



Some Names in *Mansfield Park*: A Critique of Margaret Anne Doody's *Jane Austen's Names: Riddles, Persons, Places*

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MARGARET ANNE DOODY'S *Jane Austen's Names: Riddles, Persons, Places* (2015) has been widely received as a major contribution to Austen scholarship, full of original research and stimulating suggestions. In this critical response, however, I focus only on her treatment of some key names in *Mansfield Park*, still perhaps the most controversial of Austen's novels. I first consider her handling of its title and then turn to her treatment of the names of Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram, offering my arguments as evidence of a problem in Professor Doody's critical method and assumptions.¹

Margaret Anne Doody refers to Lord Mansfield's famous judgment in 1772 that James Somersett, a slave claimed as his property by one Charles Stewart, an American who had brought him across to England, could not be kept in slavery, since neither the common law of England, nor any law passed by Parliament recognized the existence of slavery. Somersett was therefore a free man. Doody writes in a section called "The Weight of 'Mansfield'" that "[t]he irony of the name of 'Mansfield' being attached to a place whose owner is connected with slavery appears too pointed to be accidental" (336). The implication is that Sir Thomas Bertram is obviously an owner of slaves in Antigua (though this is still a matter of debate), but what Jane Austen might have intended by this "irony" is unclear. "This connection, emphasized by Margaret Kirkham in 1983, is denied by John Wiltshire, in favor of connotations of 'general Englishness,'" Doody continues. Whatever "general Englishness" might

mean, it is not what I wrote in the introduction to my edition of the novel for the Cambridge series, which was that the name of “Mansfield” was likely “chosen for its generic Englishness” (xlvi), and I seek firstly to substantiate this claim.

The many critics who are determined to link *Mansfield Park* strongly with Lord Mansfield and hence to slavery miss the key point that Mansfield was not originally called Mansfield. He was born the younger son of the 5th Viscount Stormont, who had been imprisoned for his part in the Jacobite rising of 1715. His given name was William Murray. Murray’s career in England suggests a deliberate effort to put his Scottish and Jacobite inheritance behind him. He became Solicitor General in 1742, and in 1754 he purchased Kenwood House (built in 1617), appointing Robert Adam as his architect to remodel and extend it. Murray thus set himself up in an imposing residence, within easy reach of the city of London, designed in the “modern” style of the most fashionable contemporary architect (Bryant 1).

Two years later Murray was appointed Lord Chief Justice and raised to the peerage. He took the title of Baron Mansfield. Shedding clues to one’s Scottish ancestry because it might impede a man’s career was not uncommon in this period. John Murray, Jane Austen’s publisher, lost the telltale “Mac” before his name when setting up his business in 1768; Charles Burney, the ambitious son of James MacBurney, did the same. Everything suggests that Murray too chose the name of “Mansfield” because of its Englishness, its unmistakable Englishness (Colley). As Park Honan pointed out in his biography (1997), “In the name Mansfield and its associations . . . one might see traditional strengths of the nation’s old Tory families—evidence of high and selfless achievement” (334). These associations no doubt contributed to the name’s attraction for Murray.

There is a Mansfield-house in Richardson’s *Sir Charles Grandison*; as Doody notes, there is a town called Mansfield in Nottinghamshire (she does not mention that Mansfield Woodhouse is nearby); a French novel by Sophie Cottin with a heroine called *Amélie Mansfield* was published in 1802 and was soon available in London. The generic Englishness of the name Mansfield is thus not hard to prove, but an important, and perhaps key, bearer of that name has not yet been recognized—an association that takes us to the famous battle of Trafalgar on October 21, 1805. This confrontation by the outnumbered British fleet under Lord Nelson with the French and Spanish fleets was so important because, had it been lost, the enemy would have gained control of

as of professional credit" (154–55). In other words, a British success would bring not only great honor and renown to the men involved but also prize money, which in the case of the capture of French vessels would certainly have been welcome to the engaged couple.

There was another Captain, apparently unknown to Frank Austen, or to Jane Austen's readers, who was at the battle of Trafalgar and who was awarded these prizes, though his name is hardly ever found on maps of the battle that are current: Captain Charles Mansfield (1760–1813), considerably older, more distinguished, and more experienced than Frank Austen. Mansfield had assumed command of the *Minotaur*, a vessel of seventy-four guns, in May 1803. Not long after Britain resumed war with France, a year later, he captured six enemy vessels. Nelson's plan was to attack the French and Spanish fleet lined up along the coast by forming his ships in two rows: the "Weather" column, commanded by himself, and the "Lee," further south, under Admiral Collingwood. There were twenty-seven British ships (excluding frigates) facing over thirty in the combined French and Spanish fleets.² The *Minotaur* and the *Spartiate* behind her, apparently slow vessels, were the last two ships in Nelson's line. Though coming late to the battle, these two ships nevertheless performed a pivotal role: disregarding the danger, they put themselves between the four French ships that were threatening the now badly damaged *Victory*. They then turned northward to engage and head off each of these ships as they sailed by, and then captured a Spanish vessel, the *Neptuno*, which surrendered to the *Minotaur* at dusk on that fateful day (Beales and Carter, "Battle of Trafalgar").

The late arrival of the *Minotaur* to the engagement would explain why that vessel does not appear on some maps that depict the lines of ships as they grouped *before* the actual battle. This omission is presumably why Mansfield's name has not been noticed till now. But for his contemporaries Charles Mansfield was a hero: among much else, he had bravely stepped in to save Nelson in his half-wrecked vessel. Mansfield's career had been followed in *The Times*,³ and after the battle he was awarded the Naval Gold Medal (Captain's) for the Battle of Trafalgar, "suspended from a loop and gold bar by a blue edged white ribbon with a gold buckle" (Naval Gold Medal). The Lloyds Patriotic Fund presented him with a Trafalgar pattern £100 presentation sword, richly decorated and very valuable (Beales and Carter, "Captain C. J. M. Mansfield"). Both are now held at the National Maritime Museum, London.

There is no mention of Captain Mansfield in Jane Austen's extant letters. Nor is Mansfield mentioned in *Jane Austen's Sailor Brothers*, nor indexed in Brian Southam's *Jane Austen and the Navy*. But surely it is most probable

that a woman with two brothers in the royal navy, whose careers she followed with eager and anxious attention, who saluted the navy as “that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance” (*Persuasion* 275), would be aware of the many newspaper reports of this momentous and absolutely critical naval battle and its sequels. In *Persuasion* Anne Elliot intervenes to correct her father’s disparagement of the navy with the information that Admiral Croft is “rear admiral of the white. He was in the Trafalgar action, and has been in the East Indies since; he has been stationed there, I believe, several years” (24). This interjection subtly signals that Anne has closely followed various men’s naval careers, not just Wentworth’s. Jane Austen’s own interest in a widely praised and heroic naval captain would far exceed her interest in a man who had ruled slavery illegal on English soil half a century before.

If Charles Mansfield’s surname were in Jane Austen’s mind, it might tend to function as an honorific, in complete contrast to the irony supposedly lying in the reference to Lord Mansfield. But this is not the whole point. I do not suggest that Jane Austen necessarily had this Mansfield in mind. My argument is that “Mansfield” is a name of generic Englishness, that it is so widely found as to make singling out a reference to Lord Mansfield both untenable and only understandably popular because of its capacity to be exploited in readings of *Mansfield Park* that bestow upon the novel a twentieth-century political correctness. It is true, though, that Jane Austen would have known about and may have revered Lord Mansfield, whose house in London was attacked during the Gordon riots of 1780 alluded to in *Northanger Abbey* (the mob knowing that his Scottish background meant Catholic connections). She may also have read the two poems by William Cowper, a favorite poet, “On the Burning of Lord Mansfield’s Library,” published in 1782.

Professor Doody’s readings of *Mansfield Park*, I submit, contain, among other illuminating attributions, more implausible ones—for example, her suggestion that Fanny Price’s “diminutive is strangely highly sexed, yet childish” and that her nickname is “cute and sexually suggestive,” recalling “the primary female body part” (140). This twenty-first century American reading ignores what that name would have meant to Austen’s readers. “Fanny” was then, and remained well into the nineteenth century, very popular, as a few examples might show: Fanny Blood, Mary Wollstonecraft’s friend; John Keats’s sister, Fanny, as well as Fanny Brawne, his beloved; not to speak of Fanny Nelson, Nelson’s poor abandoned wife. Jane Austen’s favorite niece was always called

Fanny. The name was a favorite because, in the words of Jane Austen's contemporary Mary Russell Mitford, "There is something so familiar, so homelike, so affectionate in the sound,—it seems to tell a story of family love, to vouch for the amiableness of both parties" (4: 70). (A similar remark was made by Hester Thrale about the "sweetness" of the name "Fanny" Burney.) When Jane Austen in the last chapter of her novel writes of her heroine as "My Fanny" (533), she is expressing her uniquely protective authorial feeling for her character and echoing the touching moment when this young woman, unused to overtures of affection, lingers over the greeting in her cousin's letter: "My very dear Fanny" (307–08).

I will turn now to Margaret Anne Doody's treatment of Edmund Bertram. She has not a good word to say about him; in fact, this is a fictional character she can't stand. She notes Mary Crawford's dislike of references to "Mr. *Edmund* Bertram," which Mary declares is "so formal, so pitiful, so younger-brother like" (in other words, so lacking in prestige). Fanny replies that for her "there is nobleness in the name of Edmund. It is a name of heroism and renown—of kings, princes, and knights; and seems to breathe the spirit of chivalry and warm affections" (246). Doody, though, finds Edmund "an ambiguous name," and the Edmund she gives most space to, and finds most similarity with Edmund Bertram, is King Edmund, a martyr and saint, who in the early tenth century was reputedly tied to a tree and shot at repeatedly by Danish arrows until he perished of his wounds.

Doody includes an illustration of this ghastly event (146). But if we go back that far, Fanny's words possibly refer to Edmund I (AD 921–46), "King of the English," also known as the Doer, the Just, and the Magnificent; or, more likely, to "Edmund Ironside," so called because of his staunch *resistance* to the Danes, and briefly King of England in 1016. Fanny's invocation of "knights," "chivalry," and "warm affections" obviously enough, however, could allude to a constellation of figures, which might include, for instance, Sir Edmund Verney (1590–1642), whose loyalty to his king at the battle of Edgehill was often recalled among conservatives, or Edmund Spenser, or Edmund Burke, who wrote famously of family love as the foundation of a civil society and as famously celebrated chivalry.

Professor Doody makes the connection between Edmund Bertram in the novel and the martyr shot at by arrows by reading Edmund as repeatedly defeated by other characters, "the butt of jokes and sneers" (147). This is a strange account, for instance, of the argument that Edmund has with Mary

Crawford in the chapel at Sotherton. There, in chapter 9 of the first volume, Mary gives a risqué sketch of young women forced to attend chapel “starched up into seeming piety, but with heads full of something very different—especially if the poor chaplain were not worth looking at.” Edmund is at first silent but recovers himself and challenges her, in part by demanding, “Do you think the minds which are suffered, which are indulged in wanderings in a chapel, would be more collected in a closet?” (102). His replies to Mary are thoughtful, forceful, and cogent, though he shifts later, as anyone who wants to head off a quarrel might do, into a more conciliatory tone. Edmund has no hesitation either when he finds his mother and aunt have treated Fanny as a servant in sending her to cut roses, “standing and stooping in a hot sun” and across the estate to Mrs. Norris’s house: “And could nobody be employed on such an errand but Fanny?—Upon my word, ma’am, it has been a very ill-managed business,” he cries angrily (85). It is true that here, as elsewhere, he blames himself, but Doody, here as elsewhere, has a troubling tendency to equate conscientiousness with weakness.

Nor, in my reading, does Edmund cave in over the play when he agrees to act. He is doing what he can to mitigate its folly. “Edmund the bullied is never happy with a moral position. He just gets shot at again” (147), Doody writes, thus aligning herself here unequivocally with Maria and Tom Bertram, who congratulate each other

on the jealous weakness to which they attributed the change, with all the glee of feelings gratified in every way. Edmund might still look grave, and say he did not like the scheme in general, and must disapprove the play in particular; their point was gained; he was to act. (185)

They gleefully think that “Edmund had descended from that moral elevation which he had maintained before,” but it is their spite and irresponsibility that Jane Austen intimates in the scathing paragraph that captures what they think is their “triumphant day”: “There was no longer any thing to disturb them in their darling project, and they congratulated each other in private on the jealous weakness to which they attributed the change” (185).

“Edmund’s letters and conversations reveal him as self-centered, anxious, and indecisive,” Doody writes when she returns to the charge against the figure towards the end of her book (340). How do we square this evaluation with Jane Austen’s own remark as reported by her friend Ann Barrett: “To a question ‘which of your characters do you like best?’ she once answered

‘Edmund Bertram and Mr Knightley; but they are very far from being what I know English gentlemen often are’” (Le Faye 233)? There is some evidence for Doody’s contempt, if we totally disregard the anguish in Edmund’s letter to Fanny about Mary and her vicious London connections (487–91). This dramatic letter displays a young man very much in love, who is tortured by the fear that circumstances are cheating him out of happiness, spilling out his conflicts to the only person whom he thinks will share his feelings. Covering five pages, its style comes close to suggesting a stream-of-consciousness mode and is surely one of Jane Austen’s great passages of writing. Of course, Edmund is quite blind to Fanny’s passion for him, and that blindness can make, and is intended to make, a reader share her own anguish, but the letter, giving him so much power and space, testifies that Edmund is far from the weakling and disgrace to his profession that Doody contrives to find.

When he goes to a place called “Lessingby” to be ordained at the same time as a friend, Doody is able to construe this name as a hint by Austen that Edmund is “lessened” by taking orders and is coerced to do so by his father (340). Most egregious, even eerie, is her lifting out of Edmund’s defense of his vocation when Mary Crawford attacks it, of the “comic and painful ‘line’” of Edmund’s suggestion that the clergyman might act as a model for his parishioners (341). There is no such “line.” There is nothing either comic or painful in his forceful justification of a parish clergyman’s role in Regency society against Mary’s derisive remarks (107–09). In fact, Jane Austen shows it to *be* his vocation by the strongly argued, thorough, and committed thoughtfulness of his defense of his profession. Doody even adds, “Edmund’s advice will be feeble and self-conscious. I would pay money to keep him away from my deathbed” (341).

This book, though so well-researched in many respects, seems in these instances to exemplify what the philosopher Paul Ricoeur called “the hermeneutics of suspicion” (27), or rather a subset of that critical mode. In the hermeneutics of suspicion, the reader claims possession of the text, or rather a knowledge of the text of which the author is unaware. Merging with a form of new historicism, it allows a critic to construe, as I have here suggested that Doody does, readings that pass over the text’s meaning for its contemporaries, subjecting it to interpretations emanating from a wholly distinct cultural world to that in which it was written and to which it was addressed. We might (and we do) entertain many ideas about Jane Austen and her novels, but it seems to me that we must always retain our trust in the author.

NOTES

1. This paper is a much-revised version of my “The Importance of Being Edmund: On Names in *Mansfield Park*” in *New Windows on a Woman’s World: Essays for Jocelyn Harris*, edited by Colin Gibson and Lisa Marr, *Otago Studies in English* 9 (2005), 1: 138–47.
2. The *Africa*, which looks as if it might belong to the French or Spanish fleet on the map, was a British vessel, though what it was doing out of the line is unclear.
3. On 6 January 1800 (Beales and Carter, “Captain C. J. M. Mansfield”); and on 12 March 1801: “Advice was received of a capture of a Swedish frigate by the *Dryad*, Capt. Mansfield; after a short but gallant action” (Beales and Carter, “*Dryad*”).

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