

THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

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Is Heathcliff a Murderer?

Great Puzzles in Nineteenth-Century
Literature

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readings offered here, and I have no doubt that many readers of World's Classics will come up with cleverer and more plausible solutions than mine. But I would argue that however far my solutions are fetched the problems which inspire them are not frivolous. It is worthwhile for readers to be curious where Sir Thomas Bertram's wealth comes from, or to wonder why *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is so 'queerly' disturbing, or to inquire why George Eliot and Henry James consciously flawed the printed endings to their greatest novels. It is less crucial, but no less thought-provoking, that Henry Esmond—the highly literate creation of a highly literate author—should quote from a work forty years before it will be written. The questions which have provoked this book are, I maintain, good questions.

I have a number of debts to acknowledge. David Lodge (who adapted the novel for television) drew my attention to the striking seasonal anomaly in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Rosemary Ashton corrected the *Middlemarch* chapter radically. Alison Winter helped with the 'science' in the *Jane Eyre* and *Oliver Twist* chapters. Philip Horne pointed out to me R. H. Hutton's meddling review of *The Portrait of a Lady*. Mac Pigman, as he has on previous occasions, assisted me with the typesetting of the book, and much of the research (to call it that) was done at the Henry E. Huntington Library, the most civilized place in the world to read Victorian novels.

J.S.

Jane Austen · *Mansfield Park*

*Where does Sir Thomas's wealth
come from?*

Edward Said's book *Culture and Imperialism*¹ was well received in the United States, but provoked some bad-tempered responses in the United Kingdom (notably in the *TLS*). The reason for the bad temper, one might suspect, was that as the imperial power principally targeted in his book's historical discussions there remained a legacy of colonists' guilt in Britain. Particular exception was taken by British commentators to Said's chapter 'Jane Austen and Empire', and its triumphant conclusion: 'Yes, Austen belonged to a slave-owning society' (p. 115). The central piece of evidence for a meaningful conjunction between the author of *Mansfield Park* and black men sweating under some sadistic overseer's whip is Sir Thomas Bertram's absence for the early stages of the novel in his estate in Antigua, during which period his unsupervised offspring put on a domestic production of Kotzebue's scandalous (for the time) play, *Lovers' Vows*.² Fanny Price, the waif who has been brought as a penniless young dependant to Mansfield Park, strenuously declines to participate in this godless activity. After various trials of her goodness she eventually wins the heart of the second son (and, given his elder brother's ruined health, prospective heir to the estate) Edmund, correcting in the process his wayward sense of vocation. (Edmund's 'ordination' as a clergyman was given by Austen in a cryptic remark in a letter as her novel's principal subject-matter, although

there is critical dispute about just what she meant; see p. xv). Finally, after a symbolic rejection of her sordid family home at Portsmouth, Fanny is adopted by Sir Thomas as the presiding spirit of Mansfield Park. Said sees her apotheosis as an installation of world-historical significance:

Like many other novels, *Mansfield Park* is very precisely about a series of both small and large dislocations and relocations in space that occur before, at the end of the novel, Fanny Price becomes the spiritual mistress of Mansfield Park. And that place itself is located by Austen at the centre of an arc of interests and concerns spanning the hemisphere, two major seas, and four continents. (p. 112)

Miss Fanny Price—one of the most retiring heroines in the history of English fiction—emerges transformed from Said's analysis as a pre-Victoria, empress (and oppressor) of a dominion over which the sun never sets.

According to Said: "The Bertrams could not have been possible without the slave trade, sugar, and the colonial planter class" (p. 112). But, "Sir Thomas's infrequent trips to Antigua as an absentee plantation owner reflect the diminishment of his class's power" (p. 113). Said is here building on two brief comments early in the novel's action. On page 20 the narrator records that Sir Thomas's circumstances "were rendered less fair than heretofore, by some recent losses on his West India Estate, in addition to his eldest son's [Tom's] extravagance". A little later, on page 26, Mrs Norris observes to Lady Bertram that Sir Thomas's means "will be rather straitened, if the Antigua estate is to make such poor returns". It is clear, however, that on her part Lady Bertram does not anticipate any serious "diminishment" of her family's position. "Oh! *that* will soon be settled", she tells Mrs Norris. And indeed, on his unexpected return, Sir Thomas confirms that he has been able to leave the West Indies early because "His

business in Antigua had latterly been prosperously rapid'. At the end of the novel, the Bertram estate—with Tom chastened and sober—seems on a sounder footing than ever.

Anyone attempting a historical reading should note that the period in which *Mansfield Park's* action is set (between 1805 and February 1811, when Jane Austen began writing) was not the period in which the British Empire fell, but the prelude to its extraordinary rise.³ The year following the novel's publication, 1815 (Waterloo year), marked the beginning of imperial Britain's century. If we follow Said, this imperial achievement was a bourgeois rather than an aristocratic thing. The co-opting of middle-class Fanny Price into the previously exclusively aristocratic enclave of Mansfield Park predicts the new bourgeois energies of nineteenth-century British imperialism. The patrician absentee landlord like Sir Thomas will yield to the earnest (and essentially middle-class) district commissioner, missionary, and colonial educator (the class represented most spectacularly by the Arnolds). Fanny Price leads on, inexorably, to that wonderful apostrophe to the battalions of British "Tom Browns" at the opening of Hughes's novel—ordinary young men and women from ordinary backgrounds, who have helped colour the bulk of the globe red.⁴

Said's insights are coolly argued and persuasive. They also supply an attractive way of teaching the novel, and will be adopted in any number of courses on post-coloniality and literature of oppression. Inevitably they will surface as orthodoxy in A level answers ("Austen belonged to a slave-owning society": Discuss.) There are, however, a number of problems. One obvious objection is that Jane Austen seems to take the Antigua business much less seriously than does Edward Said. Like the French wars (which get only the most incidental references

in *Persuasion*), Austen seems to regard affairs of empire as something well over the horizon of her novel's interests. So vague is her allusion to what Sir Thomas is actually doing abroad that Said is forced into the awkward speculation, 'Sir Thomas's property in the Caribbean *would have had to be* a sugar plantation maintained by slave labour (not abolished until the 1830s)' (my italics). Not necessarily. Since Jane Austen says nothing specific on the subject, the Bertrams could have had a farm supplying produce and timber to other plantations. And if, as Said claims, Sir Thomas is doing badly, it could be because he ill-advisedly chose to raise some other crop than sugar, or because he declines to use slave labour as heartlessly as his fellow plantation owners (there is, as we shall see, some evidence for this hypothesis).

There is one rather tantalizing reference to slavery in Volume 2, Chapter 3 of *Mansfield Park*. Fanny tells Edmund that 'I love to hear my uncle talk of the West Indies. I could listen to him for an hour together' (p. 177). She continues:

'I do talk to him more than I used. I am sure I do. Did not you hear me ask him about the slave trade last night?'

'I did—and was in hopes the question would be followed up by others. It would have pleased your uncle to be inquired of farther.'

'And I longed to do it—but there was such a dead silence!' (p. 178)

Dead silence pretty well describes *Mansfield Park's* dealing with Antigua generally. Edward Said gets round this absence of reference by a familiar critical move. Texts, just like their readers, have their repressed memories and their 'unconscious'. Austen's not mentioning colonial exploitation betrays neurotic anxiety on the subject. In his stressing absent presences, Said is following a trail flamboyantly blazed by Warren Roberts's monograph *Jane Austen and the French Revolution* (London, 1979), a work

written at the high tide of theoretic 're-reading' of classic texts. Roberts's line goes thus: as is well known, Jane Austen never mentions the French Revolution. Therefore it must be a central preoccupation, and its silent pressure can be detected at almost every point of her narratives. In *Mansfield Park*, Roberts argued for a quite specific time setting of 1805–7, when the French blockade had disastrous implications for the British sugar trade, forcing down the price to the growers from 55s. to 32s. a quintal. It is deduced that this 1805–7 crisis accounts for Sir Thomas's urgent trip to Antigua.

There is, however, nothing in the novel to confirm this historically significant date. If anything, the date markers which the narrative contains rather contradict 1805–7. There are clear references, for instance, to the *Quarterly Review* (which was not founded until 1809), Crabbe's *Tales* (not published until September 1812), and the imminent 1812 war with America. (See notes to pp. 94, 141.) These suggest a setting exactly contemporaneous with Jane Austen's writing the novel, 1811–13. On the other hand, references to *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (published in 1805) but none of Scott's subsequent poems, could be thought to confirm a setting of 1805–7. It remains a moot point.⁵ The strongest argument against an 1805–7 setting is, of course, the Crabbe reference. His *Tales* were published in September 1812 (by Hatchard, in two volumes). But, if one examines the relevant passage carefully, there is some warrant for thinking that Austen may not have had this specific 1812 publication in mind. Edmund, at the end of Volume 1, Chapter 16, asks Fanny: 'How does Lord Macartney go on?' Without waiting for answer he opens up some other volumes on the table which Fanny has apparently been reading: 'And here are Crabbe's *Tales*, and the *Idler*, at hand to relieve you, if you tire of your great book' (p. 141). The 'great book' is

identified as Lord Macartney's *Journal of the Embassy to China* (1807), which Fanny is dutifully reading since Sir Thomas is currently also on a trip abroad. It would make sense (from Edmund's ironic use of the term 'great') to assume it is a new book. And if one lower-cased the first letter of the Crabbe reference, so that it read 'and here are Crabbe's tales', it could as well refer to the much-reprinted *The Borough* or the verse stories in *Poems* (1807). Austen's manuscript, as R. W. Chapman reminds us, was not always precise on such details. There is at least sufficient uncertainty in the matter for one to consider carefully Roberts's 1805–7 hypothesis, and the elaborate superstructure he erects on it.

It remains, however, hypothetical in the extreme, and in passing one may note that Roberts's book marked a new gulf which had opened between the advanced literary critics of the academic world and the intelligent lay reader for whom, if Jane Austen or any other novelist did not mention something, it was because they did not think that something worth mentioning. *Jane Austen and the French Revolution* provoked one of the most amusing of *New Statesman* competitions, asking sportive readers of the magazine to come up with the most unlikely titles for literary critical works they could think of. The winner was the delightful: 'My Struggle, by Martin Amis.'

It will not, of course, do to laugh Edward Said's carefully laid arguments out of court. But one can question certain aspects of his reading of *Mansfield Park*. On historical grounds one can question Said's contention that Sir Thomas's wealth comes primarily from his colonial possessions and that his social eminence in Britain is entirely dependent on revenues from Antigua. During the Napoleonic War large landholders (as Sir Thomas clearly is) made windfall fortunes from agriculture, sheep-farming, and cattle-farming. (Although, as Marilyn Butler

points out, agricultural wages fell during the period, and southern England became 'a relatively depressed area', p. xiii.) Walter Scott—who had toyed with the idea of emigrating to the West Indies in 1797—discovered when he took over a farm at Ashestiel in 1805 that he could enrich himself by raising sheep, and by subletting portions of his rented agricultural land. It was the euphoria engendered by this bonanza that inspired him to go on a farm-buying spree around his 'cottage' (later a baronial mansion) at Abbotsford.⁶ It led to disaster when the value of agricultural land and produce slumped in the post-war period, after 1815. If *Mansfield Park* is set at some point around 1805–13 (taking the most relaxed line on the question), Sir Thomas may conceivably have been coining it from rented and agent-managed farms on his estate. If so, *Mansfield Park* itself would have been the main source of his income, and would have compensated for any Caribbean shortfall.

According to Said, the fact that Fanny Price shows so little concern about what goes on Antigua is a measure of how successful the imperialist ideology was in neutralizing 'significant opposition or deterrence at home' (p. 97). This most artificial of economic arrangements—a small, northern island sucking wealth from a Caribbean island by means of workers forcibly expatriated from Africa—was rendered a fact of nature. Something so natural, in fact, that it provoked no more comment than the sun's rising in morning and setting at night. It is a beguiling argument. But it can be objected that there was indeed 'significant opposition' to the colonial exploitation of slaves in England in the early nineteenth century, and that Fanny Price—particularly as elevated by Sir Thomas's favour after his return from Antigua—would have been in the forefront of it. It is useful, in making this point, to look at an earlier critical commentary. Interest in the

Antigua dimension of *Mansfield Park* is, as it happens, of fairly long standing. The first detailed reference I have come across is by Stephen Fender (a critic specializing in immigration studies) in 1974, in a conversation recorded for a publisher of educational tapes for British sixth-formers. Fender asked:

Can it be said that Jane Austen is concerned with the 'real' social life of her time? The answer is yes. The house, Mansfield Park, no longer fills its 'ideal' rôle, its members no longer fulfil their functions. Tom Bertram's relationship with the land is occasional and predatory—he only comes home to hunt—and the land no longer supports the house. Its wealth is from Antigua which produced sugar which had been worked by slaves. The Wilberforce anti-slavery movement was at its height when *Mansfield Park* was written and its contemporary readers would see that the house was, in a sense, 'alienated' from its environment. Perhaps in this context it is significant that the moral inheritor of the true values of 'Mansfield Park' is Fanny Price, the outsider.⁷

Fender's point is that *Mansfield Park* is as much a novel about the English class system and its resilient modes of regeneration as it is about British imperialism. One should also note that the novel contains clear indications that Fanny Price belongs to the Clapham Sect of evangelical Christianity, which hated plays and light morality only slightly less than it loathed slavery. Her prejudices are centrally aligned with those of the sect's 'Reform of Manners' campaign. These evangelicals were mobilized politically by William Wilberforce, who allied them with the British abolitionist movement. It may well have been Wilberforce's successful bill for the abolition of slavery in 1807 which inspired Fanny's artless question to Sir Thomas about slaves. Wilberforce's bill remained a dead letter until, five years after his death in 1838, slavery in the West Indies was finally abolished. But, it is safe to say,

Fanny would have been on the side of the abolitionists from the first—as much a hater of human slavery in 1811 as she was a distruster of domestic theatricals, and from the same evangelical motives.⁸

If we take the Antigua dimension of *Mansfield Park* seriously, reading more into it than the slightness of textual references seem to warrant, it is clear that far from buttressing the crumbling imperial edifice Fanny will, once she has power over the estate, join her Clapham brethren in the abolitionist fight. Jane Austen (in 1814) may well, as Edward Said reminds us, have belonged to a slave-owning society. Fanny Price's creator died in 1817, while slave owning was still a fact of British imperial rule, whatever the Westminster law-books said. Fanny Price, we apprehend, will survive to the 1850s, before dying as Lady Bertram, surrounded with loving grandchildren and a devoted husband, now a bishop with distinctly 'low', Proudie-like tendencies. Both of them will take pride in the fact that there is no taint of slave-riches in their wealth—and that England has rid herself of the shameful practice of human bondage a full decade before the French, and no less than thirty years before the Americans. Fanny Price, and her docile husband, will certainly have done their bit to bringing this happy end about.⁹

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

Notes

Mansfield Park

1. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London, 1993).
2. Kotzebue's play, 'The Natural Son' was first produced in England, translated as *Lovers' Vows*, 1798–1800. Mrs Inchbald's translation (which is presumably what is used by the amateur troupe at Mansfield Park) is printed as a supplement to R. W. Chapman's edition of the novel, in *The Novels of Jane Austen*, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1934). *Mansfield Park* is volume 3 in the set.
3. According to Chapman, the composition of *Mansfield Park* was begun 'about February 1811' and finished 'soon after June 1813'.
4. The World's Classics edition of Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays* is edited by Andrew Sanders.
5. In an appendix on the chronology of the novel, Chapman deduces (from internal evidence) that Austen used almanacs of 1808–9 in order to arrange day-to-day, month-to-month events and episodes in the novel. But she did not necessarily identify the historical period as that year. Chapman sees the question of historical dating as ultimately unfixable; 'As to the "dramatic" date of the story, the indications are slight. It is probably hopeless to seek to identify the "strange business" in America. Many strange things happened in those years. The *Quarterly Review* was first published in 1809 (and therefore could not have been read at Sotherton in 1808). Crabbe's *Tales* (1812) are mentioned. A state of war is implied throughout, and there is no mention of foreign travel, except Sir Thomas's perilous voyage' (p. 556).
6. See chapter 13 of Lockhart's *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.* (London, 1836, much reprinted) describing Scott's removal to the small farm of Ashiestiel, and the advantageous economic arrangement it represented.
7. *Mansfield Park*, Stephen Fender and J. A. Sutherland, Audio Learning Tapes (London, 1974).
8. For the role of evangelicalism in *Mansfield Park* see Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford, 1975), 219–49; and the same writer's essay 'History, Politics, and Religion' in (ed.) J. David Grey, *The Jane Austen Handbook* (London, 1986).

Professor Butler convincingly argues that the evangelicals of the early nineteenth century are not to be confused with the lower-class evangelicals of the Victorian period; 'During the war against France and against "revolutionary principles", pressure for a renewed commitment to religious and moral principle was not so much petit bourgeois as characteristic of the gentry' (p. 204).

9. The whole business of 'Slavery and the Chronology of *Mansfield Park*' was revived in a lively article by Brian Southam in the *TLS* ('The Silence of the Bertrams'), 17 Feb. 1995. The key assumption in Southam's argument is that the 1812 publication of Crabbe's *Tales*—and the information that Sir Bertram returns in October—enables us to 'pinpoint the course of events'. The chronology Southam deduces is as follows: 'Sir Thomas and Tom leave for Antigua about October 1810; Tom returns about September 1811; Sir Thomas writes home, April 1812; Fanny in possession of Crabbe's *Tales*, published September 1812; Sir Thomas returns, late October 1812; Edmund turns to Fanny, summer 1813' (p. 13). Southam correlates this schedule of events with the evolution of the slave trade, following the Abolition Act of 1807. Convincing as Southam's argument is, I remain somewhat sceptical that Jane Austen would expect her readers to register September 1812 as the publication date of Crabbe's *Tales* (much of his poetry has an earlier publication date), and the detail may have been as loosely installed in her mind as in those of the bulk of her readers, who would simply recall the volume as a 'recent' publication. It may also be, as I argue above, that '*Tales*' should be read as the less precisely dateable 'tales'.

Waverley

1. *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Sir Herbert Grierson (London, 1932–7), iii. 478–9.
2. John Hill Burton, *The History of Scotland from the Revolution to the Extinction of the Last Jacobite Insurrection, 1698–1748*, 2 vols. (London, 1853), ii. 463.
3. See chapter 7 of Lockhart's *Life of Scott*.