no heart.<sup>31</sup> As Mary tells Fanny,

She took three days to consider of his proposals; and during those three days asked the advice of everybody connected with her, whose opinion was worth having; and especially applied to my late dear aunt, whose knowledge of the world made her judgment very generally and deservedly looked up to by all the young people of her acquaintance; and she was decidedly in favour of Mr. Fraser (MP 361).

As the result of all this rational consideration, she finds herself at twenty-five married to an ill-tempered, exigent old man who expects her to live as staid an existence as he does. Such are the fruits of worldly wisdom.

Fanny may indeed be guilty of her uncle's charge of folly, but it is not mere whimsical human folly, but divine folly. Thomas Sherlock focuses on this paradox of the foolishness of worldly wisdom and the wisdom of divine foolishness in a sermon based on the following text: "For, after that, in the wisdom of God, the World by Wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the Foolishness of Preaching to save them that believe" (1 Corinthians i:21).<sup>32</sup> Sherlock says one

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<sup>31</sup>Utter and Needham, p. 113.

<sup>32</sup>The preceding verses of the same chapter (18-20) read: For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness, but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? . . . hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?

should not sit in judgment on God's instruments or methods, "since, how foolish or how weak soever they may seem to us, they will be found in his Hand to be the wisest and strongest."<sup>33</sup>

In refusing Henry Crawford on grounds of his lack of principle, and of her own lack of love for him, Fanny abandons the course of worldly self-seeking that most young women would have chosen to follow. In an effort to obtain security, comfort, wealth and social position, thus carefully looking out for themselves, most would have closed their eyes to his faults and accepted him for all the advantages he had to offer. Fanny, in her divine folly, eschews all worldly aspirations, relinquishing, as far as she knows, all hope for worldly success, and resigns her fate to the "divinity that shapes our ends, roughhew them how we will" (Hamlet, Act V. Sc. II, ll. 10-11).<sup>34</sup> Thus she is saved. Fanny follows what is, according to the words of 1 Peter 5:6-8, the conduct proper to Christian life:

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary is the devil.

It is important that concern for self not be disguised as self-abnegation, otherwise it can become the sort of calculated "return on investment" living that is contrary to true Christianity, and that the scriptures say leads not to the saving of life, but to its loss (see Luke 9:24). The surrender of one's life which results

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<sup>33</sup>Sherlock, I, 101.

<sup>34</sup>This as well as all other Shakespearean quotations come from The Oxford Shakespeare: Complete Works, W. J. Craig, ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1905).



in its preservation cannot be motivated by any desire toward accomplishing that end.

One cannot humble oneself, either, bowing down with one eye on the ground and with the other peering up at the throne to which one would in consequence be exalted. One is required to focus his aspirations elsewhere, namely on devotion to and dependence upon God and devotion to serving others. Otherwise there is always (as the verse says) the devil, who has as one of his most cunning deceptions the pride of self-abnegation. This is the dangerous shoal upon which Fanny is in some danger of wrecking both herself and the novel. She and Edmund sound unctious while discussing the Crawfords' faults and self-righteous in discussing Henry and Maria's elopement. The passage in which Fanny as a child is reported to have wept at her own iniquity because she had no desire to weep at her uncle's departure is probably just too maudlin for some readers. No wonder the author loses so many to Mary Crawford.

Austen's performance in creating a selfless character was much better in her later novel, Persuasion. There she is working with some of the same ideas that formed Mansfield Park. Robert Colby says of the latter novel that if Austen had gone back to the earlier kind of title, because of the way in which the characters are paired off, it could have been called Self-Love and Selflessness.<sup>35</sup> This is just as true of Persuasion. Clearly the Elliots provide us the first part of the title well enough. Sir William, with his wall-to-wall mirrors and excessive concern for appearance, is the epitome of

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<sup>35</sup>Colby, p. 76.

self-love and self-seeking. He is his own god, whom he daily worships in his multiple mirror images, and his Bible is *The Peerage*. The chief aim in Sir William's life is to preserve his appearance; to have engaged in a profession--to have been useful at all--would have meant the quick erosion of that most precious of commodities. Sailing, where a man may be out in weathers dangerous to his complexion, is out of the question, as is soldiering, for the same reason. To every profession he has some objection:

The lawyer plods, quite care-worn; the physician is up at all hours, and travelling in all weather; and even the clergyman . . . is obliged to go into infected rooms, and expose his health and looks to all the injury of a poisonous atmosphere" (P 20).

Only a man who does nothing may devote the proper attention to his health and appearance, he concludes.

Joseph Weisenfarth has said of this novel,

The aristocratic society in *Persuasion* is thoroughly moribund: static, artificial, self-serving, it casts a chill wherever it goes. Its image is the self-loving, death-desiring Narcissus.

In contrast to this society, he adds, is the sea-faring society of the Crofts, the Harvilles, and later of Wentworth and Anne. It is, he says, "dynamic, natural, and loving; it brings life from the very sea that threatens death."<sup>36</sup> In the world of this novel, preservation is really degeneration, and the beauty of Narcissus is a mask for corruption. A life of sturdy usefulness on the water, though dangerous, though wearing, is the source of regeneration to new life.

There are allusions to this idea in *Mansfield Park*, though it is not pursued here as in *Persuasion*. Mary, writing to Fanny in

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<sup>36</sup>"Austen and Appollo" in *Jane Austen Today*, ed. Joel Weinsheimer (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 1975), p. 58.

Portsmouth, cautions her against staying too long: "Those vile sea-breezes are the ruin of beauty and health. My poor aunt always felt affected, if within ten miles of the sea" (MP 416). Mrs. Croft never cared about her complexion so long as she could be with her husband; one may easily guess how often Admiral Crawford's wife embarked with him. Consider too how Henry Crawford, with his life of idleness, of useless amusements (like domestic theatres), pales beside the energetic manliness of William Price. Henry "longed to have been at sea, and seen and done and suffered as much. His heart warmed, his fancy fired, and he felt the highest respect for a lad who, before he was twenty, had gone through such bodily hardships, and given such proofs of mind. The glory of heroism, of usefulness, of exertion, of endurance, made his habits of selfish indulgence appear in shameful contrast" (MP 236).

It is appropriate that in Austen's novels regeneration should be linked to a life of seafaring, since for the Christian the renunciation of self, the death of the old life of self-serving, is symbolized by water. It represents not only the death and resurrection of Christ, but also the fact that through grace the Christian may die to his mortal life of sin and re-enter a new life.<sup>37</sup> It is, however, this death of self that is the unattractive aspect of Christianity,

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<sup>37</sup> St. Paul says,

Know yet not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death; that Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3-4).

that creates ambivalent feelings. Avrom Fleishman discusses Mansfield Park from the viewpoint of classical mythology, but what he says has relevance here too. He compares Mansfield Park to the complementary myths of the three caskets and the three maidens. The third casket (the one made of iron, for example, in The Merchant of Venice) is always the one that holds the treasure, but always the least attractive. Three women together in any story, with a choice to be made among them, signal in mythical terms the idea of the three Fates--and of course the third choice, the third Fate, is death.<sup>38</sup> But viewed in the light of Christian mythology, the death involved in the choice is not absolute death, the death of the soul, but the death that precedes regeneration, the birth of the soul into a newer and higher kind of life. As mentioned above in regard to Clarissa, all men must die; but for the Christian, for one who has escaped the bondage of sin, death is swallowed up in victory. In Christian terms, the choice of the third casket, the one which has about it the appearance of death, is actually the key to life. In Persuasion, Wentworth is presented with three caskets--three women--and chooses the third, the leaden one, and finds it contains great wealth. Henry Crawford, presented with three, picks the first, the golden one, and his reward is ashes.

Stuart Tave suggests that what is often mistaken for a sign of life--liveliness--is often the opposite, the most death-seeking.

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<sup>38</sup>A Reading of Mansfield Park (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1967), pp. 62-63.

The continual reanimation of spirits required by Henry and Mary Crawford shows a lack of life--they must be constantly entertained by something or someone, since they have no inner resources. For each, this constant need for amusement is the source of the relationship with Fanny, although they do recognize her merit. Willoughby, like the Crawfords, is "lively," and yet antagonistic to life. Tave's analysis of him could apply to the Crawfords as well. Willoughby forms opinions hastily, gives them inconsiderately, in short says whatever he thinks to whomever he pleases. Tave comments: "All this seeming freedom from forms does not in fact lead to more life, but to its own deadening unreality, an imaginary life."<sup>39</sup>

The same might be said of the Crawfords' seeming freedom from form. The Crawfords' most striking characteristic is their resistance to restriction. Consider, for instance, Mary's behavior during the visit to Sotherton. As she is leading Edmund into the wilderness (the physical one--she directs him towards the metaphorical one all through the novel), she argues with his every rational estimate of how long they have been there or how far they have come. It does him no good to produce his watch as evidence that they have been there only a quarter of an hour, and could not possibly have walked a mile. She says, "I cannot be dictated to by a watch' . . . He still reasoned with her, but in vain. She would only smile and assert" (MP 95-96). Clearly, here, she represents disorder.

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<sup>39</sup> Some Words of Jane Austen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 162.



The wilderness in Mansfield Park is symbolic of the moral lawlessness. The movement of the visit to Sotherton, led by the Crawfords, is continually away from restraint and towards freedom from any bounds or limits. They first are anxious to flee the restraint of the house. Austen's language, as she describes their exit, is very telling:

when the young people, meeting with an outward door, temptingly open on a flight of steps which led immediately to turf and shrubs, and all the sweets of pleasure-grounds, as if by one impulse, one wish for air and liberty, all walked out (MP 90).

In this chapter, the movement is toward liberty, freedom from restraint, and from unrelenting light. We are aware of Julia's tension, when, trapped in conversation by Mrs. Rushworth, she is lured by the promise of liberty; she can hardly observe the requirements of polite conversation. At last they all come to another door, which for a moment they assume to be locked: "The door, however, proved not to be locked, and they were all agreed in turning joyfully through it, and leaving the unmitigated glare of day behind" (MP 91).

Mary's impatience with any form of restraint is reflected in her comments on family devotions (which she finds objectionable): "Everybody likes to go their own way--to choose their own time and manner of devotion. The obligations of attendance, the formality, the restraint, the length of time--altogether it is a formidable thing" (MP 87). Marilyn Butler, in her book about the Anti-Jacobin influence felt in Austen's writing, says,

The cynical Crawfords have appeared, like Satan in the Garden of Eden, hostile to the old ethos of the place and bent on destruction. Every detail of what they say and do suggests their self-willed lawlessness.



She notes that in the end, however, their encroachment on the order of Mansfield Park becomes ineffectual because they challenge restraints simply because they are restraints; their inability to be denied anything is ultimately self-destructive."<sup>40</sup> Maria's preference of the wilderness to the park is exemplary of the destructive energy which the Crawfords bring to the peaceful world of Mansfield Park. When Henry tells Maria in the gate scene, "You have a very smiling scene before you," she agrees that "The sun shines and the park looks very cheerful," but the restraint of the gate and the ha-ha must be overcome; she chafes at the thought of having to remain in the well-lit, peaceful park, and longs for the wilderness (MP 99). That she gains her wilderness, both really and metaphorically, we already know, and we know the result.

From the Christian point of view the only freedom man can have is by surrendering of his freedom into the hands of God, for by doing so, he is released from the crushing bondage of sin. John 8:34-36 speaks of the Christian's liberty:

Jesus answered them, verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: but the Son abideth forever. If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

St. Paul speaks in the Letter to the Galatians of the freedom Christ offered from the hard judgments and exacting demands of the law:

So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondswomen, but of the free. Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage . . . use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another (Galatians 4:31, 5:1, 13).

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<sup>40</sup>Jane Austen and the War of Ideas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 229.

It is this attitude that Austen adopts in Mansfield Park, where she demonstrates vividly how far license goes in making human beings happy and comfortable. In addition to Mrs. Rushworth's sin and resulting exile, there is another example of freedom without principle and the disorder and discomfort it brings. This is the Price household in Portsmouth. There self-interest reigns supreme, without the veneer of social politeness that exists at Mansfield Park. This household, which found its origin in license--one can in Fanny's parents see Lydia and Wickham twenty years later--remains true to form. Her parents are interested in nothing but their own concerns, which are usually petty and momentary. Betsy and Susan argue constantly and are stopped only by Mrs. Price's self-indulgent partiality for Betsy. The Price household is illustrative of what ensues when human nature is left to act out desires and impulses ungoverned by any restraint. At Mansfield Park, when principles were wanting, the outward form of manners generally kept selfishness in rein, but in Portsmouth, not even the latter is present to make life tolerable.

Austen's skepticism regarding human nature may give us a clue to her objections regarding Kotzebue's Lover's Vows, according to Marilyn Butler. "He was," says Butler of the playwright, "the most sanguine of optimists about the beauty and innocence of human nature left to follow its own instincts." Kotzebue, she explains, was an advocate of intuition over convention--of liasons based on feeling rather than marriage, and opposed to any conventional restraint on the expression of these feelings.<sup>41</sup> Austen, as a Christian, aware

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<sup>41</sup>Butler, p. 233.

of original sin, could only believe that men and women who lived by their feelings, merely by whim and impulse, could produce for themselves not order but chaos, not happiness but guilt and misery. Sherlock's comments on the life lived according to the impulses of nature are illustrative of the Christian view: "The sensual Man labors in the Gratification of his own Passions, and has no other End than to serve himself, nay, the Worst part of himself, in all his Actions."<sup>42</sup>

In Christian terms it is the surrender of freedom that brings freedom, just as it is the surrender of self that brings salvation to the self. This surrender is not based on reason, but on complete trust in the divine, and on faith that in chaos, there is a universal order imperceptible to man because of his imperfect vision. Fanny already knew what Emma Woodhouse had to learn. To Emma, the marriage of Robert Martin and Harriet Smith is "unintelligible," and in her hubris she seeks to establish her own idea of order in Harriet's life, thereby nearly wrecking it. Only when she ceases to impose her rational will upon life does the disorder created by her efforts disappear, to be replaced by the harmony of divine anarchy. One sees in Mansfield Park the operation of this divine disorder, working at times through evil and seeming anarchy to order man's life if he will surrender to it in faith. He must adopt the attitude of Pope when he says in An Essay on Man (I, 289-294):

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<sup>42</sup>Sherlock, II, 201.

All Nature is but art, unknown to thee;  
 All chance, direction, which thou canst not see  
 All discord, harmony not understood;  
 All partial evil, universal good:  
 And spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,  
 One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right.

Judge not the Lord by foolish men,  
 But trust him for his grace;  
 Behind a frowning providence,  
 He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,  
 Unfolding every hour;  
 The bad may have a bitter taste,  
 But good will be the flow'r.

—“Lycius, Mending Out of Order”  
 William Shakespeare

"Good out of evil," says the philosopher Mr. Parker in Reading, a novel fragment in which an overwhelmed marriage and a surprised uncle are the catalysts for what will surely prove to be an amazingly interesting—that of Charlotte Eyre's in the North. Wives in War—Black Park, when Mary reveals to Mary the plot of some Black Park—long his as an uncle, he is writing that uncle of nearly unalloyed selfishness and reluctance. But Mary, seeing the potential good in the situation, tells him, "Your wicked uncle may be good here with a clever thought instead. The ill may turn into good." (p. 121). He does it for the good in uncle Mary, at least until for a while a selfish effect on him, and uncle uncle uncle may not be less irredeemable. It is the uncle in uncle's novel of the possibility that evil may be an agent for the good—what an fortunate events and wrong events may not—if an abstract plot is

## CHAPTER FOUR

## THE EVIL THAT BRINGS GOOD

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
 But trust him for his grace;  
 Behind a frowning providence,  
 He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,  
 Unfolding ev'ry hour;  
 The bud may have a bitter taste,  
 But sweet will be the flow'r.

- "Light Shining Out of Darkness"  
 William Cowper

"Good out of evil," says the ebullient Mr. Parker in Sanditon, a novel fragment in which an overturned carriage and a sprained ankle are the catalysts for what will surely prove to be an auspicious introduction--that of Charlotte Heywood to the Parkers. Likewise in Mansfield Park, when Henry reveals to Mary his plot to make Fanny Price love him as an amusement, he is acting from motives of nearly unalloyed selfishness and vanity. But Mary, seeing the potential for good in the situation, tells him, "Your wicked project upon her peace turns out a clever thought indeed. You will both find your good in it" (MP 295). He does in the end fall in love with Fanny, an event which has for a while a salutary effect on him, and might have done more had he been less irredeemable. It is one example in Austen's novel of the possibility that evil may be an agent for the good--where unfortunate events and wrong actions seem part of an ultimate plan to

bring a desirable result.

Fanny, for example, exiled to Portsmouth, is only sent for when the misery at Mansfield is caused by Mrs. Rushworth's elopement with Crawford and by Julia's ensuing folly. It is all Fanny can do to contain her joy at the consequences for her of these terrible events. The Bertram family's misfortune becomes the means for her restoration to Mansfield and eventually for her union with Edmund. Avrom Fleishman says,

Thus situated, Fanny becomes conscious of an ethical possibility lying at the heart of Christian eschatology. 'She was, she felt she was, in the greatest danger of being exquisitely happy, while so many were miserable. The evil which brought such good to her.' (Ch. XLVI p. 443).<sup>43</sup>

Likewise Sir Thomas, having decided that Mrs. Norris will accompany Maria to Italy, is in the same situation. Working through his misery, he is able to see that the events that have made his life unhappy for so long, are also about to bring him great relief.

He had felt Mrs. Norris as an hourly evil, which was so much the worse, as there seemed no chance of its ceasing but with life: she seemed a part of himself, that must be borne for ever. To be relieved from her, therefore was so great a felicity, that had she not left bitter remembrances behind her, there might have been danger of his learning almost to approve the evil which produced such a good (MP 466).

That evil exists in the world, and that it sometimes precipitates good consequences is recognized in Mansfield Park, as well as in other works by Austen.

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<sup>43</sup> Fleishman, p. 66.



Darrell Mansell, who suggests that Austen's false heroes do have their uses, says that the group at Derbyshire in Pride and Prejudice need Wickham to bring it to its final bliss.<sup>44</sup> He causes much misery, much suffering in the Bennett family, just as the Crawfords cause much unhappiness in the Bertram family; but the Crawfords and Wickham serve at the same time to bring enlightenment to the households of both novels. Without their conflict over Wickham, Darcy and Elizabeth not only might never have married, but also might never have achieved the self-knowledge that makes their union desirable. For the Christian, contact with evil and suffering are part of the process through which man may be refined and proved true; he is tried as gold is tried. St. Peter uses the metaphor of trial by fire in order to explain the presence of evil in the world. He tells the early Christians to rejoice at their temptations, "That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ" (I Peter, 1:7).

That good may ultimately come of suffering is evident not only in the joining of Edmund and Fanny as a result of Crawford's presence, but also in the changes which become evident in many other characters: Sir Thomas becomes a more thoughtful father, cured of his mercenary intentions with regard to his children; Lady Bertram overcomes--to some extent anyway--her yawning indifference to everything save her lap dog;

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<sup>44</sup>Mansell, p. 107.

Tom Bertram, who very nearly dies in a long curative illness, rises like a prosaic phoenix from the ashes of his mindless frivolity to become a useful son to Sir Thomas. Whether the Crawfords are in any way changed is left open to doubt. Edmund at any rate hopes their self-knowledge will come, and more easily than the Bertrams'. To Mary's suggestion that he is taking Maria's elopement too seriously, he replies, "that from my heart I wished her well, and earnestly hoped that she might soon learn to think more justly, and not owe the most valuable knowledge any of us could acquire--the knowledge of ourselves and of our duty, to the lessons of affliction . . ." (MP 459).

Thus we have (consistent with Christian doctrine) a suggestion of the utility of evil in revealing the good. There is Biblical sanction for this view. For example, in Romans 3:7: "For if the truth of God hath more abounded through my lie unto his glory; why yet am I also judged as a sinner?" But this, for Paul is a rhetorical question; the judgement of God is affirmed, and though he goes on to say, in verse 10, "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one," the fact of judgment upon that evil still exists. St. Paul makes it clear that the capacity of evil for throwing good into bright relief is by no means its salvation; God will still judge, and to be tolerant of evil because it is sometimes an agent for good is wrong (See Romans 3:4-9).

This then is the perspective of Mansfield Park. The existence of evil certainly is recognized; so is its connection to good. Sir

Thomas says of Mrs. Norris, "she seemed a part of himself, that must be borne for ever" (MP 465-466). Fleishman and Mansell both place much emphasis on the connection between good and evil in the novel. Mansell says that Fanny, like Elizabeth Bennett, must recognize her kinship with evil (i.e., her family), and that this is essential to her preparation for taking her place in the world.<sup>45</sup> That this is true of Elizabeth Bennett is very plausible; she is proud, and must be humbled by her own errors and those of her family. But Fanny's situation is by no means comparable; she goes to Portsmouth hoping to find a connection, hoping to realize the relationship she knows exists, and comes away sadly convinced that she is in no way kin to the Prices (save for William and Susan, who are different from the rest) except through an accident of biology. Fleishman points out how the words evil and connection appear constantly in Mansfield Park, first in simple contexts, and then acquiring wider implications as they reappear.<sup>46</sup> While this is true, the continuing emphasis on these words does not bear out the idea that Fanny and Edmund have some innate evil (like Sir Thomas' Mrs. Norris) which seems a part of them and must be borne. It is instead an increasing tension which in the end is swept away to their great relief. Edmund's conversation with Fanny following his last meeting with Mary Crawford should erase any doubts on this score. He says that although he has at moments regretted not

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<sup>45</sup> Mansell, p. 135.

<sup>46</sup> Fleishman, p. 51.

going back when she called to him,

I know I was right; and such has been the end of our acquaintance! And what an acquaintance has it been! How have I been deceived! Equally in brother and sister deceived! I thank you for your patience, Fanny. This has been the greatest relief, and now we will have done (MP 459).

And so the Crawfords, like Mrs. Norris, are not borne with; as she is swept away to exile in Italy, they are sent away to London, their natural element.<sup>47</sup>

What is missing in this novel, in contrast to the others, is the simple acceptance of evil as a part of life, and of evil people as part of the world that must be borne with. Although there there is a Christian attitude that evil has its place in some divine plan as an agent for good, and although the Crawfords are necessary to the proper outcome of events, there still exists a bitter judgment towards all evil-doers, who include Mrs. Norris, Maria, and the Crawfords. In any other Austen novel, Mrs. Norris would have gone on through the end of the novel spending the money and arranging the affairs of others, with the prediction at the end that she would live to a ripe old age and continue to torment not just Fanny and Edmund, but also their children. As examples, there are John and Fanny Dashwood; he is a contemptible coward and she is downright vicious. Yet the end of Sense and Sensibility finds them well and prosperous, exactly the same as when the novel opens. But then the wicked in Sense and Sensibility seem less

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<sup>47</sup> Their natural element is London because in Mansfield Park Austen's view of London was the conservative view of the day, according to Marilyn Butler. The country, says Butler, from their point of view, offered "greater opportunities for sober usefulness" in contrast to the selfishness and triviality of the town (pp. 97-98).

threatening; the good more in control. In Mansfield Park the power of evil is truly threatening. It is the first Austen novel in which the fascination of the evil to the good has a really sinister quality. It must be eradicated--and is. The evil in Mansfield Park is not reconciled, tolerated or accepted. Like an allegory of the last judgment, in the end the evil ones are consigned to the nether regions, and the good, gathered to the father's house.

The language of the last chapters reflects the novel's attitude towards evil. On pages 464-465, for example, the word punishment appears four times, and misery twice. On page 468, punishment again appears twice, and penalty once. And some form of judgment appears frequently--on pages 463, 465, and 472. For all the emphasis on judgment and justification in the New Testament, especially in Romans, which the novel echoes closely in language, there is an Old Testament stridency in this attitude towards sin and punishment. The conclusion reflects the "eye for an eye," "tooth for a tooth" morality, where punishment follows transgression as surely as the night the day, with unremitting swiftness and exactitude.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Or perhaps it is merely Pauline, for the Apostle's stern views regarding the maintenance of high moral standards are evident in numerous instances. In I Corinthians, Chapter 5, for example, he sounds very much like Fanny and Edmund discussing Mrs. Rushworth and Henry, as he writes to them that he has heard reports of an incestuous relationship in their midst. He is shocked and horrified not only by the deed, but also by the tolerant attitude which many have assumed toward this situation. "Know ye not," he asks, "that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened" (vs. 6-7). And yet in verse 12 he says that it is not his position to judge those that are outside the church--that is God's prerogative.



So long as it is God doing the judging, an all-righteous, super-human agent, one can accept the judgments passed on evil ones. But when man does the judging, it always serves to lower that man in one's eyes. As Hamlet says when Polonius remarks that he will use the players according to their deserts:

God's bodkins, man, much better; use every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping? Use them after your own honor and dignity: the less they deserve, the more merit in your bounty. Take them in (Act II, Sc. II, ll. 559-565).

It was a lesson from which Fanny could well have profitted, and from which Austen it seems did profit, for Anne Elliot, in Persuasion, is free from the judgmental attitude that sullies Fanny's Christianity. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, as recorded in Luke's gospel, Christ is reported to have said, "But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and the evil. Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful. Judge not, and ye shall not be judged" (Luke 6:35-37).

Here then, Fanny falls short of the heroine she might have been. As little compassion as Maria, Mrs. Norris, and Henry deserve, mercy and love towards the sinner, if not tolerance for his deeds, are demanded of a Christian. Christ once stopped the stoning of an adulteress by saying to the crowd, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." When her accusers retreat, he says to her, "hath no man condemned thee . . . Neither do I condemn thee: go, and



sin no more" (John 8:7-11). It is this quality that we miss in Fanny; her self-effacement, though well intentioned, does not go nearly far enough. Christ said, "I will have mercy, and not sacrifice; for I am not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Matthew 9:13). In Mansfield Park, the emphasis is on sacrifice, not mercy. Had Fanny's horror at Maria's sin been followed by pity for her condition, Fanny would have become a more sympathetic character.

Shakespeare's Isabella in Measure for Measure is much like Fanny Price;<sup>49</sup> she is righteous, critical, and uncompromising, and not, in the beginning, a very sympathetic figure. But Shakespeare transforms her by the end of the play by having her plead for the life of the man who has (as far as he knows) just committed the sin she finds most abhorrent. And she believes that her brother has just died for the same sin. The Duke tests her by stating very rationally the reasons Angelo should die:

. . . as he adjudged your brother-  
 Being criminal in double violation  
 Of sacred chastity, and of promise breach  
 Thereon dependent, for your brother's life-  
 The very mercy of the law cries out  
 Most audible, even from his proper tongue,  
 An Angelo for Claudio, death for death. (Act V, Sc. I, ll. 403-410)

This is the law, this is justice, and it is a judgment no one could have questioned. But a phrase in Isabella's next speech, to the effect

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<sup>49</sup> Robert Colby also makes the comparison between the two works, but does so by way of showing how Edmund teaches Fanny Christian charity (p. 59). While Edmund's attitude is more compassionate and perceptive than Fanny's on this occasion, the lessons on Christian charity are obscured by the novel's larger emphasis on judgment.

that Claudio received "justice only," is subject to a double interpretation: the first, that what he received was only fair; the second, that he got nothing more than justice--and man is capable of something higher.

It is the absence then, of the quality of mercy that mars Mansfield Park, in contrast to Shakespeare's play or Austen's other novels. Isabella, a tiresome prude, is transformed in the end, humanized by her plea for Angelo and her sympathy for Marianne. As in Mansfield Park, Measure for Measure is the story of good emerging from evil circumstances and miserable situations, but unlike Mansfield Park, the play contains more magnanimity towards those responsible for the evil. When the Duke reveals himself and pronounces his God-like judgment upon his subjects--much as Sir Thomas does--it is in the spirit of James 2:13, "For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment." There is no joy in mere justice--in the law of "an eye for an eye." Pride and Prejudice transcends the law, accepting and forgiving Lydia and Wickham, despite Rev. Collins's advice to the contrary. But in Mansfield Park the deadening hand of the letter of the law descends at the end, and no spirit arises to give it life.

## CONCLUSION

Besides the absence of mercy, there are other flaws in Mansfield Park. The most prominent may be seen in the theme of the loss of self that leads to salvation. Austen demonstrated its corollary, the destructiveness of self-absorption, successfully in Henry and Mary Crawford. But as a personification of the positive principle, Fanny is not wholly successful since she never truly relinquishes self; she is instead continually trapped in an attitude of extreme self-consciousness, always brooding over the propriety of some word or action. Although she strains toward humility, the intensity of the effort itself is counter-productive to its end; there is an element of pride in her humility, and her meekness is so engaged in self-abnegation that it approaches self-importance.

One explanation of her severe and self-conscious humility is her position in the Bertram household. Mrs. Norris makes it clear from the beginning that Fanny is always to occupy a position a little lower than her cousins', though not too low, of course, since she is Sir Thomas's niece: but there must be a distinction, one which Fanny is never allowed to forget. Before every social event, the question of Fanny's inclusion arises, and if resolved in her favor, results in such admonitions to gratitude as should nearly eclipse her pleasure. One hears in Fanny's anguished cry, "Heaven defend me from being ungrateful!" (MP 323), echoes of many past exhortations to gratitude

from Mrs. Norris or one of the Bertram sisters. After nine years of living in the neglectful tumult of the Price household, and nine of being treated as an inferior being at the Bertrams', Fanny's extended interior debates on her duty and her place should arouse little wonder.

Fanny is always being asked to do something she finds objectionable, and refusing is difficult for Fanny; her debt to the Bertrams is so thoroughly instilled that she must be certain of doing her duty by a higher power before she rebels. David Lodge observes that her refusal of Henry Crawford results in a conflict of duties; she sees it as her duty to obey the Bertrams, but to do so in this case would violate moral compunctions of a higher order. Fanny feels it wrong to marry without love; wrong not merely in the sense that it is injudicious, but actually "wicked." Lodge says of this conflict,

A code of behavior which demands such a delicate adjustment of social and moral values is by no means easy to live up to. It demands a constant state of watchfulness and self-awareness on the part of the individual, who must not only reconcile the two scales of value in personal decisions, but in the field of human relations must contend with the fact that an attractive or unexceptionable social exterior can be deceptive.

Fanny is not in a position to act upon her own intuition of right and wrong without preliminary self-acquittal:

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? And would Edmund's judgment, would his persuasion of Sir Thomas's disapprobation of the whole, be enough to justify her in a determined denial in spite of all the rest . . . she was inclined to suspect the truth and purity of her own scruples, and as she looked around her, the claims of her cousins to be obliged, were strengthened by the sight of present upon present that she had received from them (MP 153).

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<sup>50</sup>Lodge, p. 103.

Once again the emphasis is laid heavily on judgment and on the severity of consequences following wrong actions. Such reflections rob her of the sympathy and admiration readers might have had for a more decisive heroine.

Her inability to act from her own good impulses also makes it difficult for the reader to associate her with nature as the author intends. Austen went to some lengths to create an image of Fanny as a heroine who is sensitive to all that is good in nature--its order, its peace and beauty; and to place in opposition an antagonist identified with all that is bad in society--its insincerity, triviality and cynicism. Fanny philosophizes under the stars, while Mary plays the harp, a symbol for art and society, those things created by man and therefore corrupt. When Mary, following one of Fanny's rhapsodies on nature, paraphrases the Doge at the court of Louis XIV to the effect that she could see no wonder in the shrubbery equal to seeing herself in it, the allusion evokes the dissolution, the idle wastefulness, and the shallow cynicism of the French court of that era. Although Austen was certainly no disciple of Rousseau, and although she viewed nature out of control as chaos, it is consistent with her Christian outlook to regard the orderly beauty of the English countryside as God's creation, and therefore superior to the city. Robert Colby comments that the more serious authors of Austen's day shunned

the city. "Their novels," he writes, "seem to have been intended to confirm Cowper's pronouncement; 'God made the country; man made the town,'"<sup>51</sup> Despite the necessary restraint society places on man's imperfect nature, society, as a human artifact, is subject to corruption, as are all of man's creations. A. Walton Litz sees Mansfield Park as a reaction against artifice--almost against art. "At its deepest reaches," he asserts, "Mansfield Park questions the motives and consolations of art itself."<sup>52</sup>

But the contrast the author seeks to create between Fanny the child of quiet nature and Mary the darling of a superficial and artificial society is not altogether to her heroine's advantage. Fanny's sympathy with nature seems at times more a retreat from the frequent harshness of human contact than an advance towards a positive reality. And Mary's comment about the Doge cuts mercifully short a sincere but rather tedious monologue on deciduous and coniferous plants.

Persuasion's heroine, Anne Elliot, ten years older than Fanny and more mature, is a more fully developed version of the nature-oriented heroine that Austen had envisioned in Fanny. Unlike Fanny's inconsequential ramblings, however, Anne's thoughts show she is able to see in the flux of nature the pattern of change in her own existence. She has a sense of connection with nature never seen in Fanny's

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<sup>51</sup> Colby, pp. 70-71.

<sup>52</sup> Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development. (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 129.



detached observation, perceiving in the fading tones of the autumn landscape what then seems a downward movement in her life: "The sweet scenes of autumn were for awhile put by--unless some tender sonnet, fraught with the apt analogy of the declining year, with declining happiness, and the images of youth and hope and spring, all gone together, blessed her memory" (P 85). To allow her heroine to see her own declining life to be as inevitable as nature's in autumn, and to show her accepting it graciously for that reason, is an excellent use of the pathetic fallacy.

In addition to enriching her perspective on nature, Anne's greater maturity, along with her more comfortable social position, makes her relationship with others easier than Fanny's. D. H. Lawrence is correct in his notion that being "absorbedly self-conscious" is juvenile beyond a certain age; he is also right in saying that one should expect self-consciousness at seventeen.<sup>53</sup> Fanny at twenty-seven, after spending several years as the well-treated wife of a man of some consequence, might have been more like Persuasion's heroine, whose sympathy for others has no barriers of timidity or self-abasement to overcome before finding expression.

The circumstances of Anne's life, like Fanny's, are those that drive lesser souls into narrow self-pity. At twenty-seven, Anne is

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<sup>53</sup>"Surgery for the Novel--or a Bomb," International Book Review (April 1923), rpt. in D. H. Lawrence: Selected Literary Criticism, ed. Anthony Beal (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), p. 115.

past the bloom of youth by the standards of the day, and also by those standards past the age for marrying advantageously. Those she must live with--her father and Miss Elliot--are vain and egregious snobs; her younger, married sister is a whining hypochondriac. Anne has, like Fanny, every qualification for martyrdom. But although she does on occasion feel a human and natural sadness over specific circumstances of her life, she is constantly drawn outward, away from self-pity or self-righteousness, towards the needs of others. Like Mrs. Croft, who serves as a model for an older Anne, she leaves behind concern for herself in her desire to be supportive to others, and she does this without any consciousness of martyrdom. There is in her self-effacement an ease and tranquility peculiarly suited to the placid autumnal quality of Persuasion; it achieves a mood of peacefulness without sacrificing feeling.

But where Persuasion is mellow, Mansfield Park has a brittle beauty; Thomas Edwards, Jr. calls it "difficult beauty," and Henry James, the "grace of uncertainty."<sup>54</sup> and though the golden tones of Persuasion are happier, the struggle between good and evil in Mansfield Park, painted in black and white, has a special brilliance. In Austen's "dark comedy," the contrast between the facile beauty that gilds the morally corrupt, and awkwardness of those who strive to avoid corruption is painted in sharp chiaroscuro, and the struggle is portrayed as a bitter one. Nowhere else in Austen's fiction does evil seem so truly sinister, or good so defenseless, so little in

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<sup>54</sup>"The Difficult Beauty of Mansfield Park," Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 20 (1966) pp. 51-67.

control. Evil characters in other novels are, as Trilling points out, hypocritical rather than insincere;<sup>55</sup> we see easily through their masks, and the irony with which they are treated produces the impression that their power for doing harm, though great, is circumscribed. Lady Catherine de Burgh (Pride and Prejudice), John and Fanny Dashwood (Sense and Sensibility), and Isabella Thorpe (Northanger Abbey), for instance, are not harmless nor are they mere caricatures; they are always treated just satirically enough and are always just stylized enough so that they are as much objects of amusement as objects of fear. In Mansfield Park, however, the Crawfords are treated not with Austen's characteristic irony, not as representations of pride, or avarice or fatuity, but as attractively human, even more dangerous because their evil is tempered with apparently good impulses. While her villains are more complex, the novel still has the allegorical quality of her previous ones. In Mansfield Park, however, the opposing forces are not qualities like sense and feeling, but the cosmic forces of good and evil. If the author's judgment on sinners seems harsh and their suffering severe, it is consistent with the tone of a novel where evil is so threatening and the contest so deadly.

Regarding the novel in this light helps explain many of its unattractive features. It accounts for the similarity between Edmund's and Fanny's personalities, for example; and for the inward-turning quality of their relationship. It is a great departure from Pride

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<sup>55</sup>Trilling, p. 135.

and Prejudice, where balance, struggle, point and counterpoint in the novel are provided by the interplay between Elizabeth and Darcy's polar personalities. In Mansfield Park this attention is focused instead on the moral struggle between good and evil personified by Fanny and Edmund on the one hand, and by their dark counterparts, the Crawfords, on the other. The exemplary emphasis also explains why Austen, a master of characterization, created Fanny Price. Fanny, unattractive as she often is, is Austen's only truly Christian heroine, not in spite of her unattractiveness, but because of it. In the Christian scheme of things, worldly standards no longer apply: appearances are deceiving, and what is most pleasurable may be most deadly. Austen's more cynical readers, those who have no sympathy with this world-view, will never appreciate this novel or its heroine, who is a vehicle for presenting and exploring the paradoxical aspects of Christianity. Fanny, in her awkwardness and self-doubt, triumphs over the beautiful, confident, and immoral Mary Crawford. Together they demonstrate the futility of worldly selfishness and the wisdom of divine folly; by the former Mary loses Edmund and by the latter Fanny escapes Henry Crawford. The outcome of the novel for Fanny also demonstrates how evil often serves the good, and how adverse circumstances may in the end work to good advantage; Fanny and Edmund's dangerous flirtation with the destructive Crawfords is the catalyst for bringing Fanny and Edmund together and for awakening the Bertram family.

The complexity of Mansfield Park is the complexity of Christianity, a world-view which seems built on contradiction and impossibility. Good and evil are both at work in the world, seemingly at cross purposes, and yet, the scriptures say, to one end (Romans 8:28). In Christian theology appearances are deceptive, and judgments of good and evil cannot be easily made. The Christian world is one in which one must be suspicious not only of dark, charming men, but of all outward appearance of good, and even of one's own impulses towards good. It is a world in which restraint is freedom, and license is the truest form of bondage. It is a place, most significantly, where relinquishing one's life is the only means of saving it, and giving up hope of success, the only way of achieving it. In this scheme of things all reason is defied; foolishness becomes wisdom, and misery becomes joy. Austen did not abandon irony in this novel as Mudrick suggests; instead she expanded its scope beyond character and situation to focus on a different kind of irony, the cosmic irony inherent in Christian contradiction. She made contradiction the heart of the novel. The difficult beauty of Mansfield Park is the beauty of paradox.

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