



Jane Austen and the Reconsigned Child: The True Identity of Fanny Price

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JANE AUSTEN IS THE ARTIST of the settled village and meticulously delineated family relations, but in this paper, I consider some of the ways that her novels represent and work through the ancient literary theme of child-stealing, an area of concern that seems the antithesis of these things. The association of Jane Austen and the representation of the stolen child is no mere act of scholarly eccentricity on my part. Child-stealing is an extremely common phenomenon, but seldom named as the ugly thing it is; instead, it is often disguised as something unavoidable and benign, if not absolutely virtuous. As a phenomenon, it presents in many ways: as illegal, semi-legal or forced adoption, as patronage, as education, as “resettlement,” as child protection, and so on (Torney 1993). For the young subject of these common practices, working through the mysteries of his or her familial origins is a central task of growing up. The representation of this task is central to much major literature since *Oedipus Rex*, and especially to the nineteenth-century novel: *Wuthering Heights*, *Oliver Twist*, and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, to make an almost random selection of canonical works, deal explicitly with the effects of moving children around and obscuring their family origins. Austen’s development of the possibilities of the representation of consciousness (Copeland and McMaster) helped to make possible the focus on the young person’s struggle to understand the

meaning of family background, and there are a surprising number of examples of it in Austen's later work, where she considers problems of consolidating psychic identity when the place and the people one has to individuate from are not completely clear.

Child-stealing is a phenomenon which occurs throughout history, and thus answers a powerful psychological need in adults. The idea of the Reconizable Child seems to be a sort of a sinister counterpart to the fantasy of the Family Romance (Freud),¹ a conviction that just as the child fantasized that one could take parents from anywhere, an adult may place a child anywhere. But adults often have the social-political means to enact dangerous fantasies, and children are moved about in the context of contemporaneous social-political realities (Henry and Hillel; Wallace; Lewin). The backdrop of slavery and early capitalism, issues which are particularly pressing in *Mansfield Park* (Said; Southam), frame much of Jane Austen's engagement with the phenomenon of child-stealing. To what extent is the child a chattel, to be bought and sold? Austen's young heroines undertake the project of "inventing" a tolerable social and psychological space for themselves in a world structured by these frightening social institutions.

There is also an economic component to establishing a firm identity. Austen's main characters are always shown in a rather frightening relation to their domineering elders and betters, emphasizing the question of how these young people will establish a claim to society's goodies. Typically, the young people are threatened with perpetual domination and poverty by means of the twin plot devices of the entailed estate and male succession, but there are others as well: social position, capricious relatives, large families, ill-health, for example. The problem may be worse for women. Austen's novels, especially *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*, represent society as set up for the transferal of economic resources from male to male, and the prototypical women's dilemma in this society is how to find a psycho-social outcome which is neither dreadful nor depersonalizing. Austen's heroines tinker with their ideas about the accommodation of the self with society until they can live with the result. A central factor in this delicate balancing of hostile and anti-female social structures with the happy ending is that Austen does in fact explore the darker side of the construction of identity, and the threat of its possible failure, in part through the figure of the reconsigned child. In Austen's work, the identity of such children is in question from the beginning of the narrative. As they have been moved around among families, their domineering and asset-control-

ling elders inhabit more than one family, and are thus not so easy to split off and run away from, as Elizabeth Bennett does when she moves far from her embarrassing family to the gentility of Derbyshire.

This apparently exotic but actually rather common pattern of shifting children around is, of course, to be found in Jane Austen's own family: Austen's brother Edward was just such a child. It seems to be generally felt by Austen biographers that this caused no one much heartache (Blythe 11-12); but there are fictional indications that suggest other possibilities. In *Emma*, the maternal Isabella Knightley anguishes over the suffering she believes the widowed Mr. Weston must have experienced in surrendering his baby son to be raised by an uncle and aunt: "There is something so shocking in a child's being taken away from his parents and his natural home! . . . To give up one's child!" Her husband, however, responds with characteristic sharpness: "you need not imagine Mr. Weston to have felt what you would feel in giving up John or Henry. Mr. Weston is rather an easy, cheerful tempered man than a man of strong feeling" (96).

Isabella's reflections give me reason to suspect an alternative reading of the situation of Edward Austen, who appears to have behaved impeccably to both his adopted and his biological families. This is a difficult and delicate task as many modern adoptees argue (Saffian), and some of the difficulties are explored in the problems of Austen's fictional characters. Might Edward Austen have resented his mother's ready abandonment? Did he feel strained by needing to consider two sets of parents? The fictional parallels with Edward Austen's circumstances explicitly consider the fostered/adopted child's duplicity, and the reasons for it. Mr. Weston clearly did not suffer much when he signed his son over to his unpleasant in-laws—but he expects Frank to love and respect him without a trace of ambivalence. One of the central mysteries of *Emma* is the way that hindsight allows the world to understand that Frank, who writes such handsome letters, behaves quite unaffectionately, though in a covert way: he writes to his natural father and new step-mother with effusive politeness, but he does not come near them until Jane Fairfax comes to town, and it suits him to follow her. Mrs. Price seems to have even fewer qualms: she packs off ten-year-old Fanny without a second thought, except a passing surprise that the wealthy sister should request a girl for reconignment.

As I suggested earlier in this paper, Austen's novels in fact show a large number of reconsigned children: the plot of *Emma* is riddled with

them. Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax have both been orphaned and handed over to relations to raise; Jane Fairfax is handed over again in adolescence to her wealthy friends. In both cases, the adopting families adore the little ones they “inherit”; but that seems to make little difference for the young people themselves, who continue to feel oppressively obligated and hyper-cautious in their dealing with their complicated families. Harriet Smith has not been adopted at all; she has been subjected to a quasi-commercial transaction, which shows the reconsignment of the child at its most commodified. Harriet apparently has no idea at all whose daughter she might be, and does not seem interested: she has been packed off to boarding school, and her anonymous sponsors seem to consider her in no need of explanatory origins or a family. Curiously, Harriet seems less worried about her position than either Frank or Jane Fairfax, and although this might be because of Harriet’s general dumbness, it might also reflect the fact that Harriet does not have to exhibit more than everyday politeness to nice Mrs. Goddard, the head-mistress paid to board her; she does not have to love her. Frank and Jane, by contrast, have to support that awful burden for children, perpetual gratitude. They cannot take their homes or existence for granted; they cannot be exasperating, rude, and contemptuous like normal adolescents. They have to be good to be loved, Frank out of fear, Jane out of pity. Though at first glance, Emma Woodhouse, “handsome, clever, and rich” (5), seems to be the very opposite of a reconsigned child, her situation in fact provides a sort of echo of it: she has been raised by the loving but somewhat too gentle Miss Taylor since losing her mother at the age of five, and when she reflects that as a spinster she will often have a niece with her, it does show her as a sort of Miss Bates, feeding off a young niece’s life, and is in congruence with the novel’s pattern that shows children to be regarded as need-satisfiers for adults, rather than people with their own lives to map out.

Mansfield Park shows what is in many ways a similar pattern to *Emma*, but whereas in *Emma* the adoption plot is a sort of counterpoint to the main theme, *Mansfield Park* gives it complete centrality. Fanny and William Price, and Mary and Henry Crawford have all been packed off to be raised (at the end of the novel, the sturdier Susan Price has the same fate), and their developmentally inevitable search for economic and psychic stability must therefore be undertaken in an ill-defined role. When contemplating Fanny’s quasi-adoption, good Sir Thomas and bad Mrs. Norris each in their different ways imagine her as a sort of perpetual though inti-

mate guest; they believe that the child's position in her new environment can be controlled, that her identity as what Mrs. Norris considers "an indigent niece" will be stable, as will the adopting family's attitude to her. This is a belief which invariably causes problems: reconsigned children become like their adoptive families as far as values go, but if they are expected to remain in their externalized positions, they never feel secure about their right to a home. William Price clearly does best, because he has been "adopted," as it were, by the Navy, which is set up for the rearing of young boys, and is Austen's benchmark of all that is noble in English life. As a young man, William is open and confident. Henry and Mary Crawford, however, are schemers to the bootstraps; and they like to arouse and tease affection. It seems fairly obvious that their history of being adored and manipulated in the domestic warfare between their aunt and uncle inclines them to believe that feelings are tools, if not in fact weapons, to be used when useful, and an investment against possible future need. But it is of course in Fanny Price that we see the clearest and most interesting pattern of the anguish of reconsignment.

Like all stolen children, Fanny is bundled off in what is imagined as a sort of philanthropy crossed with a need for free and biddable domestic help, and it is decreed to be in her best interests. Fanny's childhood home at Portsmouth is imagined by her wealthy benefactors as a sort of cultural impure, in Mary Douglas's sense (Douglas): a primitive marginal space characterized by dirt, disorder, bad morals, bad manners, and unrelenting sexuality. Margins, of course, always seem more central when one is in them; as the novel notes, Fanny "had always been important as play-fellow, instructress, and nurse" in her parents' home, and far from being pleased at her social and moral elevation, regards herself as painfully uprooted: "the despondence that sunk her little heart was severe" (Austen 14). In correspondence with the commonplace that adoption and fostering often works well enough for babies and children, and equally often fails adolescents and adults, Fanny's childhood passes comparatively quietly, and it is not until she becomes a young woman that the difficulties with the outside world really take shape. The difficulty is what Sir Thomas initially foresaw, "cousins in love." Aunt Norris, with a child-stealer's confidence in the utter malleability of the child, then insisted that love would be out of the question, that the children raised in one household would be brother and sister in terms of the incest taboo, if not in terms of fortune and position. What this assertion leaves out of account is the emo-

tional complications of Fanny's reconsignment to another family; because it suits the fosterers, she is expected to take on the sibling incest prohibition, without in fact having anything like sibling footing in respect of fortune or freedom in the household. A striking example of this can be seen in the episode where Fanny tries to interest Edmund in her grief about the idea of leaving Mansfield to live with Aunt Norris. Edmund reminds Fanny that she will always of course be free to walk in the grounds of Mansfield (Austen 27). Nothing could make Fanny's contingent status in the house clearer than Edmund's attempt to reassure her: Mansfield never has been Fanny's home, so how can Edmund be her brother?

The contradiction inherent in Fanny's position is expressed in a range of ways, from the violence and crudity of Aunt Norris's insistence that Fanny should be regarded as a greedy invader, rather than a hapless debt peon, to the gentlemanly Enlightenment rationality of Sir Thomas, who wants Fanny to remember her origins, but to love her new family, to be, as he says "my niece," a position of less closeness than a daughter, but still of significance. *Mansfield Park*, in fact, represents Sir Thomas's position as in many ways a good and reasonable one, a way of understanding the real meaning of the reconsigned child's ambiguous position, which puts it on a level with the system of primogeniture. Sir Thomas, as an older son himself presumably, believes that it is natural that Edmund should suffer for his brother Tom, if necessary, and that Edmund's expectations, though decent, should be humbler than his brother's. He would therefore have no difficulty in accepting that Fanny should tolerate a "natural" distinction between herself and her cousins. This does make a sort of sense, but the mind of Sir Thomas is, as it were, undermined by the mind of Aunt Norris; that is, the rational and kindly in society must be taken alongside the irrational and cruel (as it has been pointed out that kindly Sir Thomas's fortune is based on the horrors of slavery in the Caribbean). Aunt Norris, who is of course quite close to being herself what she resents in Susan Price, "a spy and an indigent" relative, reveals the reverse side of the Enlightenment concept of social gradation: Fanny represents a hated version of herself, one that can be persecuted and tortured with impunity, even with approbation. Aunt Norris has a good deal of success with this strategy, which is a relief to her feelings of despair and rage at her socially dependent position, until Fanny becomes sexually significant.

This is of course the fairy-tale position: the intruding step-daughter is tolerated until one day the mirror reveals her to be a competitor! Just

as Fanny Price is useful to Aunt Norris, and has actually been adopted at her suggestion, because she provides an even more dependent and penniless relation for Aunt Norris to despise, so Maria and Julia Bertram provide Aunt Norris with gratifying versions of herself, good relations to Sir Thomas. The most appalling proposition for Aunt Norris is for Fanny, her psychic rubbish dump, to enter into a successful competition with Maria and Julia, the ego-ideals. And that, of course, is what happens. *Mansfield Park* shows that adopted, fostered, and reconsigned children are loose cannons in the battlefield of intra- and inter-family transactions. They have independent moral codes and may not see obligations as others do; they do not necessarily align with family expectations. Fanny, who has done so badly under the scheme of social gradation that Sir Thomas admires, will not consider marrying to improve her position; she would presumably see it as a version of being shipped off to the Bertrams to improve her position. As an indigent niece, that is, poor and female and not the closest of relations, she sees herself as cut loose from purely social obligation, and especially from the first requirement of a woman in patriarchy, that she bring credit to her male relatives. She completely declines to understand why she should marry Henry Crawford. Likewise, Henry Crawford feels no obligation to esteem marriage as a sort of social glue, having lost his parents and been raised subsequently by a warring husband and wife. He thus feels no anxiety about destroying marital happiness in others, and is happy to love outside the rule of social propriety and reciprocity—which is just what Fanny does. Henry's version of love seems to include the use of another as a need-satisfier, a lesson learnt in his uncle the Admiral's house. Mary Crawford reveals another version of the pattern: she appears to regard the loved one as a project, to be played with and altered at will.

The explosions of sexual maturity in these formerly passive waifs and strays reveal what the fosterers have not suspected: their unpredictable generativity, their propensity for forming families of their own. The adopting adults have blindly considered the children as generationally frozen: perpetually cute, biddable babies. Whether this neglect of the future independent adult in the adopted child means that the fosterers are simply familiarly omnipotent about their own centrality in the power structures of the family, or whether it means that the fostered children are regarded more as property than as people, is not so clear. Frail Fanny Price, however, turns out, to the amazement of her foster-family, to have retained the aspirations of her childhood, where she was "important as play-fellow,

instructress, and nurse,” and also to have combined them with the values of her uncle and her cousin Edmund. Her uniquely composed moral code makes her absolutely immovable! It also means that she mystifies all those around her, both her family of origin and her foster family: the central nurturing role she left behind in her childhood disqualifies her from desiring a life as “a prosperous beauty” (332), like Lady Bertram, shoring up the upper-middle class order; but her upper-class Enlightenment training, prizing reason, calm, order disqualifies her from life in Portsmouth as a sailor’s wife or daughter.

I think, then, that it is possible to see the action of *Mansfield Park* as revolving round the issue of where children come from, rather than, as in *Pride and Prejudice*, of where they go. In a sense, the novel shows that Austen’s society, as she understood it, legitimizes only one form of descent: from Sir Thomas to Sir Thomas. This might be said perhaps to be the plot kernel also of *King Lear*: daughters and bastard sons as wild cards in the family pack. Such children do not docilely pick up what the parents expect, and, as the family does not work for them, strictly speaking, they cannot be trusted to further its good. As doubly marginalized daughters, Mary Crawford and Fanny Price are thus extra-legitimate in a way: the great play the novel makes about the unconventionality and propensity for social mischief of the Crawfords—Henry’s flirting, or Mary’s wish to have her harp conveyed by cart at hay-making time, for instance—is mirrored in Fanny’s anomalous position in the social order. Is Fanny “out,” or is she not? The question is canvassed at length, but the issue is never decided. Mary Crawford feels that it is a mystery: “‘She dined at the parsonage, with the rest of you, which seemed like being *out*; and yet she said so little, I can hardly suppose that she *is* And yet in general, nothing can be more easily ascertained. The distinction is so broad” (48-49). Edmund decides the issue cannot be relevant to Fanny: “‘My cousin is grown up. She has the age and sense of a woman, and the outs and not outs are beyond me.’”

“Yet . . . and yet”: Fanny is in fact a hybrid, with no secure place in the social order, and thus neither “out” nor “not out,” both part of and excluded from the family, both marriageable and profoundly unmarriageable; merely a human object, until rescued by reciprocated love.

Mansfield Park thus emphasizes the idea of the dangers of illegitimacy by using an even more alienated and dangerous figure than the bastard son or non-inheriting daughter to disrupt the family of fosterers: the slave

child, for whom sexual maturity provides its only hope for revenge upon the clutch of wicked stepmothers, aunts and ogre-uncles who have been exploiting its potential as plaything or worker. It is genuinely touching to see how Austen shows these children as drawn together, how Henry Crawford falls in love with Fanny's patience and suffering in her servitude, presumably as reminding him of an idealized part of his own experience at his uncle's house; how Fanny enjoys the company of the destructive Mary Crawford in spite of herself, presumably for acting out her own unconscious contempt and hatred of her circumstances. Reconsigned children, anomalies who cannot fulfill their obligations to all parties in their families, are obliged to act good when they feel bad, and they are liars, too. Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax have to lie all the time; Mary and Henry Crawford delight in it. Even virtuous Fanny Price tells Sir Thomas an out-and-out lie: "her lips formed into a no, though the sound was inarticulate, but her face was like scarlet. . . . She would rather die than own the truth, and she hoped by a little reflection to fortify herself against betraying it" (316).

This seems to me to shed light on their basic condition: reconsigned children must lie because they are caught between two social truths; it is only powerful patriarchs like Sir Thomas and Mr. Knightley who can think the truth is a stable entity, available to everyone. Sexual maturity, a sort of undeniable truth in itself, liberates the slave-child into a world where she may have a chance to make her own truths and bargains, and to find herself new masters.

In short, the figure of the child shifted away from its family of origin allows Jane Austen to explore the most intense difficulties of psychic individuation and satisfaction for young people. Even more strikingly than the young women at the mercy of sexist entails, fostered children must fight to find the familial and social space necessary if one is to individuate from anything. Such children are psycho-familial hybrids from the date of the reconsignment, and every successful establishment of self is a massive triumph of survival. Readers often resent Fanny Price as a sniping moralist. I believe that the strength of her sometimes unpleasant moralizing reflects the strength of the effort it takes for her to create a coherent self with which, and from which, to love and hate. Like women in general in Jane Austen's novels, Fanny Price and other reconsigned children must fight ferociously to create a self, and it might be thought that the marks of that fight in this case provide the bearable identity. Their victory in establishing a true identity shows that the child is not inevitably con-

demned to remain a creation of the grown-ups' wish fantasy of the re-
 consignable child. In the end, Fanny Price frees herself from one of the
 Oedipal myths of patriarchal capitalism, the principle that children belong
 to the father and can be shifted around like any other sort of manufactured
 goods, and she creates an adult self out of the particular circumstances of
 her life as she experiences it.

NOTE

1. This is an inexhaustible and often comic theme with which creative writers work to the
 present day. See, for example, the novels of Barbara Trapido: her characters in the linked
 novels *Temples of Delight* (1990) and *Juggling* (1992) wrestle with the endlessly fascinating
 question of generational truth, and seem, even when they have tracked down the very last
 relevant sperm, to find it easier to believe that fatherhood, and occasionally motherhood, is
 nothing but a comic myth anyway, and that one's "real" father is Shakespeare (in *Juggling*),
 or Mozart (in *Temples of Delight*).

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