THE

THE CONNELL GUIDE TO JANE AUSTEN'S

MANSFIELD PARK

"There's now not a journey I make without taking with me one of the Connell Guides."
JOANNA LUMLEY

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by John Sutherland and Jolyon Connell

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Jane Austen’s

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What is *Mansfield Park* about?

Few novels have divided critics more than *Mansfield Park*. It has been fiercely argued over for more than 200 years, and with good reason: it is open to radically different interpretations.

At its broadest, it is a novel about the condition of England, setting up an opposition, as the critic and biographer Claire Tomalin puts it, between someone with strongly held religious and moral principles who will not consider a marriage that is not based on true feeling, and is revolted by sexual immorality, and "a group of worldly, highly cultivated, entertaining and well-to-do young people who pursue pleasure without regard for religious or moral principles".

On the worldly side are Henry and Mary Crawford, tainted by their uncle, the Admiral, who keeps a mistress openly and passes on a light-hearted attitude to vice to his niece, while Maria and Julia Bertram are led astray by vanity and greed, with their corruption completed by a move from the country, where "outwardly correct standards are maintained", to London, where anything goes.

That is certainly one way of looking at *Mansfield Park*: the "parallels with the highest Regency society are all there", as Tomalin says.

But while some early readers were pleased by what they saw as the novel's championing of morality, others reacted less warmly, including Jane Austen's highly intelligent mother, who found the virtuous Fanny Price "insipid", and Austen's sister, Cassandra, who wanted Jane to let Fanny marry Henry Crawford. Many critics have felt the same. In 1917, Reginald Farrer, writing in the Quarterly Review, thought *Mansfield Park* "vitiated throughout by a radical dishonesty". The author, he said, is oppressed by "a purpose of edification" at cross purposes with her natural gift. The Crawfords "obviously have her artist's affection as well as her moralist's disapproval... Fiction holds no heroine more repulsive in her cast-iron self-righteousness and steely rigidity of prejudice" than Fanny. Mary, on the other hand, "would be...most delightful as a wife". Twenty years after Farrer's attack, Q.D. Leavis weighed in with similar misgivings: for all its brilliance, she found *Mansfield Park* "contradictory and confusing" and spoilt by Austen's "determination to sponsor the conventional moral outlook".

This critical attitude found its most vigorous expression in a famous essay by the novelist Kingsley Amis, which appeared in The Spectator in 1957. No other of her novels, he argued, embodies to a comparable degree Austen's

habit of censoriousness where there ought to be

> indulgence and indulgence where there ought to be censure. These are patently moral 'oughts', and it is by moral rather than aesthetic standards that *Mansfield Park,* especially, is defective. Although it never holds up the admirable as vicious, it continually and essentially holds up the vicious as admirable...

As social beings, says Amis, Edmund and Fanny are "inferior" to the Crawfords. Henry and Mary are "good fun"; the other two simply aren't. "To invite Mr and Mrs Edmund Bertram round for the evening would not be lightly undertaken." More basically than this, Edmund and Fanny are "morally detestable". He is narrow-minded and pompous, while Fanny's notions and feelings "are made odious by a self-regard utterly unredeemed by any humour". She is, concludes Amis damningly,

> a monster of complacency and pride who, under a cloak of cringing self-abasement, dominates and gives meaning to the novel. What became of that Jane Austen (if she ever existed) who set out bravely to correct conventional notions of the desirable and virtuous? From being their critic (if she ever was) she became their slave. That is another way of saying that her judgement and her moral sense were corrupted. *Mansfield Park* is the witness of that corruption.

In another, highly influential essay, written three years earlier, the American critic Lionel Trilling sought to rehabilitate *Mansfield Park.* Jane Austen herself, when embarking on it, wrote to her sister Cassandra: "Now I will try to write of something else; – it shall be a complete change of subject – Ordination." Trilling takes her at her word: the idea of ordination runs strongly through his interpretation of the novel, he says. He accepts Fanny's shortcomings – "Nobody, I believe, has found it possible to like the heroine of *Mansfield Park*" – but sees her as a Christian heroine whose "debility" is a sign of her saintliness. The question of ordination is important as it involves a conception of professionalism and duty which looks forward to the Victorians; the episode of the play may seem absurd, but it illustrates the dangers of impersonating others and of not being true to ourselves. The Crawfords are superficially attractive, but they are insincere; Fanny has integrity.

This view is echoed by the leading late 20th century English critic, Tony Tanner. Like Trilling, Tanner sees the novel as without irony; it celebrates stillness, he says; it seems "to speak for repression and negation, fixity and enclosure... in the debilitated but undeviating figure of Fanny Price we should perceive the pain and labour involved in maintaining true values in a corrosive world of dangerous energies and selfish power-

play". Fanny "suffers in her stillness. For Righteousness's sake."

Marilyn Butler's important book, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975) extends this line of argument, believing Austen, in all her novels, to be making a conservative philosophical case against the dangerous ideology of the French revolution. In Butler's reading, the novel is deeply imbued with the values of Edmund Burke, whose *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) portrayed British society as held together not by reason but by love and loyalty, with the castle or country house a symbol of its strength. Fanny, thinks Butler, is a Christian heroine faced by a series of trials. "Portsmouth is Fanny's exile in the wilderness, her grand temptation by the devil Mammon" in the shape of the rich, estate-owning Henry Crawford. Portsmouth and London must be rejected; peace can only be found at rural Mansfield, which promises a life "of affectionate service, together with an inner life of meditation".

Yet Butler's interpretation, like many in the 1970s and earlier, seems a curiously restricting one. Butler pronounces Fanny a "failure" in a novel which is in essence "a skilful dramatisation of the conservative cause" and makes this bracing claim:

The theme of *Mansfield Park* is the contrast of man-centred or selfish habits of mind, with a temper that is sceptical of self and that refers beyond self to objective values. Since Fanny is the representative of this orthodoxy, the individuality of her consciousness must to a large extent be denied.

But is this really true? Is Fanny's individual consciousness denied? Modern critics of *Mansfield Park* see Jane Austen as engaged in an altogether more subtle and subversive task than Butler, Tanner or Trilling allows. The clever feminist critic Claudia Johnson, for example, argues that the novel "erodes rather than upholds" conservative values and that Fanny Price, for all her happiness at the end, is the unconscious victim – as well as saviour – of the social world into which she is drawn. *Mansfield Park* may corroborate Fanny's severity with Mary Crawford, but "it also explodes her confidence in the dispositions of patriarchal figures". The ending of the novel Johnson sees as ironic, with Austen hurrying her characters into tidy destinies which are hard to credit.

Johnson also contends, more controversially, that "the family fortunes [Sir Thomas] rescues depend on slave labor in the West Indies". It's a claim frequently made by modern critics, most influentially by the Palestinian-American Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1973). 'Follow the money,' Said instructed. Where does the wealth which keeps up the magnificence of *Mansfield Park* come from? Most of it, he asserts, from black slaves, working 3,000 miles away, in

the sugar plantations of the Caribbean, in conditions of inhuman exploitation.

According to Said: “The Bertrams could not have been possible without the slave trade, sugar, and the colonial planter class.” Their revenues “could only” have been drawn from sugar plantations. Moreover, he asserts, this imperialistic inward flow of capital applies not merely to one family of landed gentry, but to the enrichment of all Britain’s genteel classes – even a clergyman’s family, resident, in rural Hampshire. “Yes,” Said concludes,” Jane Austen belonged to a slave-owning society.” Just as Georg Lukacs instructed that we should insert the “invisible serf” into every scene in Tolstoy, so should the reader sketch in a shackled slave, groaning under the overseer’s whip, behind Emma’s father, Mr Woodhouse, at Hatfield, as he sups his evening gruel. As for Fanny: she, in effect, is “a transported commodity” who replicates the slave, while Sir Thomas’s efficient management of his estate on returning from Antigua echoes the authoritarian behaviour of the slave-master.

Said’s claims need to be treated with caution. Brian Southam, while accepting the presence of a colonial subplot in *Mansfield Park,* says this aspect of the novel needs very careful analysis. Indicting a

FREE INDIRECT SPEECH

Austen is rightly famous for her use of free indirect speech (FIS), the presentation of her characters’ thoughts, feelings and unquoted speech in a way which reflects the way they think, feel and speak.

For much of *Mansfield Park* the narrative viewpoint, though mostly Fanny’s, is promiscuous (though it becomes more narrowly focused on Fanny in Part Three). We are shown the thoughts, feelings, self-deceptions and evasions of Edmund, Mary and other major characters.
In the last chapter, the narrator’s mask appears to drop completely: “Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quite such odious subjects as soon as I can...” Before this, the narrator sometimes intervenes, as when describing Mrs Price’s loss of Fanny. “Poor woman! She probably thought change of air might agree with many of her children.” With this exclamation of sympathy, notes Roy Pascal in his justly praised analysis of free indirect speech, The Dual Voice, the narrator acquires something of a personality and at the same time, by using the qualifying “probably”, renounces the narratorial right of omniscience.
But frequently our judgments are guided by Austen’s brilliant use of FIS. In the first chapter, for example, the narrator makes clear how selfish and hypocritical Mrs Norris and how indolent and hesitant Sir Thomas. As they discuss adopting Fanny, free indirect speech (FIS) is used to show how they take refuge in evasions:

Sir Thomas could not give so instantaneous and unqualified a consent. He debated and hesitated; – it was a serious charge; – a girl so brought up must be adequately provide for, otherwise there would be cruelty instead of kindness in taking her from her family.

The evasions are given in FIS,