



The Rushworths of Wimpole Street

LAURIE KAPLAN

Laurie Kaplan, Professor of English and Academic Director of George Washington University's England Center, has published essays on the London settings in Jane Austen's novels (Brunswick Square [*Emma*] and Mayfair [*Sense and Sensibility*]). She has also published essays on women in World War I, Paul Scott, and Tom Stoppard.

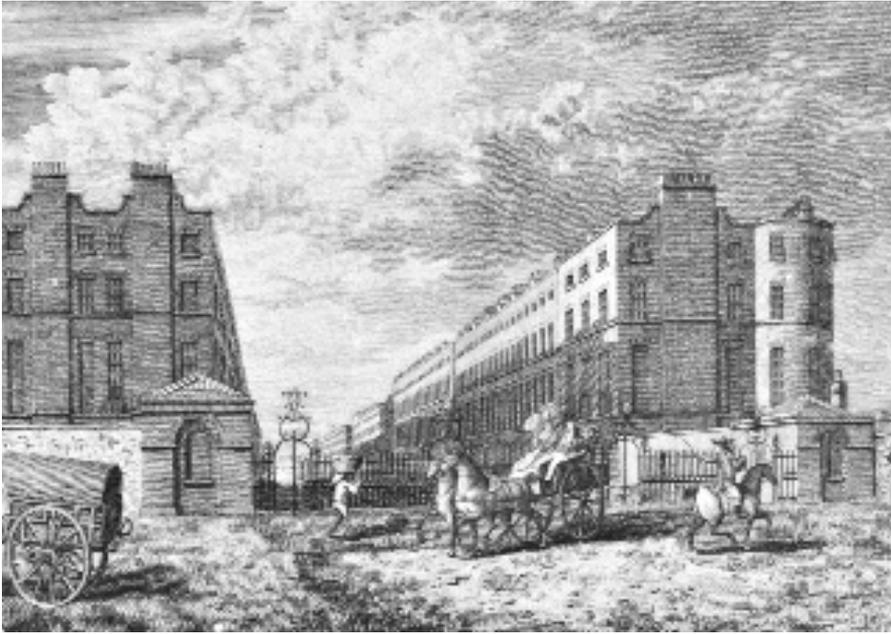
"But Mrs. Rushworth's day of good looks will come; we have cards for her first party on the 28th.—Then she will be in beauty, for she will open one of the best houses in Wimpole Street. I was in it two years ago, when it was Lady Lascelles's, and prefer it to almost any I know in London . . ." (*MP* 456)

THUS MARY CRAWFORD reports to Fanny how the newly married Rushworths will open their first—and last—London season. Mrs. Rushworth's first party will fit into the web of flirting, gambling, and matchmaking that draws the elite from the boredom of their country estates to London houses. That the Rushworths have managed to acquire the Lascelles's house on Wimpole Street is a significant coup—and a costly achievement. But the house is easily affordable for the couple, for Maria Bertram has married into money, and her husband can pay not only for the extensive improvements on the estate at Sotherton but also for the fine house on Wimpole Street. As Edward Copeland points out, Mr. Rushworth's "estate of £12,000 a year supports a house in an expensive, fashionable part of London" (324). The Lascelles house on Wimpole Street is, indeed, a very fine and fashionable house, but this house is doubly tainted. Not only is the Lascelles name connected with plantations, slavery, and corruption, but the Lascelles family is also obliquely connected—through marriage—with one of the great sexual scandals of the late eighteenth century.

Jane Austen's readers would have recognized the Lascelles name, which had appeared prominently in the news a few years before she began writing *Mansfield Park*. I propose that it is the Lascelles name, rather than a particular "Lady Lascelles," that makes the connection to this house important to the themes of *Mansfield Park*. Janine Barchas finds that the names of even the most minor characters in her novels were carefully chosen by Austen "for suggestive combinations" (147), and in the context of this novel, Jane Austen has indeed chosen carefully: the combination of the name "Lascelles" with the place "Wimpole Street" radiates a deeper significance and binds together the moral problems that underlie *Mansfield Park*. As Markman Ellis reminds us, "[e]ach of Austen's wealthiest gentlemen is identified by and through his estate. . . . [T]he estate is a synecdoche for a gentleman's virtue, and hence an advertisement of his marital eligibility" (417). If a man is identified through his estate, and if an estate signifies a gentleman's virtue, might not the Lady's house on Wimpole Street signify a lady's virtue, or, by extension, her fall from virtue?

As I argue in "Emma and 'the children in Brunswick Square,'" in her choice of urban locations Jane Austen was commenting, implicitly rather than explicitly, on important issues that affected the society of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In *Mansfield Park*, the issue of the slave trade permeates the novel's text and subtext, to the extent that Sir Thomas Bertram's trip to the West Indies serves to underscore the lack of a moral compass to guide the activities of the young people who live at Mansfield Park. As Claire Tomalin notes, the corruption of Maria and Julia "is completed by moving from their father's house in the country, where outwardly correct standards are maintained, to London, where anything goes" (225). When Maria Bertram Rushworth absconds with Henry Crawford from the extravagant house on Wimpole Street, she is fulfilling the pattern of sexual abandonment that her behavior at Mansfield and Sotherton had forecast.

Jocelyn Harris, in her discussion of geographical locations in *Persuasion*, points out how the slave port of Bristol made Bath rich and fashionable (*Revolution* 176–77). Jane Austen, Harris asserts, may have been familiar with information about the slave trade because James Brydges, Duke of Chandos (1674–1774), was Mrs. Austen's great uncle (176); he had a residence at Portman Square, an elegant square not far from the Rushworths' house on Wimpole Street. Nearby lived the very wealthy Elizabeth, Countess of Home, who had been born in Jamaica and had gravitated to Portman Square, where her residence, the splendid Home House, at 20 Portman Square (built in 1773–77), drew in the growing West Indian contingent converging on Marylebone



Devonshire Place and Wimpole Street, from the New Road, St Mary le Bone, by *George Barret (the elder)*, after *Charles Reuben Ryley* (1799). © Trustees of the British Museum.

(Thorold 142). It is not a coincidence, therefore, that the actual Lascelles family, with their ties to the Islands and huge fortune, also had a house in Portman Street. When she wrote *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen carefully moved her fictitious Lady Lascelles a few blocks away and placed her house in Wimpole Street.

The Marylebone¹ district was developing apace as fashionable people with huge fortunes pushed north from Mayfair to find spacious, modern, elegant houses. The area's connection with the "best people" was confirmed by the fact that "[s]treets in what was originally the Cavendish-Harley estate, developed in the eighteenth century, took their names from the noble families who built there" (Wiltshire 724 n.2). Wimpole Street, constructed circa 1724 by John Prince and named after the Cambridgeshire estate of the landlord, Edward Harley, Earl of Oxford (Weinreb and Hibbert 966), was "a principal street running north to south in Marylebone," extending the length of "London's most fashionable and expensive district," with Mansfield Street running parallel (Wiltshire 724 n.2). Like Portman Square, Wimpole Street attracted an enclave of very rich West Indian plantation owners, most of whom were

linked together by marriage, economic situation, banking interests, and the sugar trade.

Jane Austen would have known of the connection between the new Marylebone developments and the slave trade. Acutely aware of social changes and shifts of political ideas, Austen creates a network of allusions to slavery, money, and inequality in *Mansfield Park*. References to Mansfield Park's connection to the West Indies and the slave trade have been elaborated upon by a number of critics, including Avrom Fleishman, Warren Roberts, and Edward Said. In *A Revolution Almost Beyond Expression*, Jocelyn Harris points out not only that "Austen undoubtedly understood the implications of West Indian investments" (80), but that Austen's "progressive stance" regarding the antislavery movement is underscored by her declaration (in a letter on 24 September 1813) that she was "'in love' with the leading antislavery polemicist Thomas Clarkson, author of *History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade by the British Parliament* (1808)" (81). Harris says that "the name of *Mansfield Park* probably reflects Lord Mansfield's decision of 1772 to make slavery illegal on British soil, while Fanny Price's curiosity about the West Indies reproaches the other members of the family for carelessness about the trade that enriches them all" (81).

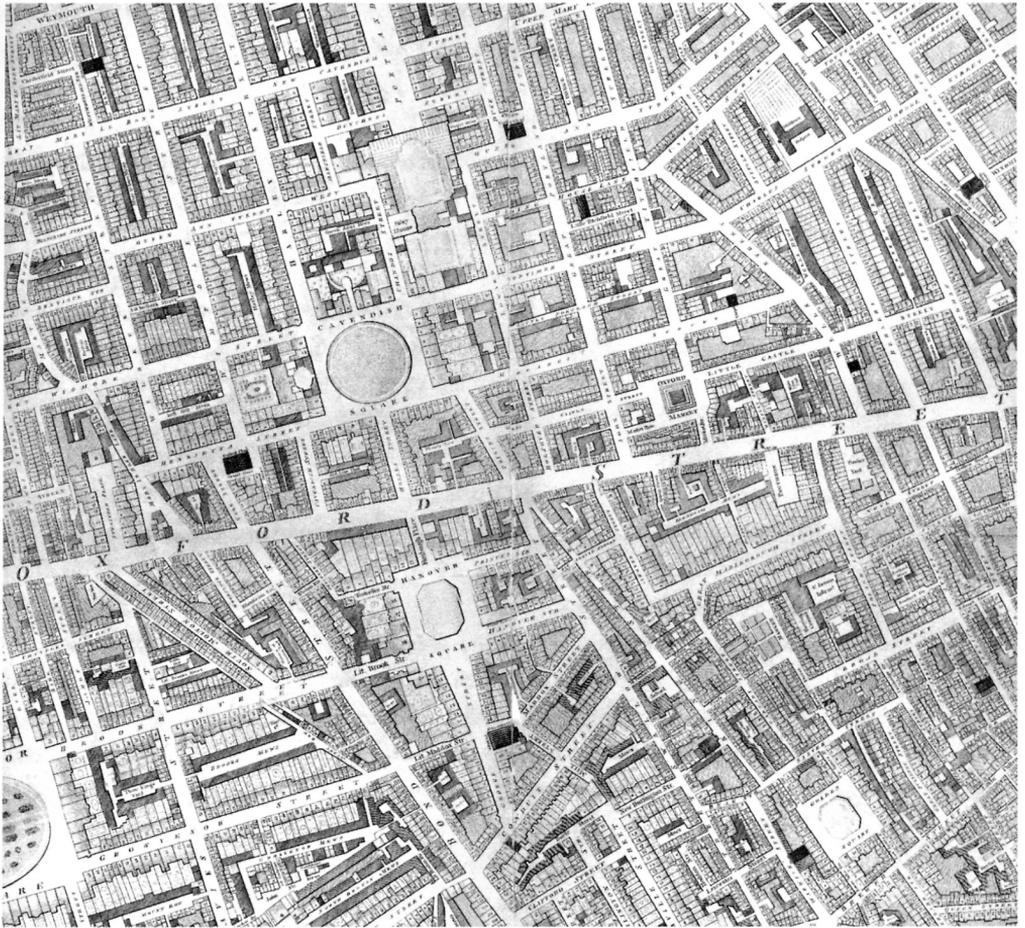


Both the Bertram and the Lascelles wealth was tied to their extensive plantations in the West Indies. In the early eighteenth century half-brothers Henry and Edward Lascelles "amassed a large family fortune through working as sugar merchants, money lenders, slave traders, plantation owners, suppliers to the Navy and as Collectors of Customs for Bridgetown. Between 1713 and 1717 Henry had a financial share in 21 slave ships and was partly responsible for trading thousands of slaves" (*Harewood House 1807*). In the 1740s allegations of corruption were brought against both brothers, but these charges regarding "irregularities" that occurred under Henry's colonial administration in Barbados were not proven. In 1753, however, Henry Lascelles inexplicably committed suicide, leaving a fortune of £392,704 (equivalent to £28.5m today) (Mauchline 8–11). His eldest son Edwin, who had been born in Barbados in 1712, inherited not only the Harewood estate in Yorkshire but the West Indian plantations that flourished on the triangular slave and sugar trade. The plantations in Barbados, along with the Lascelles and Maxwell merchant bank in London, produced a prodigious fortune. Edwin Lascelles,

Lord Harewood, an absentee landlord like Sir Thomas Bertram, became more interested in constructing a grand estate in Yorkshire than in overseeing the family concerns in the Islands.² In 1759, Edwin began work on Harewood House. Designed by John Carr and decorated by Robert Adam, Harewood House became a home *par excellence* for an Earl. Chippendale supplied the furniture; both Capability Brown and Humphrey Repton created the gardens.

In March 1807, George III had signed the Act abolishing the transatlantic slave trade. Following the King's signing of this Act, the Parliamentary election in May 1807 took on a special significance in the national psyche, for abolition joined Catholic emancipation and mechanization in the cloth-making factories of the north as the major issues. Standing for Parliament in Yorkshire, in what was described as the "famous electoral battle between two great Yorkshire families for a county seat," were William Wilberforce, Lord Milton, and Henry Lascelles (who, in 1820, would become the second Earl of Harewood) (Kennedy 74). In this election, Wilberforce was put forward as an abolitionist, but Lascelles was known as a plantation owner's son, that is, as a slave owner. Word on the street claimed that Lascelles would repeal the abolition act if he were to be elected. Furthermore, Henry Lascelles was against Catholic emancipation and for the mechanization of the factories. The hotly contested (and very expensive) election lasted fifteen days, and eventually Wilberforce and Lord Milton were elected; Henry Lascelles lost by a total of 181 votes (Kennedy 73–74).

I have included this background information to suggest the fact that, when *Mansfield Park* was published in 1814, the Lascelles name would have been recognized by Austen's readers because of its connection with plantations in the West Indies and with the slavery bill in Parliament. Gabrielle D. V. White, in *Jane Austen in the Context of Abolition: "a fling at the slave trade,"* comments that the Lascelles name "had become well-known" as one of the prominent families associated with absentee landlords (20) and that "the Lascelles-Wilberforce electoral struggle in Yorkshire of 1807 would also have publicised the Lascelles family as pro-slavery" (182). The family's connections to the lucrative plantation trade, which was the foundation of their wealth, and their exquisite collections of paintings and porcelain at Harewood House were public knowledge. In 1815, in fact, their collection of Sèvres porcelain had achieved such renown that Queen Charlotte and the Prince Regent travelled to Yorkshire to see the Lascelles collection (Kennedy 124). Even their London townhouse "would have been associated with one of the most expensive addresses in London" (White 182). As White notes, in *Mansfield Park*, "Mary Crawford, whose principles are found wanting, is associated with the Lascelles name and so with its slavery connection



Wimpole Street and the Marylebone District, from Richard Horwood's Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster . . . (1792). © Trustees of the British Museum.

that would have been well-known at the time” (20). It is Mary Crawford who tells Fanny Price that Lady Lascelles’s fictitious house on Wimpole Street is so expensive that “Henry could not have afforded [Maria] such a house” (456).



It is not only the connection with slavery that brought the Lascelles name into the realm of public scrutiny. The scandal surrounding the adultery and elopement of first Earl’s stepdaughter Seymour Dorothy, Lady Worsley,

was “one of the eighteenth century’s most sensational legal suits” (Rubenhold 1). Mary Mauchline notes that the marriage between Dorothy and Sir Richard Worsley of Appeldurcombe “was stormy and sad, and Lady Worsley’s amatory career the source of much scandal and gossip” (162), but that mild description of the Worsleys’ marital conflict hardly begins to describe the state of her affairs. The details of the scandal, which hit the newspapers in February 1782, are indeed shocking, providing fodder for cartoonists, lampoonists, and scandal sheets for many years.

In *Lady Worsley’s Whim*, Hallie Rubenhold retells in rather graphic detail the story of Seymour Dorothy Fleming’s numerous and tumultuous love affairs. Seymour was born on 5 October 1757, the fourth child of Jane Colman, granddaughter of the Duke of Somerset, and Sir John Fleming, a career soldier. When Sir John Fleming died, Lady Fleming in 1770 chose as her second husband Barbados-born Edwin Lascelles, widower, MP for Yorkshire, and a very rich man. From Sir John Fleming, who had been bequeathed a large fortune by a fellow officer, His Majesty’s Governor of Gibraltar, Seymour and her elder sister Jane inherited a huge fortune (17–19). Seymour and Jane, as stepdaughters to Edwin Lascelles, had every material advantage the Fleming inheritance and the Lascelles plantation money could provide. Like the Bertram sisters, the Fleming girls were materialistic and careless heiresses, and on the marriage market the reputed £100,000 inheritance (in actuality, the sum was approximately £50,000) attracted hopeful, money-strapped beaux (Rubenhold 22–23).

It was Seymour’s marriage in 1775 to another ostensibly rich man—Sir Richard Worsley—that proved her undoing. Like Maria Bertram, Seymour chose quickly and stupidly, and she ended up with a man who was intellectually dull and socially inept, a man who cared more for his estate than for society. Sir Richard had returned from his grand tour in want of a rich wife; he gave himself five months to find an heiress who could replenish his foundering estate on the Isle of Wight. More interested in the inheritance than in the underage woman he married, Sir Richard quickly fathered an heir and then apparently lost interest in his high strung, romantic wife. It did not take long for the marriage to fall apart: Lady Worsley soon became enamored of Captain George Bisset, Sir Richard’s friend, neighbor, and fellow—albeit subordinate—officer in the South Hampshire Militia.

The most sordid detail of this affair, and a detail that inflamed the nation’s gossips and newspaper cartoonists, focuses on Sir Richard’s behavior in his wife’s amatory affair with Bisset. It has been suggested that Sir Richard acted as pimp in the relationship between his wife and his fellow officer, to the

extent that Sir Richard accepted Lady Worsley and Captain Bisset's child, a girl born in London in 1781, as his own.

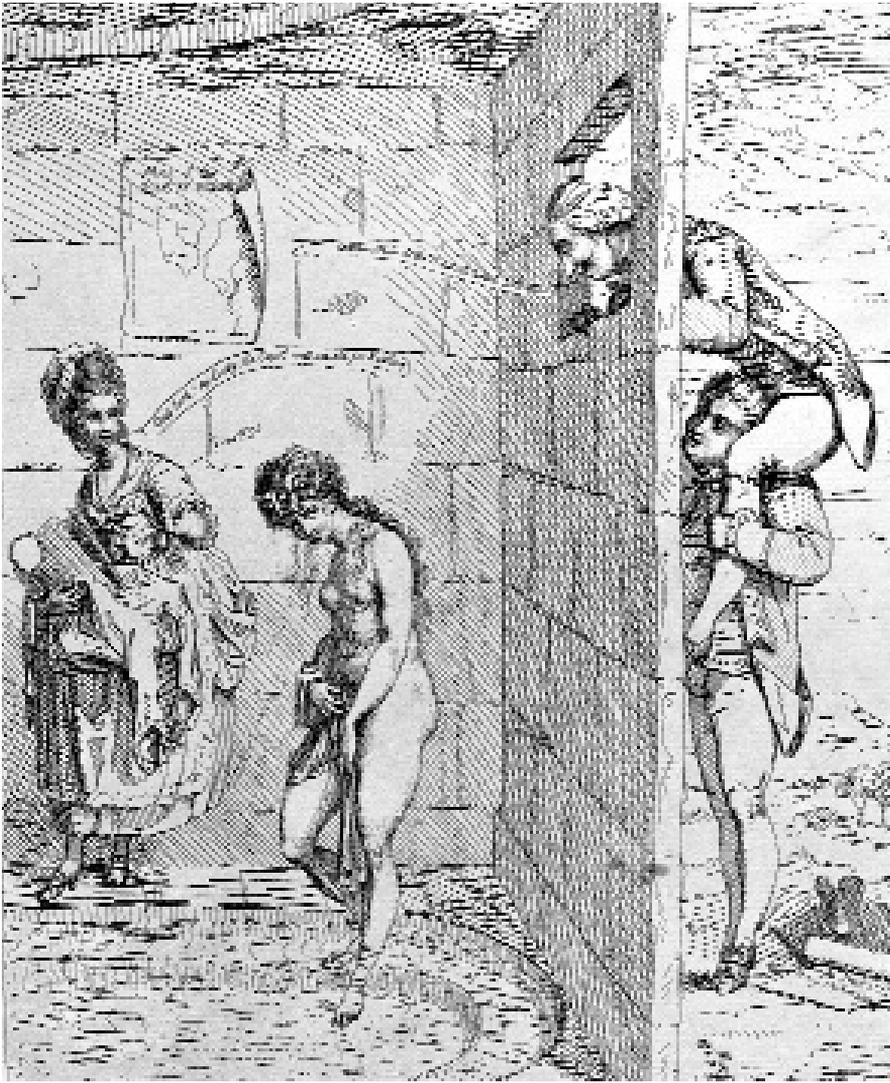
But it was later in the autumn of 1781, when Lady Worsley visited the Maidstone baths, that the strange relationship between the Worsleys and Bisset started to become more or less public. It is reported that when Lady Worsley emerged from the female baths,

she heard her husband and her lover beside the entrance. "Seymour! Seymour!" Sir Richard called out to her, "Bisset is going to get up and look at you!" Suddenly the captain's face appeared in the window above the door. As he smiled at her, Lady Worsley stepped from the darkness of the alcove where . . . the bathing woman was helping her to dress. Moving into the full view afforded by the porthole, she displayed herself openly. The baronet held Bisset tightly in place for five minutes, permitting him the spectacle of his half-naked wife as she teasingly drew on her clothing. (Rubenhold 53)

After the scene at the baths, in a most unfortunate decision, during which the adulterous couple underestimated the wider implications of their actions, Lady Worsley and Captain Bisset eloped. Ultimately, the couple was charged with the crime of criminal conversation.

When the *Worsley v. Bisset* case came to court in 1782, the Lord Chief Justice Mansfield, the esteemed pro-abolitionist, presided. Grub Street hacks were about to go wild in their coverage of details of the bathing scene, the list of Lady Worsley's supposed lovers, Sir Richard's complicity in his wife's downfall, and the financial demands made by Sir Richard for reparation for damage to his "property," that is, his wife. Summarizing the case for the jury, Lord Mansfield asserted that the crux of the matter was "Whether Sir Richard has not been privy to the prostitution of his wife?" (Rubenhold 154). When the jury returned its verdict, Sir Richard Worsley, who would forever after be known as Sir Richard-Worse-than-Sly, was awarded a total of one shilling. While the Lascelles family distanced themselves from Seymour and took no notice of the court case, Lady Worsley found herself depicted in a most compromising position in a battery of cartoons. Where once the Worsleys had been painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds, they were now on display in print sellers' windows, for all to see, in James Gillray's *Sir Richard Worse-than-Sly, Exposing his Wife's Bottom; O fye!*

As Hazel Jones notes, Jane Austen herself "was not above a delighted wickedness in retailing scandal and gossip to her correspondents, nor includ-



Sir Richard Worse-than-Sly, Exposing His Wifes Bottom; O Fye! by James Gillray (1782).
© Trustees of the British Museum.

ing such behaviours in her novels” (102), so it is safe to assume that at some time the young novelist would have heard about this case, which was the talk of the nation as well as Hampshire, and at some point Jane Austen would have seen the immensely popular lampoons displayed widely in print sellers’ windows throughout the land.



When Mary Crawford first mentions the Lascelles house on Wimpole Street, she links the house with money, suggesting that Mrs. Rushworth's party will make her feel “—to use a vulgar phrase—that she has got her penny-worth for her penny” (456). When later she writes to Fanny, Mary Crawford's report about the Rushworths' first party is filled with ironic understatement: “I ought to have sent you *an account* . . . ; suffice it, that every thing was just as it ought to be, . . . and that her own dress and manners did her the greatest credit. My friend Mrs. Fraser is mad for such a house . . .” (482 emphasis added). House on Wimpole Street, dress, manners—Mary Crawford finds these outward signs of Mrs. Rushworth's wealth and position in society significant; in contrast, Edmund Bertram, who has dined twice at Wimpole Street, finds it “mortifying” to be in company with Rushworth and avoids the house (491).

In Portsmouth, while Fanny is staying with her parents, a particular paragraph in his newspaper rouses Mr. Price from his usual lethargy to question Fanny about her “great cousins in town”: “And don't they live in Wimpole Street?” (509), he asks. Before Fanny even knows what has happened, her father proclaims to his astonished daughter, “[B]y G—if she belonged to *me*, I'd give her the rope's end as long as I could stand over her. A little flogging for man and woman too, would be the best way of preventing such things” (509). The violence with which Mr. Price responds to the gossip he is reading is shocking. When Fanny picks up the newspaper she reads:

“it was with infinite concern the newspaper had to announce to the world, a matrimonial *fracas* in the family of Mr. R. of Wimpole Street; the beautiful Mrs. R. whose name had not long been enrolled in the lists of hymen, and who had promised to become so brilliant a leader in the fashionable world, having quitted her husband's roof in company with the well known and captivating Mr. C. the intimate friend and associate of Mr. R. and it was not known, even to the editor of the newspaper, whither they were gone.” (509)

After their disgrace, both Lady Worsley and Mrs. Rushworth fall prey to the gossip columnists, but at least Maria Rushworth is spared the humiliation of being depicted *in flagrante* with her paramour.

Like Lady Worsley, Mrs. Rushworth finds that the attachment outside the bonds of matrimony to which she has sacrificed herself cannot stand the stress of public disapprobation. When Mrs. Rushworth leaves the house on Wimpole

Street, she knows she courts public disgrace, but she assures herself that Henry Crawford will marry her after her divorce from Mr. Rushworth. Mr. Rushworth's angry mother, counteracting all methods of hushing up the sad events at Wimpole Street, sets in motion the publication of her son's wife's disgrace. Soon, "[e]very thing was . . . public beyond a hope" (521). Mr. Rushworth gets off easily: he is granted a divorce (537). Maria Bertram Rushworth, however, suffers the fate of other women of the time—women not unlike Lady Worsley—who married in haste: her relationship with Henry Crawford falls apart. The beautiful Mrs. Rushworth, who was to have such a glorious London season, finds herself estranged from her family, ostracized from Mansfield Park, and secluded with Mrs. Norris in an establishment "in another country—remote and private, . . . with little society" (538).

What is rotten at the heart of Mansfield Park is doubly rotten at Wimpole Street. The narrator informs the reader that "Fanny was disposed to think the influence of London very much at war with all respectable attachments" (501), but Wimpole Street, rather than London, is the focal point of vanity, guilt, and misery. Markman Ellis says that "Sir Thomas Bertram's journey to Antigua broadcasts his status as a slave-holder, a morally reprehensible status . . ." (423). But if Sir Thomas's journey to Antigua forms one part of the journey toward an understanding of what June Sturrock refers to as a "diseased relationship with money" (182), then Mrs. Rushworth's journey from Mansfield Park to—and from—the best house on Wimpole Street suggests, as Mr. Price opines, how she and "so many fine ladies were going to the devil now-a-days that way, that there was no answering for anybody" (510). With neither guardianship nor moral compass, Maria Bertram Rushworth is doomed to disgrace, punishment, and misery.



In his book *The London Rich* Peter Thorold writes that in the last quarter of the eighteenth century "Marylebone and the West Indians became closely identified" (142). Hence, Thorold notes, "When, in *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas Bertram's elder daughter marries, she and her husband take a house in Wimpole Street which had recently belonged to 'Lady Lascelles.'" A careful reading of the London section of *Mansfield Park* reveals that the house on Wimpole Street, in conjunction with Lady Lascelles, a name that Austen uses only once in the novel, resonates with the themes the author explores. Wimpole Street, one of the seemingly most insignificant details in the topography of the

London chapters of the novel, emerges as revelatory of Austen's subtle use of realistic and historic detail.

The West Indian connection with Marylebone, which began in the eighteenth century when plantation owners flocked to this particular area of London, lasted well into the reign of Queen Victoria. In 1784, a gardener at nearby Portman Square made a list of real-life residents who lived in the area; he compiled a slate of Admirals and Earls, Lords and Ladies, a high percentage of whom owned West Indian plantations. It is interesting to note that Captain Bisset deserted Lady Worsley in 1783 (Ruenhold 219–20). After a year of consorting with the retinue surrounding the Prince of Wales, the couple was debt-ridden and unable to keep up with the fast set that had adopted them. Separation was inevitable. At the time Bisset left, Lady Worsley, pregnant with Bisset's second child and in dire need of someone to support her financially, attached herself to the West Indian plantation owner Isaac Byers, and the couple lived together on Newman Street, in Fitzrovia, a neighborhood close to the West Indian enclave on Wimpole Street. Soon, however, to escape duns and bailiffs, Lady Worsley fled to the Continent and, ultimately, reverted to her maiden name and was known as Lady Fleming.

In the early nineteenth century, one of Jane Austen's sailor brothers was also connected through marriage to the area. While he was stationed in Bermuda, Charles Austen had met Fanny Palmer, the sixteen-year-old daughter of the island's former Attorney-General; they were engaged in 1806 and married in 1807 (the year the anti-slavery bill was signed). Fanny died in childbirth, the child two weeks later, on board the *Namur* in 1814, and in 1820, Charles remarried—his bride was Harriet Palmer, his sister-in-law (Nokes 319; 450; 525).³ The Palmers' house in London was at No. 22 Keppel Street, approximately one-half mile from Wimpole Street and therefore within blocks of the Marylebone neighborhood where the Rushworths settled after their wedding trip.

In 1837, "Edward Moulton-Barrett, father of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, a member of one of the most important slave-owning families in the Caribbean," moved his family into 50 Wimpole Street (Thorold 145). In this house on Wimpole Street, Elizabeth, an invalid, met Robert Browning. Robert, who was also descended from a West Indian family, courted Elizabeth at the Moulton-Barrett home on Wimpole Street, and, in 1846, the couple eloped to Italy. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's father never forgave her.

NOTES

1. Marylebone was named after the church known as St. Mary-by-the-Tyburn or St. Mary-a-le-Bourne.
2. Thorold points out that “[m]any of the West Indians never went near their plantations. The Lascelles family were sugar factors and bankers. During the last part of the eighteenth century there were three Lascelles MPs in the House of Commons, none of whom, as far as it is known, ever visited the family’s Barbados estates” (131).
3. Deirdre Le Faye: “At that date marriage with a deceased wife’s sister was not illegal but certainly subject to disapproval, as it fell within the prohibitions of the Prayerbook’s Table of Kindred & Affinity . . .” (264). In 1826 Charles returned to Jamaica on the frigate *Aurora*.

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