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Iron Gates and Ha-has: Visible and Invisible Barriers in *Mansfield Park*

Since Alistair Duckworth's *The Improvement of the Estate* in 1971¹ the houses and grounds in Jane Austen's fiction have been unignorable and his placing of *Mansfield Park* in the centre rather than on the periphery of some of Jane Austen's dearest concerns has remained persuasive. Critics and general readers still disagree about how conservative Jane Austen's values are, and hence about the extent to which Fanny and Edmund embody these values, but no one now would marginalise the significance of the places they inhabit or visit.

There are five significant houses in the novel: Mansfield Park, Sotherton, Thornton Lacey, Mansfield Parsonage and the Prices' house at Portsmouth; and there are lots of others: Henry Crawford's Everingham, the White House to which Mrs Norris retires (neither of which we enter), the Admiral's house where William Price dines, Mrs Fraser's where Edmund dines, Lady Stornaway's where he has his last encounter with Mary Crawford, the Rushworth's house in Wimpole Street, the house in Twickenham where Maria and Henry commence their affair, the relatives' house that Julia retreats to, and finally that establishment 'remote and private' in another 'country' to which Maria and Mrs Norris are banished. But it is, of course, Sotherton, inside and outside, which assumes most importance in the first volume, followed by the interior of Mansfield in the throes of the theatricals, which straddles the end of the first and the beginning of the second volumes. Events in the grounds at Sotherton and in the house at Mansfield dominate and shape the narrative, until the point in the third volume when the topsy-turveydom of Portsmouth prepares the way for the moral confusions which bring the action, although not the story, to a close. When Nabokov wants to fix the novel he does so by drawing the exterior of Sotherton and the interior of that section of Mansfield Park which includes the billiard room and the adjoining study.²

But in my title I have committed myself to specific aspects of Sotherton's grounds – the ha-ha and the iron gate. The ha-ha is an invisible barrier and the iron gate a visible one, but both are felt by Maria as constraints. Barriers, I will suggest, are the fundamental metaphors of *Mansfield Park*. Throughout her life Jane Austen displayed an intense consciousness of barriers, social, economic and aesthetic. After she had returned a call to the Lances in Southampton, she wrote that their house:

¹ Alistair M. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971; 2 ed. 1994).

² Vladimir Nabokov, 'Mansfield Park', in *Lectures on Literature* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1980).

...is a handsome building, stands high and in a very beautiful situation. ... They will not come often, I dare say. They live in a handsome style and are rich, and she seemed to like being rich, and we gave her to understand that we were far from being so; she will soon feel therefore that we are not worth her acquaintance.³

She had clearly sensed a barrier.

My claim is not that ha-ha and iron gate carry a simple symbolic significance, but rather that the kind of emphasis they are given, their prominence in the first third of the book, is a way of signalling the novel's concern with forms of containment, exclusion, protection and appropriation; and with the ways in which these things can at any point be confused. What presents itself as protection may be a form of containment or even a form of exclusion.

The ha-ha is referred to five times in the course of the Sotherton episode in volume 1; no ha-ha appears elsewhere in Jane Austen. The iron gate comes up four times and the iron palisades are twice referred to in the visit to Sotherton; the only iron gate of any note elsewhere in the novels is the great iron sweep gate at Hartfield that opens to admit Frank Churchill and Harriet whom he has just saved from the gypsies (*Emma*, vol.3, chapt.3). Iron gates enclose and protect (and impress) but the ha-ha is a more complicated matter. Even its name is beguiling, and the French *saut-de-loup* is equally, if differently, captivating. And it is from France that the ha-ha comes. Most histories of the English garden explain that the English ha-ha is a kind of amalgamation of the military fosse and the French *saut-de-loup*, a ditch dug at the end of an *allée* to prevent trespassing without spoiling the view. (A small but still existing sunk fence was used at Levens Hall by the French gardener Beaumont c. 1695). In 1712 John James translated Dezallier d'Argenville's *La Théorie et la pratique du jardinage*, 1709, in which the use of the sunk fence is advocated. But it was Bridgeman and Kent who popularised the ha-ha and Capability Brown who entrenched it, if you will forgive the pun.

Horace Walpole in *On Modern Gardening* sets his seal of approval on the ha-ha:

But the capital stroke, the leading step to all that has followed, was (I believe the first step was Bridgman's) the destruction of walls for boundaries and the invention of fosses – an attempt then deemed so astonishing that the Common People called them Ha! Has! to express their surprise at finding a sudden and unperceived check to their walk.

³ Jane Austen, *Letters*, ed Deirdre Le Faye, 3rd edn (Oxford: OUP, 1995), to Cassandra, 18-19 Dec. 1798, letter 49, p117.

I call a sunk fence the leading step for these reasons: No sooner was this simple enchantment made, than levelling, mowing and rolling followed. The contiguous ground of the park without the sunk fence was to be harmonised with the ground within; and the garden in its turn was to be set free from its prim regularity, that it might assort with the wilder country without. ... At that moment appeared Kent, painter enough to taste the charms of landscape, bold and opinionative enough to dare and to dictate and born with a genius to strike out a great system from the twilight of imperfect essays. He leaped the fence and saw that all nature was a garden. ... [he] extended the perspective by delusive comparison. ... Thus the pencil of his imagination bestowed all the arts of landscape on the scenes he handled.⁴

We know that Walpole's ancestry for the ha-ha is not quite right but it is the sense of wonder that it produces that continued to be stressed by some of the participants in the landscape gardening debates of the 18th century. By making all nature a garden the ha-ha created the illusion of connectedness between elements of the world that were not in fact connected, that were indeed, firmly but invisibly separated.

Capability Brown, of course, made extensive use of the ha-ha to produce his 'swept' landscapes. Cowper, Jane Austen's favourite, deplored Brown's cavalier despoliation of the works of time: *The Task*, Book 3, 'The Garden'

Lo! he comes--

The omnipotent magician, Brown, appears.
 He speaks. The lake in front becomes a lawn,
 Woods vanish, hills subside, and valleys rise,
 And streams, as if created for his use,
 Pursue the track of his directed wand
 Sinuous or straight, now rapid and now slow,
 Now murmuring soft, now roaring in cascades,
 Even as he bids. (ll.765-780)

For Cowper, Brown remains a magician however much he disapproves. But even those who approved the ha-ha, like Walpole, admit that it is delusive. And it very quickly becomes apparent that the ha-ha is bolstered by appropriative and imperialistic notions and metaphors.

⁴ Horace Walpole, 'On Modern Gardening', appended to *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, vol.4, 1786, pp.287-290

As one commentator put it, describing the effect of the ha-ha at Sion House at Richmond: ‘even the Thames itself seems to belong to the gardens, and the different sorts of vessels which successively sail as it were through them, appear to be the property of the noble proprietor.’⁵ This appropriative gesture assumes possession of elements of the world without the owner of the estate having to take the trouble to care for them. The proprietor can, as it were command a fleet, without the bother of being responsible for it.

Ha-has were very common by the second half of the 18th century used even by those who deprecated Brown’s sweeping effects. But by the second decade of the 19th century, the ha-ha was falling out of favour. The reaction against its use owed something to the increasing privileging of the domestic and comfortable over the grand (Repton speaks of ‘humanising as well as harmonising scenery’) but also to a growing demand for honesty encouraged by Repton and the younger Gilpin:

The necessity of a fence, to protect the house from cattle, seems to have been doubted by the followers of Brown, who generally used the ha! ha! supposing that the fence ought to be invisible. On the contrary, it cannot surely be disputed, that some fence should actually exist between a garden and a pasture; for if it is invisible, we must either suppose cattle to be admitted into a garden, or flowers planted in a field; both equally absurd.⁶

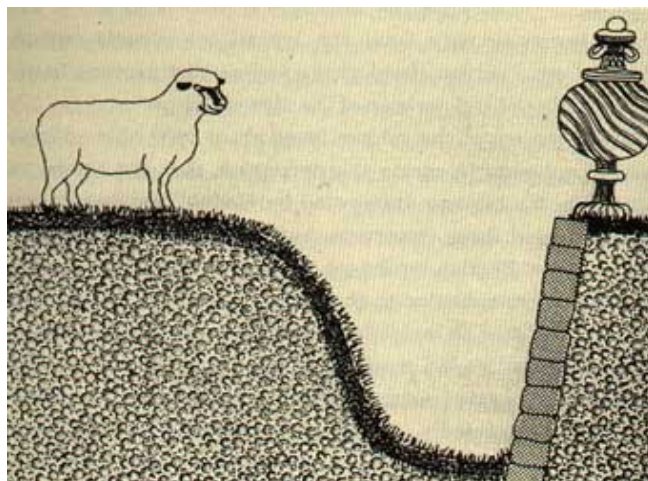
Gilpin, who preferred walls to fences, still followed Repton’s arguments about the good sense of admitting the real separation between the garden and the natural world beyond: he asks ‘Whence this horror of a fence which good sense, a constituent part of good taste, prescribes.’ And more emphatically:

If it be contrary to good sense to admit the cattle on the dressed lawn, it is, I conceive, equally contrary to let it appear they are admitted.⁷

⁵ *London and Its Environs Described*, vol. 1761, p.

⁶ Humphry Repton, *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (London: T. Bensley for J. Taylor, 1816), p. 416-7.

⁷ William Sawrey Gilpin, *Practical Hints on Landscape Gardening* (London: Cadell, 1832), pp.79-80.



Indeed, as early as 1806 Repton in his *Enquiry into the Changes of Taste in Landscape Gardening* had noted: ‘where ground is divided by sunk fences, imaginary freedom is purchased at the expense of actual confinement’.⁸

My concern, however, is not with whether Jane Austen agreed or disagreed with Repton. Obviously Austen knew about Repton’s work – she seems, for example, to have got his terms right at 5 guineas a day. He had been employed by her mother’s cousin, Rev. Thomas Leigh at Adlestrop in 1802. Jane and Cassandra had visited Adlestrop some time in 1794. With their mother they visited again in 1806, when they would have been able to assess the improvements. After a brief visit, however, Leigh whisked them off to Stoneleigh Abbey which he was expecting to (and did) inherit. Mrs Austen’s describes this visit in a now-famous letter to Mary Lloyd (13 August 1806 to Mary Lloyd).⁹ After Repton’s success at Adlestrop, which was rather like his success at Compton in *Mansfield Park*, Thomas Leigh employed him at Stoneleigh. Jane Austen’s visit predates his improvements, but her eldest brother, James, visited Stoneleigh summer 1809 and it likely that he would have told Jane about Repton’s progress and it is not impossible that Jane Austen would at some point have seen his 1809 Red Book. But Austen is probably only using Repton in much the same way as Peacock does with his Mr Milestone in *Headlong Hall* as an icon of fashion and, therefore, a proper target for the satirist. It is surely of broader interest, however, that Repton’s objections to the ha-ha are based on its dishonesty, its denial of what

⁸ Humphry Repton, *An Enquiry into the Changes of Taste in Landscape Gardening* (London: printed for J.Taylor, 1806), p.171.

⁹ Deirdre Le Faye, *Jane Austen: A Family Record*, 2 edn (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), pp.156-157.

everyone knows to be the case and yet is willing to be deceived about, and this does seem to bear on Fanny's situation at Mansfield Park.

Fanny warns Maria that her attempt at circumventing the iron gate and the ha-ha is dangerous and may well involve her slipping into the ha-ha. It is commonly said that Maria does later slip metaphorically into the ha-ha and that this places her ultimately beyond its protection shut out by the iron gate of rigid morality. Repton notes that:

I have sometimes seen a drive, or walk, brought to the edge of a precipice, without any adequate fence; but good taste, as well as good sense, requires to be satisfied that there is no danger in the beauties we behold.¹⁰

Others have thought of the ha-ha as the invisible, internal barrier of conscience which protects Fanny from transgression.¹¹ But this seems endow the deceptive ha-ha itself with a kind of moral force and this doesn't seem very satisfactory. In any case, at Sotherton Fanny doesn't want to cross the ha-ha, but she does not want to be left sitting on the bench either; she would much rather be with Edmund. It is Edmund and Mary who insist that she's still tired because they want to be alone together. But it is true that Fanny sees the risks in crossing the ha-ha.

Thus the ha-ha can be read in a number of ways: for Maria it is a form of imprisonment which stops her moving out into the wider world beyond, a world which the illusion of the ha-ha seems to make available to her. For Fanny it offers a form of protection for those on the house side, shielding them from the wilder, not the wider world: to treat it as merely imprisoning is to risk injury. But there is also the issue of the ha-ha encouraging notions of possession and connection that are not actually the case. The ha-ha becomes, I believe, a figure that offers a number of different ways of accessing and discussing the concerns of Mansfield Park.

The ha-ha had made appearances in novels before Jane Austen. There is the sunk fence or ha-ha in the grounds of Sir Charles Grandison's estate which enables the view of 'the gardens and the lawns from the windows of this spacious house to be as boundless as the mind of the owner, and as free and open as his

¹⁰ *Fragments*, p.417.

¹¹ Inger S. B. Brodey, 'Papas and Ha-has: Rebellion, Authority and Landscaping in *Mansfield Park*', *Persuasions*, 17, 90-96, p.93.

countenance' (*The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, vol.7, letter 5). More exploitative perhaps of figurative meanings of the sunk fence is the incident in *Tristram Shandy* which Jane Austen may well have known:

I was shewing Mrs. Bridget our fortifications, and in going too near the edge of the fosse, I unfortunately slipp'd in—Very well, Trim! my father would cry—(smiling mysteriously, and giving a nod—but without interrupting him)—and being link'd fast, an' please your honour, arm in arm with Mrs. Bridget, I dragg'd her after me, by means of which she fell backwards soss against the bridge—and Trim's foot (my uncle Toby would cry, taking the story out of his mouth) getting into the cuvette, he tumbled full against the bridge too.—It was a thousand to one, my uncle Toby would add, that the poor fellow did not break his leg.—Ay truly, my father would say—a limb is soon broke, brother Toby, in such encounters.—(*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, vol. 3, chapt.24)

Maria's reference to Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* (vol. 2, 'The Passport: the Hotel at Paris') gives some licence to invoke *Tristram Shandy* at a point in the narrative when falling into a fosse is not as serious a matter as it later becomes. Two later examples might have been known to Jane Austen.

Among the minor fiction of the late century is Esther Finglass's *The Recluse or History of Lady Gertrude Lesby*, Dublin 1789, a two volume novel of unbelievable silliness which does, however, feature a family called Darcy and a ha-ha, broad and deep, which is crossed by means of a plank hidden in the grass: 'have you a key to this ... or must I venture my neck' (vol.2, letter 37, p.129). More promising is Mary Charlton, a novelist from the Minerva Press stable. In her *Rosella or Modern Occurrences*, 1799 (a novel that incidentally has a harp delivered as a mysterious gift), the heroine, Rosella is inspecting works on her mother's estate, when a series of unfortunate encounters with nature and improvements conclude with her jumping over a ha-ha into a newly acquired meadow and landing in mud. At this point she meets up with a group who variously respond to her dishevelled condition. When she returns to her mother Sophia and her guardian, Selina, it is remarked that her 'petticoats are fringed with black mud' (vol.1, chapt.9, p.219). Austen's use of a muddy petticoat in *Pride and Prejudice* is a good deal more complex than Mary Charlton's but the coincidence is at least suggestive (*Pride and Prejudice*, vol.1, chapt.7). But in no novel before Jane Austen does the ha-ha figure as prominently as it does in *Mansfield Park*. Fortunately, then, the ha-ha- for all its potential had not been overused in imaginative work and so when it is employed by Jane Austen it retains its powerful metaphorical force.

Ha-has need not, of course, be metaphorical. They are after all more or less workaday affairs, parts of the landscape that Fanny and Jane Austen for that matter might simply have taken for granted. Jane Austen

would have encountered ha-has – perhaps at Adelstrop, Stoneleigh, Goodnestone, Godmersham, certainly at Chilham, Chawton House and even Bath. As for Fanny, well, she has not travelled but she knows what she is looking at and so we must assume that either she has been reading books which give her access to ha-has or that Mansfield Park has a ha-ha. But whether or not this is the case, Mansfield Park is certainly supplied with an immaterial or figurative ha-ha.



Chilham: Samuel Rastall 1777

Chilham ha-ha today

At Sotherton Maria feels the ha-ha as a constraint. She remembers the pathetic story of the starling in *A Sentimental Journey* and in doing so invites a sympathy that I would argue survives all her subsequent behaviour. But the ha-ha was not really devised to keep people in but rather to keep sheep, cattle, deer and even human trespassers out, and it was designed to do so while maintaining the impression that they were not so excluded. In the larger political sense, the impression of connectedness underpinned national cohesion, even though there were plenty of invisible barriers in the nation; what was true of the nation is emphatically true of Mansfield Park. And it was Sir Thomas’s intention from the outset that there be such a barrier and that it be as close to invisible as possible:

“There will be some difficulty in our way, Mrs. Norris,” observed Sir Thomas, “as to the distinction proper to be made between the girls as they grow up: how to preserve in the minds of my *daughters* the consciousness of what they are, without making them think too lowly of their cousin; and how, without depressing her spirits too far, to make her remember that she is not a *Miss Bertram*. I should wish to see them very good friends, and would, on no account, authorise in my girls the smallest degree of arrogance towards their relation; but still they cannot be equals. Their rank, fortune, rights, and expectations will

always be different. It is a point of great delicacy, and you must assist us in our endeavours to choose exactly the right line of conduct.”¹²

In other words Fanny must look as though she is on one side of the ha-ha while actually remaining on the other. In the hands of Mrs Norris the barrier becomes more like an iron gate than a ha-ha. But there is this much to be said for her: iron gates may be threatening and unattractive but they are not dishonest; with Mrs Norris, what you see is what you get. The lack of clarity in Fanny’s situation, the pain and difficulty it causes her and the confusion it creates for others is occasioned by the undecidability of her situation. It is certainly problematic for the Crawfords: ‘Pray’, Miss Crawford asks about Fanny, as she is walking with the Mr. Bertrams, ‘is she out, or is she not out?’ (vol.1, chapt.5). When he addresses himself to the question even Edmund misses the point that it shouldn’t have been necessary to ask if she was out, if she had really been in.

Barbara Werner suggests that ‘Fanny’s liminal position in the landscape of Mansfield Park indicates she is in a position to effect its cure’.¹³ This seems to me to underestimate the effect of the accidental and the unseen in the novel and perhaps also Fanny’s unwillingness to cure Mary Crawford, since it is in her interests to keep her in error. But Werner is surely right that the insecurity about Fanny’s position is vital to the functioning of the novel’s plot. Is Fanny a member of the family or not? Is Fanny in or out? It may be that the ha-ha offers the clue. We know that the cattle and the deer are certainly not allowed on the lawns because they would trample them, but the prospect over the ha-ha allows the pretence that they are all part of the harmonious whole – a whole that only remains harmonious by excluding in fact, what is pretends to include. And this is, of course, how Fanny is treated: as one of the family who is not really admitted to it. Tom interestingly actually treats Fanny more like one of the family than anyone else does. He is responsible after all for most of the work-boxes and netting-boxes that cover the table between the windows in her unheated room. There is also the incident at the dance when he uses Fanny, to whom he has already conveyed his disinclination to dance, as his cover for not standing up with Mrs Rushworth:

“I should be most happy,” replied he aloud, and jumping up with alacrity, “it would give me the greatest pleasure; but that I am this moment going to dance.” Come, Fanny, taking her hand, “do not be dawdling any longer, or the dance will be over.” (vol.1, chapt. 12)

¹² Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed John Wiltshire (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), vol.vol.1, chapt.1). All *MP* quotations are from this edition.

¹³ Barbara Britton Werner, *Prospect and Refuge in the Landscape of Jane Austen* (London: Ashgate, 2006), p. 70.

Tom unselfconsciously treats Fanny as his sister, which is one reason why she would never fall in love with him. It is because Edmund *doesn't* treat her in the same way as he treats Julia and Maria that she falls in love. Had she really been treated as his sister by everyone, then Mrs Norris would have been right about the impossibility of an affective relationship. And so, if I may put it in this way: it is the persistence of the ha-ha that deceptive, illusion-making structure that allows the Bertrams to believe, almost without thinking about it, that their power over their immediate group is without limit. And it is their inability to understand the *effects* of the ha-ha that in the end humbles the pride of the Bertrams. But it is also ironically that invisible barrier that enables Fanny be different, and in this way to unwittingly direct the plot of the novel.

Mansfield Park is much concerned with questions of nature and nurture. When Fanny is trying to convince Henry Crawford that she cannot marry him she says that they are 'unfitted for each other by nature, education and habit' (vol.2, chapt.2). When she is in Portsmouth Fanny reflects that it is amazing that Susan 'brought up in the midst of negligence and error, ... should have formed such proper opinions of what ought to be' (vol.3, chapt.10). This kind of comment or reflection occurs over and over again.

Nurture, the novel sometimes suggests, serves only to disguise human nature. Like the ha-ha it is a deceptive device. Take, for example, the unpleasant fight between Betsy and Susan about the knife in Portsmouth. The quarrel has the dual function of exposing the inadequacies of the Prices as parents but also of pointing the finger at the inadequacies of the Bertrams. Julia and Maria have been engaged in a squabble just as unpleasant over the favours of Henry Crawford, but the ha-ha, as it were, of surface manners hides the rather difficult gap that opens between Julia and Maria. And so while the nurture is visibly inadequate, at Mansfield it is just as bad beneath the surface. At the end of the novel Sir Thomas admits to himself that Mansfield upbringing has been defective but he goes on to extol the benefits of early deprivation:

In *her* [Susan's] usefulness, in Fanny's excellence, in William's continued good conduct and rising fame, and in the general well-doing and success of the other members of the family, all assisting to advance each other, and doing credit to his countenance and aid, Sir Thomas saw repeated, and for ever repeated, reason to rejoice in what he had done for them all, and acknowledge the advantages of early hardship and discipline, and the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure. (vol.3, chapt.17)

In this way of looking at things, the ideal upbringing would be mess, confusion, favouritism and neglect, followed by patronage, and luxury, just as inconsistently apportioned. But we know this is very unlikely and so

does Jane Austen. If *Mansfield Park* is inconsistent, and I think it is, then that is because it is too honest a novel to keep employing ha-has to make the view pretty.

Mansfield Park the novel is no more stable than Mansfield Park, the house. Neither can really be said to represent stable values, threatened by the incomers' restless new behaviours. It isn't true, for example, that Fanny has inward freedom – she is rather the prisoner of her unspoken love for Edmund and her corroding jealousy of Mary Crawford. Edmund says of Fanny's behaviour that she had been consistent throughout but that is because he judges from appearances – what looks like the consistency of good behaviour is deceptive, for Fanny's treatment of Mary Crawford, although we are made to understand and sympathise with it, is not very generous. And in truth there is more similarity between Julia's behaviour at Sotherton and during the play, and Fanny's than many readers have found it comfortable to admit. Julia has suffered the tedium of Mrs Rushworth which the rest have escaped:

The politeness which she had been brought up to practise as a duty, made it impossible for her to escape; while the want of that higher species of self-command, that just consideration of others, that knowledge of her own heart, that principle of right which had not formed any essential part of her education, made her miserable under it. (vol.1, chapt.9)

Fanny, just as much as Julia, seems to lack the 'higher species of self-command' that prevents one feeling miserable under social restraints: the behaviour of Edmund and Miss Crawford makes her restless and anxious; she endures 'the pain of having been left a whole hour' and 'the result of the whole was to her disappointment and depression' (vol.1, chapt.7).

Most of the seeming wisdoms not merely *about* but also *in* the novel contradict themselves. Jane Austen admits that she is in two minds about the novel's conclusion, that another ending to the novel is quite possible:

Would he have persevered, and uprightly, Fanny must have been his reward – and a reward very voluntarily bestowed – within a reasonable period from Edmund's marrying Mary. (vol.3, chapt.17)

But that is entirely appropriate when Jane Austen seems to remain in two minds about the values that inform the whole novel. The view of the countryside that is allowed by the ha-ha is arguably more attractive than the view of the countryside that is impeded by visible barriers and so it is understandable that it might be sought, even if it is an illusion and a deception. The problem that *Mansfield Park* leaves us with, as it rewards Fanny, excludes Mary and banishes Maria is how far it is possible for what is *right*, to look attractive. Must Maria be excluded by iron gates; will the key to these gates ever be found? And should it be?

At Sotherton Maria with Henry's assistance and Julia quite on her own scramble round the iron gate and negotiate the ha-ha without serious mishap, except, of course, that their behaviour conditions their future paths. But the iron gate that is erected against Maria after her disastrous attempt to escape from the constraints of her marriage is not circumventable. And it is an iron gate, a visible barrier, that is erected against her. It becomes a matter of propriety that Sir Thomas make it visible since we are to accept that it would damage his position and betray his trust in the neighbourhood if he were not seen to exclude his daughter forever. This is very decided – what is not decided and what continues to worry readers of *Mansfield Park* is whether or not we should take satisfaction in this conclusion. Is it merely sentimental and ahistorical of us to feel that the dishonesty of the ha-ha is less frightful than the downright closure of iron gates?

The questions that trouble us at the end of *Mansfield Park* register an undecidability that has been a characteristic of the novel throughout. The outcome of *Mansfield Park* is not satisfactory and that is the novel's strength. Jane Austen can tell her family how much money Mrs Norris tipped William but there is much else that she does not tell them – I think because she does not know. *Mansfield Park*, surprisingly enough, may be Austen's least manipulated novel.

Conclusion

And so to sum up: the Mansfield family pretends that Fanny has been admitted into its inner presence but this is not the case until the catastrophe which precipitates the conclusion. The ha-ha, the invisible barrier that separates different species makes sure that Fanny remains other for most of the inhabitants of Mansfield and their acquaintance. Mrs Norris is the indefatigable maintainer of visible barriers against Fanny: since she has no moral or emotional delicacy she does not scruple to make Fanny's inferior position clear. But Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram have never intended to allow Fanny to cross the ha-ha – Sir Thomas is aware that his act of adoption, of appropriation, must carry the moral responsibility of providing for Fanny should she not catch a husband, but he never intends her to be treated like his own daughters and that is in part what precipitates the sufferings of them all. Had all the barriers been removed, had Fanny been treated completely like one of the family, then it would not have been possible for her to drive the plot of the novel in the way that she does – for make no mistake about it the shape of the narrative is dictated not by the apparently strong but instead by the underdog, the victim, Fanny. Jane Austen admits as much when she indicates that the ending could have been quite different. But Fanny will not permit this ending and why not? Because she loves Edmund and how can she

love Edmund? – well, because he does not appear to her to be at all like a brother. One of the most delightful ironies of the novel is that it is Tom who behaves like a brother. Criticism has often been too preoccupied with Tom's failings to notice that there is much that has been understandable, even likeable about him all along. So very much is Tom like a big brother that we can be sure that Fanny would never have entertained romantic notions about him. Edmund, on the other hand, treats Fanny so kindly that she is made aware of her difference and feels her relationship with him to be special as, indeed, it is. It is possible for Fanny to fall in love with Edmund because she is other to him and it is possible for him eventually to love Fanny for the same sort of reason.

In the end, then, the narrative and the Mansfield families remove the figurative ha-has as a number of gardeners were shortly to do with the material ones. The new configuration of the Mansfield families is certainly more open, relationships are acknowledged and there is no deception, no pretence at connection where no real connection exists. But the clarity that results is upsetting and Jane Austen does not try to argue away what is upsetting about it. She cannot account for why things turn out as they do and she refuses to try. And she does not revert to a narrative ha-ha, a sleight of hand that conceals what is going on. Other pens may dwell on guilt and misery but their stories are shut out of *Mansfield Park*, the gate is firmly closed on them. But Jane Austen is too honest to be complacent about this and we need not think that she is unaware of the costs of policing the estate. Edmund and Fanny's relative happiness is costly. The Crawfords are gone for ever, Julia presumably will visit joylessly from time to time but Maria will always remain beyond the gate.

Postscript

As a postscript I should like to add that the ways of thinking about the ha-ha that I have been proposing can be extended to call in the other major concerns of *Mansfield Park* – slavery and acting. We have seen how the ha-ha, which is supposed to show connection and inclusion and benign dominion, is an illusion that may rather imperfectly conceal actual difference and exclusion and questionable coercion. I need not labour the point that at least some of these terms must enter into any speculation about what Sir Thomas has been up to on his Antiguan plantations. But it is also worth noting that a *reversal* of this set of terms reveals much about the theatricals. In the conventional proscenium theatre that the Mansfield theatricals disrupt the household to imitate, the actual and visible separation of the world of the stage and the world outside by means of visible divisions of space, lights, curtains and so on, signals that what is being done on the stage is not real life and so the constraints of

real life do not apply. But this only works if the actors sustain the illusion by respecting the visible barrier; we are shown that these actors are either not capable or not willing to sustain this illusion and so actuality keeps intruding. Altogether, then, the notion of visible and invisible barriers and the pretences associated with them provides the central figuring structures of *Mansfield Park*.

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