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JOHN SUTHERLAND

*Who Betrays  
Elizabeth Bennet?*

*Further Puzzles in  
Classic Fiction*

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an embittered Charlotte is determined to settle accounts with Elizabeth. She will poison Elizabeth's prospects, with a pre-emptive strike that she knows will provoke an outburst of the young woman's incorrigible 'prejudice'. It is a stroke of well-conceived malice. It fails—but only just.<sup>1</sup>

The Oxford World's Classics *Pride and Prejudice* is edited by James Kinsley and Frank W. Bradbrook, with an introduction by Isobel Armstrong.

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*What do we know about Frances Price  
(the first)?*

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In a short note in the Jane Austen Society *Report* for 1982 Deirdre Le Faye points out a problem in the sketched background to *Mansfield Park*. It relates to the three Ward sisters, each of whom plays a significant, if supporting, role in the novel's plot.<sup>1</sup> The problem is laid out in Jane Austen's typically crisp *mise en scène* in the first two pages of the narrative. 'About thirty years ago,' the novel opens, 'Miss Maria Ward of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton' (p. 1).

Given its date of publication, 1814, the 'thirty years ago' reference would set Maria's happy catch in the 'season' of 1784 or thereabouts. Huntingdon and Northampton are neighbouring counties and the same social set attends the same events. We get a momentary glimpse of the family behind the bride, but no more than a glimpse: 'All Huntingdon exclaimed on the greatness of the match, and her uncle, the lawyer himself, allowed her to be at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to it.'

The lawyer uncle and the dowry (albeit three thousand short) indicate professional respectability and a middle rather than upper station in life (the younger sons of the nobility go into the church or the army, not the law; noble wives bring with them property, not money). We know absolutely nothing of the Ward parents. But

Maria, we are told, 'had two sisters to be benefited by her elevation . . . Miss Ward and Miss Frances'. The honorific 'Miss Ward' (without the Christian name, which we never know) indicates that she is the oldest of the trio. 'Half-a-dozen' years later (1790-ish) Miss Ward, having now been somewhat long in the shop window, is obliged to lower her sights and accept 'the Rev. Mr Norris, a friend of her brother-in-law, with scarcely any private fortune'. Why Miss Ward, unlike her younger sister, has little or no dowry we are not told.

Sir Thomas's patronage gives Mr Norris a living in the environs of Mansfield Park in Northamptonshire and with it a comfortable income of 'a very little less than a thousand a year'. The Norrises have no children (and are careful not to adopt one, in the shape of young Fanny), and we may suppose that Mrs Norris takes wise precautions against any expensive little strangers. The 'less than a thousand pounds' does not admit of such extravagances. The less constrained Lady Bertram has four children: two boys and two girls. It is, as Deirdre Le Faye plausibly surmises, at some point shortly after Mrs Norris's wedding that the third sister, Frances Ward, makes her disastrous choice of partner. She 'married, in the common phrase, to disoblige her family, and by fixing on a Lieutenant of Marines, without education, fortune, or connections, did it very thoroughly'. He was evidently wholly unknown to the Ward family. Sir Thomas can do nothing in this unfortunate case. Lieutenant Price's line of profession 'was such as no interest could reach'. And, to seal the rupture, there is a sharp exchange of letters in which Frances makes 'disrespectful reflections on the pride of Sir Thomas'.

Over the next eleven years, in their series of married quarters in Portsmouth, Mrs Price goes on an orgy of childbearing, with nine lying-ins. A contrite letter gets

a helpful response from Mansfield Park—leading to the launching of the two oldest Price children, William and Fanny, into more respectable courses of life than their parents. Frances's husband has not risen in his branch of the service. He is still only a lieutenant—indeed is no further forward ten years later, in 1808–11, the date at which the novel proper begins.<sup>2</sup>

The questions which Deirdre Le Faye asks are the following:

1. How did Miss Frances Ward—of Huntingdon—fall into the way of a lieutenant of marines in faraway Portsmouth? Unlike Northampton, this is not neighbouring territory.
2. Did Frances Ward elope with Lieutenant Price, prefiguring Maria Bertram's conduct? That she did is hinted by the tart comment: 'to save herself from useless remonstrance, Mrs Price never wrote to her family on the subject, till actually married' (p. 1).
3. Why cannot Sir Thomas's 'interest' help Lieutenant Price?

Le Faye surmises, plausibly, that Frances cannot have been working as a governess in Portsmouth—that being the only line of away-from-home work which someone of Miss Ward's class might take up. As we see her in later life, Mrs Price is incompetent to have filled such a role. She might, conceivably, have been visiting relatives in the south-west. But, as Le Faye sees it, elopement is the most likely scenario. It is a case of 'family history repeating itself'.

Le Faye's speculations are as convincing as any speculation can be. We assume, if only from the evidence of the sexual activity, that there was a kind of Mellors-the-gamekeeper masculinity about Lieutenant Price which made him irresistibly attractive to the lawyer's genteel niece. Those manly attractions had probably worn rather

thin by the time of her ninth pregnancy—but by then Frances's lot was fixed.

There are some other deductions to be drawn from the parental Price plot, once it is brought to the reader's attention. The marines were responsible for discipline in the shipyards and ports. The navy—manned as it was in large part by press-ganged crews, with discipline enforced by the cat—was in a constant state of seething discontent and mutiny. Major garrisons of marines were kept in the principal ports such as Chatham and Portsmouth.

An oddity of the marines was that commissions were not by purchase after 1755 (they remained so in the regular army until the 1870s). This explains why it is that Sir Thomas cannot instantly help Lieutenant Price. As a branch of the services, the marines had earned great credit for their part in putting down the 1796 mutinies at the Nore and Spithead. It is more than likely that Lieutenant Price played a part in this operation. As a mark of favour, they were renamed the 'Royal Marines' in 1802, although Jane Austen does not use that title.

It is clear from Fanny's experiences when she is given her punishment posting to Portsmouth that Lieutenant Price is not a pleasant paterfamilias. He drinks in his mess, is coarsely sarcastic at home, neglects his worn-down wife, and evidently rules his wayward children harshly. But, as Fanny notes in her father's conversations with Henry Crawford, on duty he is not unprepossessing in public. He would seem to be a good marine.

We have, I think, to leave the courtship of Frances Ward and Lieutenant Price in the dark in which Austen chose to keep it. But an authorial motive can be discerned in Austen's having made her heroine's father a marine. The marines were famous throughout their long history, but particularly after 1796 (and particularly at Portsmouth), as the embodiment of martial discipline of a ruthless kind.

It is as just such an act of discipline that mutinous Fanny is sent back to Portsmouth, to bring her to her senses with—metaphorically—a touch of the lash (it is not inconceivable that she might get the odd physical cuff from her drunken lieutenant father).

Meanwhile—ironically—discipline at Mansfield Park falls to pieces with the elopements. I think Jane Austen chose a lieutenant of marines not because she had, stored away in the back of her mind, some 'pre-plot' in which she saw the courtship of Miss Ward and her unsuitable suitor in any detail. She chose him because he fitted into the thematic pattern of her novel: *Mansfield Park: or Discipline*.<sup>3</sup>

The Oxford World's Classics *Mansfield Park* is edited by James Kinsley with an introduction by Marilyn Butler.

discusses the issue in the introduction to his Oxford World's Classics edition of Defoe's novel *Roxana* (Oxford, 1996), 341–2.

### *Tom Jones*

1. Coleridge's reported ejaculation (in conversation) was: 'What a master of composition Fielding was! Upon my word, I think the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the *Alchemist*, and *Tom Jones*, the three most perfect plots ever planned' (quoted in Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 269).

### *Pride and Prejudice*

1. Kathleen Glancy was kind enough to read this chapter in proof. 'Your explanation is most ingenious', she concedes. But Miss Glancy is 'not wholly convinced. Charlotte may very well have scores to settle with some members of the Bennet family . . . Elizabeth, though, was the person whose friendship Charlotte valued most in the world and except for one unguarded reaction to the news of Charlotte's engagement—and Charlotte was *expecting* that—says and does nothing unkind to her. Would one careless remark be enough to rankle to the extent of making Charlotte want to ruin Elizabeth's chances of making a brilliant match?' Miss Glancy is not, as she says, 'wholly convinced'. On the other hand she sportingly offers a conjecture that 'might add weight to your theory. Mr Collins's letter to Mr Bennet, after his warning against Elizabeth's supposed engagement, goes on about his dear Charlotte's situation and expectation of an olive branch. Pregnancy can lead to mood swings and irrational behaviour, and it is easy to imagine that the thought of Lady Catherine dispensing advice on prenatal care and the rearing of the child and the awful possibility that it would resemble its father might prey on Charlotte's mind and cause her subconsciously to blame Elizabeth for her predicament. After all, if Elizabeth had accepted Mr Collins Charlotte wouldn't be pregnant by him.'

### *Mansfield Park*

1. Deirdre Le Faye, 'What was the History of Fanny Price's Mother?', *Jane Austen Society Report* for 1982 (pp. 213–15 of the *Collected Reports*, Vol. III, 1976–85).
2. For the vexed question of the date of the action of *Mansfield Park* see J. Sutherland, *Is Heathcliff a Murderer?* (London, 1996), 1–9.

3. Miss Le Faye makes enlightening comments on this chapter which she was kind enough to read in proof. On Mrs Norris's first name, Miss Le Faye notes: 'I think it was Dr [R. W.] Chapman who pointed out that as Mrs Norris is godmother to nasty little Betsy Price, it is probable that Mrs N.'s Christian name was Elizabeth'. This is neat and plausible. On the question of the sisters' 'portions' Miss Le Faye suggests that 'Miss Maria Ward may have had a separate fortune, from a godmother or grandmother perhaps. Or possibly the three sisters did each have £7,000—but Miss Ward was already too venomous and scared suitors off, perhaps? Maybe Miss Frances lost hers by making an unsuitable marriage?' On the runaway Bertram daughters, Miss Le Faye notes discriminatingly that 'in fact, both Maria and Julia Bertram elope—but Julia's is more literally the elopement, as she and Yates flee together to get married at Gretna Green, which was the classic form of elopement. Maria more correctly speaking *runs away* with Henry Crawford, knowing full well that marriage would not be possible for several years at least, while the ecclesiastical and civil divorce proceedings trundled on their ways. Miss Le Faye picks up, as I did not, that Lieutenant Price is 'disabled for active service' (p. 3). But, as she points out, 'we don't see or hear of the loss of a limb; and he certainly does not seem to suffer from tuberculosis or cancer; and is certainly capable of continuing to beget children. Does he have a bad rupture, perhaps? Or possibly some form of arthritis or rheumatism which might stiffen his arms and legs and so make it impossible to climb ladders, etc., aboard a ship? or to hold a gun to fire volleys? Bearing in mind that Nelson was perfectly able to continue an active career with only one arm and one eye, what can be wrong with Lieut. P. that he too can't serve actively?' All I can suggest is that 'disabled' here means not that Lieutenant Price is physically impaired, but that with the lull in the war there is no active service for him to perform; 'disabled' means 'unable'. I am aware this is a feeble retort to Miss Le Faye's witty conjectures. She reserves her most vigorous protest for my suggestion that Lieutenant Price is an abusive parent. 'He comes home to drink his rum and water—*doesn't* stay out boozing with the boys till all hours. And at home, he sits down *and reads the newspaper*—perfectly domesticated! Makes no complaint about his wife's incompetent housekeeping—*doesn't* go out with the town tarts but begets an honest and healthy and

goodlooking family. Admittedly he has no interest in Fanny when she returns to the fold, but then neither has her own mother—and he does give her a “cordial hug” on the first evening at least . . . *Not a brutal and harsh father!* Here I feel on stronger ground. Lieutenant Price’s first entry into the action is with an oath and a kick for Fanny’s band-box (p. 345). And, a couple of pages later, we are told that Fanny ‘could not respect her parents, as she had hoped. On her father, her confidence had not been sanguine, but he was more negligent of his family, his habits were worse, and his manners coarser, than she had been prepared for . . . he swore and he drank, he was dirty and gross’ (p. 354). I can’t think of another character in Jane Austen’s fiction who attracts this kind of censure. Given the prevailing decency of her fictional world, one can read a lot into those jarring words, ‘dirty and gross’. On the other hand Miss Le Faye is clearly right to point out that there is no evidence of physical violence. Would a contemporary social worker worry about the condition of the younger Price children? Miss Le Faye’s comments leave me in two minds about what Fanny’s father must have been like to share a small house with.

### Emma

1. In *Is Heathcliff a Murderer?* I committed an error of my own by confusing the Donwell outing with that to Box Hill, as a number of readers pointed out.
2. Constable’s paintings and sketches are reproduced in *The Early Paintings and Drawings of John Constable*, ed. Graham Reynolds (New Haven, 1996) and *The Later Paintings of John Constable*, ed. Graham Reynolds (New Haven, 1984).
3. Euan Nisbet, ‘In Retrospect’, *Nature* (10 July 1997), 9.

### Rob Roy

1. Notably Philip Gosse, see Edmund Gosse’s *Father and Son* (London, 1907).
2. See J. Sutherland, *The Life of Walter Scott* (Oxford, 1995), 205.
3. The bridge shown in this illustration is that which Scott mentions in his ‘Advertisement’ to the first edition of *Rob Roy*, dated 1 December 1817: ‘in point of minute accuracy, it may be stated that the bridge over the Forth, or rather the Avondhu (or Black River) near the hamlet of Aberfoil, had not an existence thirty years ago.’ Frank and Nicol Jarvie cross this as-yet-non-existent

bridge in 1715. On 27 May 1997 a news item appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* announcing that the inn at Aberfoil ‘used by Rob Roy is up for sale . . . it is unlikely to survive as a drinking den, as planning permission has been granted to convert it into a house with a small extension’.

### Frankenstein

1. In addition to Gothic ‘shockers’, one can cite D. H. Lawrence’s rewriting of the Gospel story, *The Man Who Died* (London, 1931).

### Oliver Twist

1. *Can Jane Eyre Be Happy?* (Oxford, 1997), 54.
2. In *Can Jane Eyre Be Happy?*, pp. 54–5, I noted that Fagin was based on the historical fence, Ikey Solomons. Philip Collins made this link earlier in his authoritative *Dickens and Crime* (London, 1962). The connection was contradicted by J. J. Tobias in *Prince of Fences: The Life of Ikey Solomons* (London, 1974), 147–50. Philip Collins accepts the correction in the preface to the third edition of his book, and courteously wrote correcting the perpetuated error in my book.

### Vanity Fair

1. ‘De Finibus’, in *Roundabout Papers*, the ‘Oxford’ edition of the works of Thackeray, ed. George Saintsbury, 17 vols. (London, 1908), xvii. 593.
2. Thackeray’s chapter title was probably inspired by Charles Lever’s military novel, *Tom Burke of Ours* (London, 1843).
3. See the explanatory notes to the Oxford World’s Classics edition of *Vanity Fair*, p. 892.

### Wuthering Heights

1. *Is Heathcliff a Murderer?*, 57.
2. See Keith Hollingsworth in *The Newgate Novel 1830–1847* (Detroit, 1963).
3. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Eugene Aram* (1834, repr. London, 1887), 57 (my emphasis).
4. *Ibid.* p. x (my emphasis).
5. Elizabeth Gaskell kept a diary of her daughter’s baby years, to present to the young woman in later life. It makes a number of