



Absent Signifiers in Jane Austen: Toward an Archaeology of Morals

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Mona Scheuermann. *Reading Jane Austen* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
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It is probably a sign of the times that contemporary readers can find so much to enjoy in a discussion of the moral values at work in Austen's world. Nothing is more difficult to convey in a college classroom today than the concept of decorum with all its ramifications, social to aesthetic. Yet students gravitate toward the concept and desperately want to understand it. Mona Scheuermann has performed a great service to teachers and students alike in this study of Austen's moral compass, her abiding commitment to right relations amongst members of her society. It may sound naive to us, but people were expected to be decent, thoughtful, honest, and good, especially within their own class. Even across class boundaries there were rules of respect and charity. Though Austen's novels are conspicuously concerned with love, Scheuermann argues convincingly that any wholesome love is contingent on morality, that, for example, Elizabeth Bennet needs to discover that Darcy is a good man before she can open herself to feelings of affection toward him. No small share of credit for the Austen revival in our time must attach to the novelist's firm conception of civil, decent, rational conduct in complex human situations.

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81

Scheuermann takes issue with a view common among critics that Austen's morality simply defends the status quo. The last chapter of this book reviews the turbid political history in Austen's lifetime and sufficiently reminds us of the threats to received values. Yet Austen's novels seem almost immune to those threats. Scheuermann explains, "So self-evident are her values for Austen that she does not write in defense of the status quo: for that to be the case, she would have had to recognize a challenge to that structure and be responding to it" (10). Modern readers have real difficulty understanding a novelist of such depth and complexity whose moral codes are so fixed and assured. But we seem to like her anyway. Those fixed codes are also most particularly demanded of the upper classes who populate her novels. One of Scheuermann's most valuable contributions is in lacing her analysis of Austen's morality with specimens from contemporary moral literature like Thomas Gisborne's *An Enquiry into the Duties of Men in the Higher and Middle Classes of Society* (1794). In this popular conduct book, we find the phrase "truths universally acknowledged" that Austen later applied to eligible men of fortune, but Gisborne attaches it without irony to the duties detailed in his handbook. Those duties establish the order and structure of a successful society, Austen would agree, and Scheuermann connects them with lines from Pope's *Essay on Man* (1733–34, which are strangely printed with center-justification in this book). Assumptions about correct morality, Scheuermann argues, transcend political divisions in Austen's time. Hannah More and Mary Wollstonecraft may have been poles apart politically, but when they wrote on the education and conduct of young women, "their advice was identical" (4).

Austen expected a degree of rigor and integrity from her "Higher and Middle Classes" that can easily escape recognition by readers in today's relatively classless societies. But she was certainly not alone. Coleridge's important lay sermons expose their assumptions in their full titles: *The Statesman's Manual; or the Bible the Best Guide to Political Skill and Foresight: A Lay Sermon, Addressed to the Higher Classes of Society* (1816) and *A Lay Sermon Addressed to the Higher and Middle Classes, on the Existing Distresses and Discontents* (1817). By specifying his intended readership, Coleridge hoped to achieve a greater degree of intimacy and unanimity, preconditions, he thought, for successfully engaging his readers and transforming their deepest values. Austen's novels have had a more diverse, less predictable readership, and today we may need a little coaching as we search the paths of moral judgment that earlier generations would have found instinctively.

Scheuermann's careful investigation of Austen's "moral tapestry" is limited to what she considers the four major novels, omitting *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility*. Though she never explains their secondary status, I would

guess that she considers the former an unreliable moral authority, owing to its elements of gothic parody. This view should be challenged. The wry and intrusive narrator of that novel holds firm moral values, every bit as firm as those in later works. The treachery of Isabella Thorpe and her subsequent punishment illustrate exactly the lesson Catherine Morland needs to learn. No matter how “horrid” gothic literature may be, real human relationships must be founded on more than sex, glamour, and money. Of course, Austen herself might dispute whether money should be included on that list. Recall Marianne’s key conversation with her sister early in *Sense and Sensibility* (volume 1, chapter 17):

“What have wealth or grandeur to do with happiness?”

“Grandeur has but little,” said Elinor, “but wealth has much to do with it.”

“Elinor, for shame!” said Marianne, “money can only give happiness where there is nothing else to give it. Beyond a competence, it can afford no real satisfaction, as far as mere self is concerned.”

“Perhaps,” said Elinor, smiling, “we may come to the same point. *Your* competence and *my* wealth are very much alike, I dare say; and without them, as the world goes now, we shall both agree that every kind of external comfort must be wanting.”

Like Elinor, Scheuermann argues that money is nothing to sneer at in Austen’s moral universe, that the proper stewardship of money and land is a key virtue to be examined in her characters. It remains puzzling that Scheuermann chooses to bypass these early novels and focus on the later ones.

But her excellent study of *Mansfield Park*, which occupies the most extensive section of the book, makes us forgive her omissions. She discovers four moral episodes that constitute the core of the novel: the decision of the Bertrams to take their poor niece, Fanny Price, into their home to be raised, a common occurrence even in Austen’s own family; the significant implications of landscape “improvement”; the ambiguities of staging *Lovers’ Vows* in a family home; and the untying of all the romantic intrigues in the novel’s end. Scheuermann wants us to see this novel as an accurate depiction of Austen’s society and its mixed moralities, not as the problem novel many have found. From this perspective, “the extended moral explorations in the novel that seem to a modern reader to slow the action of the book become central to that action” (14). As in the earlier novels, money and morality are closely tied. Tom Bertram’s extravagant lifestyle deprives Edmund of the family living. Edmund’s choice of profession in the church distances him from the ambitious Mary Crawford, whose existence requires a more ample flow of cash. Even Fanny herself, though hardly a great expense to her hosts at Mansfield Park, learns from

1 them a style of life, of manners, of graciousness, that fits her poorly for the
 2 temporary return to her noisy family in Portsmouth, late in the novel. "There
 3 is no ambiguity," Scheuermann argues, "about the fact that wealth is good.
 4 Wealth should be used in the furtherance of morality, and to sacrifice other
 5 values simply in pursuing an extra-huge fortune as opposed to a very decent
 6 competence . . . certainly is bad" (15). Either extravagance or miserliness is a
 7 moral failing in Austen's view. This is clearly why so many important human
 8 relationships are predicated on financial conditions in the novels. The right
 9 use of money gauges a person's character. The absence of money will not be
 10 fatal, of course, as we can see in the case of Fanny Price, whose moral probity
 11 compensates for the absence of any fortune, at least in the mind of Sir Thomas
 12 Bertram (not "Lord Bertram": baronets were not peers). A moral education is
 13 just as important as having the resources for making or sustaining a fortune. In
 14 the case of the Bertram girls, whose lives ultimately fall apart, Scheuermann,
 15 citing More and Wollstonecraft, lays the blame squarely at the pampered feet
 16 of Lady Bertram. "Their education is sorely lacking at the moral level" (20),
 17 and according to the mores of the time, it is the upper-class mother who bears
 responsibility for that.

18 Money and morality merge in issues about stewardship of the land. Just
 19 as Elizabeth Bennet's immediate experience of Pemberley helps transform her
 20 opinion of its owner's character, so also, but in opposite ways, should Mr.
 21 Rushworth's decision to make improvements to his estate at Sotherton sink
 22 him in our eyes. With some apt historical research, Scheuermann demon-
 23 strates that Austen's contemporaries regarded estate "improvement" with sus-
 24 picion: "The whole idea of improvement to properties that are just fine in the
 25 first place is a scam offered to separate those who are well off but not too bright
 26 from the resources that they are too stupid to husband properly" (28). Nothing
 27 more clearly evidences the moral difference between Fanny Price and Mary
 28 Crawford than their opinions over Sotherton. Fanny romantically laments the
 29 plan to chop an avenue of trees. Mary approves the employment of the cel-
 30 ebrated Humphry Repton even at five guineas a day (about \$400 in today's
 31 terms, not outrageous), presumably on the condition that he supply them with
 32 an ostentatious plaque advertising his work. The debate about the improvement
 33 of nature was long-standing, but moral "improvement" in the novel is just as
 34 debatable. Despite the fact that characters' responses to these proposals signify
 35 their moral rectitude, Scheuermann rejects those who see "improvement" as
 36 wholly symbolic: "No one in the novel 'improves'" (28). Her discussion of the
 37 debate about religion initiated by the visit to the chapel at Sotherton is one of
 38 the best parts of her book. Here she establishes the affinity between Fanny's
 39 or Edmund's respect for religion and Austen's own attitude. As she says later,
 "Austen takes her religion seriously" (59).

Much of Scheuermann's interest in *Mansfield Park* represents a courteous dissent from the approach of those like Claudia Johnson, who claim Austen's purpose there is "to turn conservative myth sour." "Quite the contrary, Austen believes absolutely in the ideals and the moral position that Fanny and Edmund represent" (37). Austen's real nemesis is the modern propensity for abandoning moral judgment and ignoring proper conduct, especially in aesthetic judgment. The importance of judgment and conduct become apparent when we consider the staging of a German play, *Lovers' Vows* (by Kotzebue, adapted by Inchbald) at Mansfield Park. Here, for all but Fanny and Edmund, European sentiment trumps English decorum. Scheuermann concludes:

Lovers' Vows shows that chastity is not essential for happiness, that seduction does not necessarily blight a man's character and even that a child born without social or legal sanction may grow up to be the respectable heir to fortune and position. Edmund and Fanny are absolutely right [to object to its performance], and Austen means us to notice that justification. Her contemporary readers would have understood this; it is time, distance, and political correctness that make it difficult for modern readers to realize quite how properly Edmund and Fanny behave. (47)

Edmund's propriety appears also in his refusal to collect the income from his living, while hiring a curate to perform his clerical duties. Nonresident clergy were seen as a disgrace to the church, and Edmund will not be an "absent signifier," not even to win the smiles of Mary Crawford.

Scheuermann observes that *Mansfield Park* is the only novel in which Austen "actually shows, rather than hints at, the difference between civilized upper-class existence and the scrambling, inevitable coarseness of the financially deprived" (66). Life in Fanny's old home at Portsmouth is cheap, brutish, and dehumanizing. Family ties have decayed, interaction is coarse, the lifestyle is needlessly squalid. The Bertram home may provide no more emotional support for Fanny than her parents did, but "Mansfield Park in comparison with Portsmouth is heaven to Fanny. . . . In the world Austen creates, harmony and good manners are as important as, if not more important than, emotional fulfillment" (71-72). Austen never sentimentalizes home, sweet home. Instead she suggests that poverty and bad manners lead to a breakdown of social order, and by contrast, good manners themselves possess the power of civilizing, preparing the ground for meaningful relationships. This is why, in the end, "the relationship of the individual to the larger family and community circle is almost as important as that between the man and wife" (82). In Portsmouth, Fanny faces severe obstacles and accomplishes only a little in the way of civilizing, mainly with Susan and William. But back at Mansfield Park, Fanny enters

into “a net of interleaving social relationships that are mutually enhancing” (83). As Austen says near the end, “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” (volume 3, chapter 17). Immoral conduct has consequences, though, and by contrast to Fanny and Edmund, Maria Bertram Rushworth finds herself consigned to the fringes: “Julia’s [*sic*, it should be Maria’s] situation presents the only real loss, as her actions preclude her reinstatement into decent society” (79). *Mansfield Park*, Scheuermann convincingly argues, is a novel about decorum.

In *Pride and Prejudice* the characters represent stable class categories, but their morality is not always appropriate to their class. Most of the drama in the novel derives not from the love plots, but from uncertainties about moral character. For Austen “true aristocracy inextricably is tied to social responsibility” (90), but as *Mansfield Park* has shown, the aristocracy is not all true. Scheuermann is not shy about ascribing moral excellence to Jane and Elizabeth, or demonstrating how Elizabeth and Darcy’s courtship is contingent upon resolving moral issues between them. Morality is not just someone else’s problem but a way of making sense of one’s own self. Elizabeth’s receptiveness to the housekeeper’s testimony at Pemberley (misspelled throughout) enables her to reassess Darcy. As elsewhere, Scheuermann usefully contextualizes this housekeeper by comparison with characters in Hannah More and others, recognizing in her the type of the satisfied servant. All is in good order at Pemberley. Good manners, good fellowship, good food, even good fishing. The final declaration of love between Elizabeth and Darcy is not a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” but a reasonable resolution of shared values.

Scheuermann’s study of *Emma* illuminates “the only really serious moral error she commits in the novel” (127), insulting Miss Bates at Box Hill, and thereby reveals a great deal about how class and morality are related in the microcosm that is Highbury. Occasionally, as in the case of Harriet Smith and Robert Martin, I would take issue with Scheuermann’s concept of class. Early in her volume, she observes that there are people like Harriet who “should not be in polite society and who, rightfully, by the end of the novel are returned to the lower-class level where their family background should place them” (88). Yet Harriet turns out to be not just the “natural daughter of somebody” (volume 1, chapter 3), but “the daughter of a tradesman, rich enough to afford her the comfortable maintenance which had ever been hers, and decent enough to have always wished for concealment” (volume 3, chapter 19). Scheuermann herself later recognizes Robert Martin’s social respectability: “Robert Martin is above Harriet in all ways” (120). Martin, a member of the yeomanry, is hardly part of the lower class such as Emma visits with charitable designs elsewhere in the novel. He is risen just enough to allow Emma to snub him without being

guilty of heartlessness. Emma tells Harriet, "The yeomanry are precisely the order of people with whom I feel I can have nothing to do. A degree or two lower, and a creditable appearance might interest me; I might hope to be useful to their families in some way or other. But a farmer can need none of my help, and is, therefore, in one sense, as much above my notice as in every other he is below it" (volume 1, chapter 4). Knightley feels very differently, of course. Given Knightley's deep interest in his tenant's welfare, I find it hard to agree with Scheuermann that "Harriet and Emma will live in quite separate and not intersecting worlds after they are married" (120). Even though, as Austen says, their intimacy "must sink" and be replaced by "a calmer sort of goodwill," why should we assume they become strangers to each other any more than Knightley and Martin are?

In *Persuasion*, Austen's introduction of naval officers in major roles complicates the class structure. Scheuermann notes, "Unlike the comment in *Emma* about everyone rejoining his own place after a ball, in *Persuasion* Austen rejects rigid class lines, emphasizing instead the value of the individual" (155). Individual merit, individual conduct outweighs birth or fortune. You make your name by independent action. The naval lists are just as important as the baronetage (or the clerical lists in *Mansfield Park*). Early in the novel, when Sir Walter Elliot and his steward discuss Admiral Croft's fitness to lease Kellynch-hall, they connect him with a former neighbor, a gentleman named Wentworth. They remain at a loss for details until Anne supplies them from her vivid memory. Scheuermann accidentally misrepresents the relation between the Crofts and the Wentworths, stating, "Admiral Croft, it turns out, is the brother of Mrs. Wentworth, the wife of Frederick's brother" (140). No, Admiral Croft is related to the Wentworths only by marriage, not by blood. Sophy Croft, his wife, is sister to the forgettable Rev. Edward Wentworth, curate of Monkford. Their brother, Captain Frederick Wentworth, first met Anne Elliot eight years earlier in a visit to his brother's parish in the vicinity of Kellynch-hall. Anne has not forgotten, will never forget. And the family resemblance of these three siblings is important in *Persuasion*. Sophy Croft is probably the most happily married woman in the novel and as such brings long-absent felicity back to Kellynch-hall. Furthermore, she represents the contentment that can be enjoyed in a naval marriage, an important exemplar for her brother and Anne. Sir Walter remains clueless and dismisses the Wentworths altogether: "Mr. Wentworth was nobody, I remember; quite unconnected." By contrast to this aristocratic complacency, the meritocracy and moral code of the navy seem far advanced.

Scheuermann would have us resist a simple choice between decadent aristocracy and naval meritocracy, however. She demonstrates that Austen insists on a proper morality at every place in society. Sir Walter exemplifies immoral-

ity in his relationships, his financial conduct, his self-obsession, etc. Likewise, Mr. William Walter Elliot shows his irresponsibility in marriage, in scorning his birth, in squandering his fortune. By contrast, Captain Wentworth honors his commitments, respects his friends, prospers in his profession, and cares for others. Moral probity appears in women as well as in men. So does immorality. By asking us to bear in mind the fundamental choices of right and wrong, Scheuermann invites a new, rich reading of Austen that helps us all respond to her vision. Our choices are never simple, but there are still principles to guide them.



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