



Mansfield Park and the Question of Irony

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IT IS A TRUTH universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." So goes the famous opening line of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, a story rife with the ironies of social life. Not only does this statement set the tone of the novel, but, as Dorothy Van Ghent observes, it also defines Austen's fictive vision: "This is the first sentence of the book. What we read in it is its opposite—a single woman must be in want of a man with a good fortune—and at once we are inducted into the Austen language, the ironical Austen attack, and the energy, peculiar to an Austen novel, that arises from the compression between a barbaric subsurface marital warfare and a surface of polite manners and civilized conventions" (305). That surface tension between the "barbaric" and the "polite" is disrupted by the complacent but insistent word "must," a small word that conveys both the demands of a ruthless social order and those of romantic desire. A man *must* want a wife or the whole social and romantic mechanism of courtship and marriage falters. In the discussion that follows, I will use an analysis of this small word "must" to suggest that *Mansfield Park*, a novel generally thought to be impervious to what Van Ghent terms the "ironical Austen attack," is actually Austen's most deeply ironic narrative, one that implicitly questions its heroine's virtue, and in doing so questions its reader's expectations of virtue.

Lionel Trilling asserts that *Mansfield Park* is the one Austen novel “in which the characteristic irony seems not to be at work”: “Indeed, one might say of this novel that it undertakes to discredit irony and to affirm literalness, that it demonstrates that there are no two ways about anything” (208). Marvin Mudrick agrees, writing, “Nowhere else does Jane Austen take such pains to make up the mind of her reader” (155). In effect, readers of the novel must forsake an ironic mode and follow Fanny’s lead, taking her, and her perceptions of the world, with complete and unquestioning seriousness. As evidence for this kind of reading, some critics point to Austen’s remark, in a letter to her sister Cassandra, that “the work is rather too light & bright & sparkling;—it wants shade” (4 February 1813) and her promise, in another letter, of “a complete change of subject—Ordination” (29 January 1813). Although most agree that Austen is probably not referring here to *Mansfield Park*, which was well under way when *Pride and Prejudice* was published, they do argue that she has written “something else” in the novel, something completely serious rather than ironic.

Other critics point to the explicitly didactic nature of Fanny’s character. Richard Colby traces a kinship between Fanny and the heroines in the didactic novels of More, Opie, and Brunton, asserting that “[c]ertainly the characters of *Mansfield Park* would not feel out of place in the atmosphere of *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*” (83). He further argues that “Miss Austen’s way with the Christian-didactic novel . . . is not to be compared with her flippant treatment of Gothicism and sentimentality, for her attitude toward her immediate contemporaries is fundamentally different. . . . The novelist of *Mansfield Park*, therefore, is no longer the mocker but the improver” (94). In other words, Austen wants us to view Fanny as a model Christian heroine—humble, submissive, longsuffering, selfless. And in many ways she does seem to lead us to this conclusion by setting her in opposition to her all-too visibly flawed, spiritually void fellow female characters: the insipid Lady Bertram, the mean spirited Mrs. Norris, the selfishly erring Bertram sisters, and the unprincipled Mary Crawford. By comparison, stalwart little Fanny cannot but appear to a moral paragon.

And yet, as Trilling recognizes, no reader “has ever found it possible to like the heroine of *Mansfield Park*. Fanny Price is overtly virtuous and consciously virtuous” (212). We sympathize with her trials, perhaps; respect her fortitude, perhaps; and feel satisfaction when she finally gains the object of her self-effacing desire. Perhaps. But we do not like her. What is it about her that irritates, dissatisfies, and troubles so many readers of

the novel? Is it that she is too good—“overtly virtuous and consciously virtuous”—or too good to be true? In her description of Fanny as a Christian heroine, Marilyn Butler suggests that beyond her other admirable qualities Fanny’s greatest virtue is her “self-knowledge”: “Fanny’s sense as a Christian of her own frailty, her liability to error, and her need of guidance outside herself, is the opposite of the Bertram girls’ complacent self-sufficiency. For Jane Austen ‘vanity,’ the characteristic of the fashionable, is a quality with a distinctly theological colouring. . . . Such an error arises from an inability to place oneself in a larger moral universe, a context in which the self, and the self’s short-term gratifications, become insignificant” (222). While I do not disagree with Butler’s overall description, I question Fanny’s “impulse towards self-knowledge.” To what degree, and in what ways, does Fanny understand herself? Further, does this self-knowledge lead her to a fuller understanding of her place and participation in the world? I would argue that Austen points to the answers with her generally overlooked use of irony in *Mansfield Park*, particularly in her representation of Fanny’s judgments. Time and again, the word “must” disrupts the smooth, implacable surface of Fanny’s character, urging us, in Van Ghent’s words to “read in it its opposite” (305). If we look at Fanny’s persistent attempts to obscure what she knows to be true with what she wishes to be true, we see not self-knowledge but self-deception.

Early in the novel, Mary Crawford quizzes Edmund Bertram about whether Fanny is “out” or not, whether she is a full participant in the social world or merely an observer. Her conclusion that “‘Miss Price is *not* out’” (51) defines Fanny’s role as pupil in Volume I—she watches, listens, and presumably learns to judge. But we find that her judgments are perhaps not as clear-sighted as we might expect from a model heroine. For example, one evening at Mansfield, Mary, Edmund, and Fanny discuss Edmund’s taking orders. Mary, highly resistant to the notion that Edmund is to enter the clergy, wonders why anyone would *choose* such a profession. She decides that “[i]ndolence and love of ease—a want of all laudable ambition” (110) must be the motivation. While Edmund avers that some men, Dr. Grant for instance, probably do suffer from a “‘very faulty habit of self-indulgence’” (111), Fanny observes that Dr. Grant’s profession is likely the best one for him because, unlike “‘a more active and worldly profession,’” it forces him into self-reflection: “‘It *must* make him think, and I have no doubt that he oftener endeavours to restrain himself than he would

if he had been any thing but a clergyman” (112). Fanny’s insistence reveals her moral optimism and her strong desire for moral and spiritual coherence. But it also exposes her refusal to confront the reality before her. She cannot accept the notion that a worldly man could, and does, function as a spiritual leader within the community.

Fanny’s next comments, as she and Edmund stand at the window admiring nature “where all that was solemn and soothing, and lovely, appeared in the brilliancy of an unclouded night” (113), reveal the same kind of self-deluding desire:

“Here’s harmony!” said she, “Here’s repose! . . . Here’s what may tranquillize every care, and lift the heart to rapture! When I look out on such a night as this, I feel as if there could be neither wickedness nor sorrow in the world; and there certainly would be less of both if the sublimity of Nature were more attended to, and people were carried more out of themselves by contemplating such a scene.” (113)

While Fanny’s statements seem faultless in their appreciation of the natural scene and their call for selflessness, she is turned away from the social bustle behind her. She sees harmony and repose only because she refuses to look at the human scene within the room. Her contemplation here amounts to self-indulgence, even as she declares that she is carried out of herself. She yields to a selfish belief that “there could be neither wickedness nor sorrow in the world” even while she “knows” that it exists, and she allows herself to be “tranquillized” by her own emotional response to the situation. Ironically, even as Edmund assents to this view and promises to stay with her at the window, he is drawn back into the room by his desire for Mary Crawford.

After her apprenticeship as observer, Fanny becomes, in Butler’s words, an “active heroine” (236), one who grows into maturity. At first “[Fanny’s] silences are the appropriate social demeanour of the Christian heroine, who is humble and unassertive. But in her half of the book, the second half, they also imply the strength of someone who neither needs to seek advice nor to vindicate herself, because she has a source of strength both within and without” (240). I would suggest, however, that what we see in Fanny’s half of the book is social practice built on the foundation of moral self-deception laid down in Volume I. Over and over, Fanny demonstrates just how little she knows of human character, her own included.

When Mary, from whom Fanny has received overtures of friendships,

gives her a necklace that had been a gift from Henry, Fanny wants to refuse the necklace—"Fanny, in great astonishment and confusion, would have returned the present instantly. To take what had been the gift of another person—of a brother too—impossible!—it must not be!" (259)—but her previous silences have pushed her toward continued assent. She bows to Mary's will and Edmund's approbation, and agrees to wear the necklace. When Edmund himself gives her a chain for her cross, Fanny happily decides that she can wear them both: "'They must and shall be worn together'" (262). Where Fanny perceives harmony, her insistent "must" points toward its opposite. She must be able to wear the two necklaces, to hide one desire while pretending another, or the whole romantic framework of her sense of self falls apart. So, she joins the chain to the cross, wearing it atop the necklace, and she is "comfortably satisfied" with the effect (271).

She is wrong, of course, in her complacent trust in her ability to determine not only her own standards of right and wrong but the standards of others as well. Overlooking her uncle's sanction of Maria's loveless marriage, Fanny incorrectly anticipates Sir Thomas' views on both Henry Crawford and matrimony: "She had hoped that to a man like her uncle, so discerning, so honourable, so good, the simple acknowledgment of settled *dislike* on her side, would have been sufficient. To her infinite grief she found it was not" (318). She expects his support because she needs to believe that her values are his values, but he only berates her for willfulness and ingratitude. Even Edmund, who has shaped Fanny into the woman she is, sides with his father, seeking a marriage that will improve his own chances with Mary.

Fanny also misperceives Henry during his visits to Portsmouth. At first she is deeply but hopefully embarrassed by her family, thinking, "He must be ashamed and disgusted altogether. He must soon give her up, and cease to have the smallest inclination for the match" (402). But even while she thinks this, she wants to be wrong, for she believes him to be a changed man and is flattered by his attentions:

The wonderful improvement which she still fancied in Mr. Crawford, was the nearest to administering comfort of anything with the current of her thoughts. Not considering in how different a circle she had been just seeing him, nor how much might be owing to contrast, she was quite persuaded of his being astonishingly more gentle, and regardful of others, than

formerly. And if in little things, must it not be so in great?

(413-14)

In these ruminations, we hear again Fanny's desire to substitute polite behavior for principle and her belief that she can shape her world through her "musts."

We know, of course, that this fantasy of rightness created by Sir Thomas, Edmund, and Fanny collapses under the weight of real desire. When Fanny learns that Henry has absconded with Maria, she thinks not of her own part in the situation, nor of the frailty of human character, but only of Maria's unforgivable sin, the burden of which must be unbearable to all those connected with her:

Sir Thomas's parental solicitude, and high sense of honour and decorum, Edmund's upright principles, unsuspecting temper, and genuine strength of feeling, made her think it scarcely possible for them to support life and reason under such disgrace; and it appeared to her, that as far as this world alone was concerned, the greatest blessing to every one of kindred with Mrs. Rushworth would be instant annihilation. (442)

The ironies in this observation abound. Sir Thomas was quite willing to sacrifice "parental solicitude" to expediency in allowing Maria to marry Mr. Rushworth, and Edmund was happy to sacrifice his "upright principles" to his selfish desire for Mary Crawford. And Fanny plainly expects to escape the annihilation that she calls for, as it is clear she is not "kindred with Mrs. Rushworth" (442). She has no fellow feeling for Maria and, despite her own attraction to Henry, does not believe herself implicated by the same human nature that motivates Maria.

While Fanny's wish for "instant annihilation" is not granted, the novel does, in a sense, turn in on itself. The wicked are banished and the good are brought home to nurse their wounds. The narrator follows Fanny's lead and turns her back on the wickedness of the world, saying, "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest" (461). And so we are provided with what appears to be a typical Austen happy ending in which misunderstandings are cleared up, lovers united, and families brought into proper balance.

For many readers, though, the novel's conclusion has proven as unsatisfying as its heroine. Butler asserts that ultimately *Mansfield Park* fails

because Fanny is a character too good to be true: Austen sacrifices realism, and the sympathetic involvement of the reader, to didacticism, undermining the power of her novel through her desire to create an exemplary “Christian” heroine. I would argue, though, that the novel fails because Fanny is not really a Christian heroine. She *is* too good to be true—not because her goodness is unattainable, but because it is specious. She has the appearance of virtue but not the substance. Self-knowledge does not result in self-satisfaction—not in Christian theology, or in Austen’s other novels. Mortification, such as that which Fanny ought to have experienced for her misjudgments of Sir Thomas, Edmund, and the Crawfords, should have produced within her the desire for improvement tempered by a recognition of the essentially flawed nature of human character. Instead, Fanny returns to Mansfield to “restore” its inhabitants with her “goodness” without ever really confronting her own crucial errors in judgment, because the air is so filled with the errors of others. She believes herself untouched by guilt and is interested only in feeling “justified” in her own actions (452). She even takes pleasure from the knowledge that she has gained from the rest of the family’s misery by becoming more necessary to them.

Trilling would have us read the ending of *Mansfield Park* without a lens of irony. Fanny is finally and deservedly ensconced at the heart of the “perfect” estate—sure of its moral foundation, comfortable in its somber domesticity, and protected from the rest of the world. He writes, “It shuts out the world and the judgment of the world. The sanctions upon which it relies are not those of culture, of quality of being, or personality, but precisely those which the new conception of the moral life minimizes, the sanctions of principle, and it discovers in principle the path to the wholeness of the self which is peace. When we have exhausted our anger at the offense which *Mansfield Park* offers to our conscious pieties, we find it possible to perceive how intimately it speaks to our secret inexpressible hopes” (230). But I would counter that Austen wants us to see the novel otherwise and to wonder about the “secret inexpressible hopes” that would set us on Fanny’s path of self-deception. I would direct our attention once again to Austen’s use of irony, to those insistent “musts” that punctuate her narrative and train our ears to hear the “opposites” that lie within them. The narrator begins the final chapter, “My Fanny indeed at this very time, I have the satisfaction of knowing, must have been happy in spite of every thing. She must have been a happy creature in spite of all that she felt or thought she felt, for the distress of those around her” (461). We

learn as well that Edmund's "happiness in knowing himself to have been so long the beloved of such a heart, must have been great enough to warrant any strength of language in which he could cloathe it to her or to himself; it must have been a delightful happiness!" (471). "With so much true merit and true love, and no want of fortune or friends, the happiness of the married cousins must appear as secure as earthly happiness can be" (473). Austen's language pushes us to ask the question, do Fanny and Mansfield Park represent the ideal because they *are* the ideal, or because we believe they ought to be?

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