

Convinced and Converted

Constancy and the Ethics of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*

By Joyce Kerr Tarpley.

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Review by Nora Nachumi.

In the contentious world of Austen studies, arguments that her novels enact an agenda can be a hard sell to those who regard them as preternaturally postmodern. Meanwhile, a book that focuses exclusively on *Mansfield Park* will have difficulty attracting readers who—try as they might—can but regret that Fanny Price is, well, Fanny Price. *Constancy and the Ethics of Mansfield Park* dismantles these hurdles. Not only does it make a strong case for Austen's advocacy of a particular ethical system, but it also clarifies why Fanny needs to be Fanny (and not a Dashwood sister, Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, or Anne Elliot). In Fanny, Joyce Tarpley argues, Austen represents “the growth and development of a Christian mind,” one that develops by contending with secular minds like Mary Crawford's.” Cogent and thoughtful, Tarpley's analysis will inspire some readers (this one included) to reevaluate their opinions of Austen's least popular novel.

Austen's ethical system depends upon constancy, Tarpley contends; this is the “cardinal virtue grounding the essentially Christian ethics that Fanny Price practices.” Those ethics stem from Austen's “wider conception” of religion, a synthesis of “classical and Christian ethical voices” which are, in turn, stabilized by Christian presuppositions, truths taken for granted. Constancy “regulates and unifies the virtues and fosters integrity in . . . the practice of virtue.” It guides Fanny to “adjust her perceptions and her choices to an eternal design. . . . to choose specifically

Christian goods: duty and respect for parents; faithfulness and monogamy in marriage; loyalty and charity with siblings, humility, gratitude, service, and self-denial as guiding principles for daily living.”

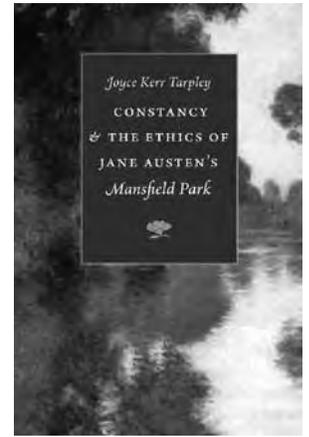
Initially, Tarpley examines the nature and practice of constancy. Fanny develops it through encounters with its opposite; faced with “inconsistency regarding law, or the rules for conduct that govern the way young people think, choose, and act at Mansfield Park,” Fanny learns to rely on the constancy of eternal law, ranking it above those that are natural, divine, or human). Consequently, Fanny can question *human* authority. Moreover, her willingness to subordinate her own will to God's frees her to “fulfill the design of her God-given nature.” Thus, she is freer than Tom, the Bertram sisters, or the Crawfords, all of whom mistake license for freedom. Differences like these call attention to Austen's philosophy of education, “in which the most important good is the development of constancy and the most important end is the proper use of liberty.” Fanny's education depends upon an awareness of her own and others' imperfection, on continuing examination and reflection and on episodes of suffering through which she develops an appropriate (rather than excessive) sense of humility. Along the way her consciousness serves as a place where both she (and the reader) work to discern truth. Tantamount to self-knowledge, truth allows Fanny to “pursue an understanding of [her] relationship to God, to others, and to the larger community” and to form healthy relationships based on genuine and reciprocal affection.

In the second half of the book, Tarpley considers the ability of the heart and the mind to discern beauty and truth; in doing so, she offers cogent reasons for Mary's allure and Fanny's comparative lack of charisma. Drawing on Dante's distinction between the primal will and the free, Tarpley illustrates how the novel renders characters' perceptions of beauty

unreliable. Although they first think Henry Crawford plain, Maria and Julia quickly idealize him; Edmund falls victim to Mary's beauty despite the

fact that he sees the “defective aspects of [her] mind.” Constancy, in contrast, provides Fanny with a basis for distinguishing false from true beauty. She “thereby learns to love rightly, knowing what good and beautiful objects to seek and where to seek them.” This process, however, depends upon questioning and evaluating her experiences, thoughts, and emotions in terms of a truth that is “supernaturally grounded, objective, authoritative,” and constant. The novel invites readers to do something similar, Tarpley argues, by sorting through the conversations that make up *Mansfield Park*.

Thus, educated, savvy readers are invited to rethink the conclusion of *Mansfield Park*. As a couple, Tarpley argues, Edmund and Fanny are *supposed to be* less passionate than, say, Darcy and Elizabeth (or the unions which would have existed had the Crawfords prevailed). Their love is primarily *spiritual*, for the novel's end looks “to a higher than earthly reward.” Tarpley's reading renders the ending of *Mansfield Park* the most glorious (if still the least glamorous) of those in Austen's oeuvre. It is an ending that cannot be achieved by an Elizabeth Bennet or even an Anne Elliot; it can only be achieved by Austen's “most Christian heroine,” Fanny Price.



*Fanny knew her
own meaning.*

Mansfield Park

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