

Mary Crawford and the Christian Heroine

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It is a matter of commonplace that *Mansfield Park* is Jane Austen's most controversial novel—perhaps even, in some ways a failure.¹ Fanny Price who occupies the central position in mediating what is widely thought to be Jane Austen's point of view, is, in fact, almost completely antipathetic to the attitude to life revealed by Jane's correspondence with her sister, Cassandra; while Mary Crawford—having won our approval by her good natured intelligence and vivacity—is cast aside, not merely as a threat to Fanny's romance—what Angus Wilson has called 'the dusty union', but as a comprehensive danger to the very foundations of the *Mansfield* estate, and by extension, to the stability of the whole fabric of society at a critical period of revolutionary ferment. It is also largely agreed that Jane Austen's supposed intention of writing a novel on the theme of ordination—with all that this implies of a conservative political philosophy—led her to abandon the ironic mode and even compelled her to impose an arbitrary didactic conclusion upon the plot so that virtue might be almost as glibly and sentimentally rewarded as in *Pamela*.

Ironically, much of the misunderstanding and confusion seems to have arisen because it has been believed that Jane Austen wrote her novel under the influence of Evangelical Christianity with all that this implies of regeneration and enthusiasm and disapproval of the smartly decadent values of fashionable London society. This critical response sees *Mansfield Park* as Jane Austen's response to the issues of her time—a response in which the religious affirmations of the debate in the chapel at Sotherton and Edmund's impending commitment to the duties of Thornton Lacey are balanced by secular responsibilities to the management of the estate. In this thematic reading Jane Austen assumes the mantle of Edmund Burke; and clearly, the coherence of such a reading has much to recommend it. If not distinctly Evangelical, Jane Austen was at least the daughter of a Tory parson, and as a rational pessimist, largely immune to the currently fashionable theories of human perfectibility. Nevertheless, I believe such a view is at best an over-simplification and fails to allow for the particular refinement of her moral perception and the extraordinary depth of her

¹ *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*. Marilyn Butler. Oxford 1975. pp. 248-249.

ironic vision—a vision which frequently found expression by means of a subtle and pervasive ambivalence. Jane Nardin touches on the point when she argues that Jane Austen's moral affirmations are always qualified by critical and ironic reservations.

The basis of the misunderstanding has been the punctuation of Jane Austen's letter of January 29th 1813, in which she is thought to have said that her next book would be about ordination.² It has recently been noticed that this is an error and that a better punctuation takes 'ordination' from the sentence and establishes it as part of a brief expression of gratitude in answer to some enquiry. This new understanding removes not only a somewhat intractable problem but also undermines the erroneous basis on which so much further misunderstanding has been built. The second important argument for the Evangelical theory has been the frequently quoted extract from Jane Austen's letter to her niece of November 18th 1814.

And as to there being any objection from his *Goodness*, from the danger of his becoming even Evangelical, I cannot admit *that*. I am by no means convinced that we ought not all to be Evangelicals and am at least persuaded that they who are so from Reason and Feeling, must be happiest and safest.

Even if this passage is taken in isolation, and quite apart from her other explicitly disparaging remarks, it is difficult not to feel that it demands careful qualification.³ Obviously the context is important and here two things are worth remarking: if Jane Austen really held pro-Evangelical views they would almost certainly be familiar to a favourite niece who was a regular correspondent and it could only be because she did *not* hold any such position that her remark served to reinforce her point that there was nothing to worry about in John Plumtree's goodness. The full force of the comparison lies in the hostile qualification 'even'. When we turn to the largely rhetorical 'I am by no means convinced that we ought not all to be Evangelicals . . .' it is apparent immediately that by using a double negative Jane Austen has signalled her distance from genuine affirmation. In fact she was writing (perhaps rather in the spirit of Mrs Gardiner) about how her niece should respond to the proposals of a staid admirer and her letter—which was largely contradicted in the next—did no more than offer a guarded opinion that goodness—carrying here connotations of

2 See discussion, *The Double Life of Jane Austen*. Jane Aiken Hodge. Hodder and Stoughton 1972. Also *A Jane Austen Companion* p. 102 by F. B. Pinion; *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, by Marilyn Butler. p. 236.

3 Disparaging remarks such as: 'I do not like the Evangelicals' 1808 and (1816). 'We do not much like Mr Cooper's new Sermons—they are fuller of Regeneration and Conversion than ever—with the addition of his zeal in the cause of the Bible Society.'

dullness— need not be an insuperable barrier *even* when carried to Evangelical lengths. It is remarkable that such a tepid piece of ‘approval’ should ever have been thought to provide evidence for Jane Austen’s religious position. But perhaps this is scarcely more strange than the way in which critics have diverged on the subject—some seeing her as a Christian novelist; (and Fanny as her most Christian heroine) while for others her accessibility to modern readers owes a great deal to her sceptical indifference to religious questions and her hostile treatment of the clergy.⁴

Gilbert Ryle, while acknowledging that Jane Austen may perhaps have been ‘personally pious’ argues:

Yet hardly a whisper of piety enters into even the most serious and most anguished meditations of her heroines. They never pray and they never give thanks on their knees. Three of her heroes go into the church, and Edmund has to defend his vocation against the cynicism of the Crawfords. But not a hint is given that he regards his clerical duty as the saving of souls. Routine church-going on Sunday with the rest of the family gets a passing mention three or four times, and Fanny is once stated to be religious. But that is all. . . . Her heroines face their moral difficulties and solve their moral problems without recourse to religious faith or theological doctrines. . . .⁵

Other writers are more doubtful of the personal piety, not withstanding Jane’s three recorded prayers, conventional death bed and family encomiums. Jane Alkin Hodge remarks that ‘contact with loud and noisy exponents of the then popular religious phase made her reticent almost to a fault’⁶ and Norman Page has pointed out that if we enquire about the source of Jane Austen’s ‘moral and ethical standards’, the answer is likely to be found in terms of social rather than spiritual convictions.⁷ Certainly her novels are characterised by the almost complete omission of any

⁴ Marilyn Butler, Lionel Trilling and others support the Christian view: Jane Aiken Hodge writes a little strangely, (p. 138) *The Double Life of Jane Austen: Mansfield Park* is her Pilgrim’s Progress, with Edmund and Fanny, the Christian hero and heroine, fighting their way through temptation towards a not very clearly defined goal.

⁵ Jane Austen and the Moralists, by Gilbert Ryle, from *Critical Essays* by B. C. Southam, p. 117. Similar views are to be found in Jane Austen’s Novels, *A Study in Structure* by Andrew H. Wright p. 28 1953; and *The Double Life of Jane Austen* p. 14 ‘her characters make moral decisions in the same kind of climate of unknowing.’

⁶ Elizabeth Jenkins wrote some time earlier (1938): ‘It is the tradition of her family that though she was very devout, she so much distrusted the exploiting of religious feeling that she was almost exaggerated in her reserve about her own.’ *Jane Austen* p. 132. On the other hand Mrs Oliphant reviewing the *Austen Leigh Memoirs* says that the amiable tolerance of Jane Austen’s attitude has ‘none of the sweetness which proceeds from the highest Christian graces—it is not charity.’

⁷ *The Language of Jane Austen*, by Norman Page. Basil Blackwell 1972. p. 88.

reference to God and are in this respect remarkably close to the general tenor of her correspondence. Even the occasion of her father's death received only the most perfunctory of religious conventionalities.⁸ When we turn to the novels the evidence is almost entirely hostile to religious association. Those of her clergymen who are seen in active roles are uniformly worldly and all too often sycophantic and ridiculous besides.⁹ The young men in orders who are attractive—and the attraction is in proportion to the flippancy—are all living the lives of ordinary gentlemen. Appropriately Mary Crawford reminds Fanny 'there is no distinction of dress nowadays . . .' and of Edmund as rector of Thornton Lacey we see nothing at all. Norman Page observed that while some people have regarded adultery as carrying the greatest weight of condemnation in Jane Austen's novels, it is in fact the clerical widow, Mrs Norris, who is "presented with an unusual and barely-suppressed moral indignation."¹⁰ Within her own family circle it was her least favourite brother James (who had succeeded her father in the living at Steventon on all too favourable terms) that she describes in a way highly reminiscent of a Dr Grant or a Mr Collins:

" . . . his chat seems all forced, his opinions on many points too much copied from his Wife's and his time here is spent I think in walking about the House, banging the doors, or ringing the bell for a glass of water." 1807¹¹

To some extent our attitude to Jane Austen's personal commitment to Christianity must depend upon which of her heroines appears to speak most nearly for the author. In this connexion one letter in which Jane Austen refers to the engagement of her niece, Anne Austen and Ben Lefroy is particularly useful.

'Upon its being made rather a serious question, (he) says he has not made up his mind as to taking orders so early, and that if his father makes a point of it, he must give up Anne rather than do what he does not approve. He must be maddish.'¹²

It seems hardly a comment to have appealed to Fanny Price and is certainly significant in distancing the values of Mansfield from Jane Austen's private code. There seems little doubt, unless we follow E. M. Forster in distinguishing between 'the Miss Austen who wrote trivial, ill-bred and sententious letters, and the Jane

⁸ Letter 40. Dated Monday 21 January 1805.

⁹ 'What vile creatures her parsons are'. Newman. See Avrom Fleishman p. 88 Note 5.

¹⁰ *The Language of Jane Austen*, Norman Page, p. 89. F. B. Pinion's comment which seems to me particularly sound is also worth comparing:

'Jane Austen's antipathy to mercenary heartless people was almost obsessional.'

¹¹ See also Letter 81 of 3 July 1813 about a clergyman's marriage.

¹² The point appears to have been first noted by Jane Aiken Hodge in *The Double Life of Jane Austen* p. 148.

Austen who composed the novels' that for most people the voice of the lively amusing correspondent is heard again most distinctly in Elizabeth Bennett. Nor in fact, need we rely wholly upon such possibly coincidental similarities as a fondness for walking or a reservation about someone who 'seems to like people rather too easily'.¹³ At the very time she was completing *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen wrote of Elizabeth Bennett:

I must confess that I think her as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print, and how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like *her* at least I do not know.¹⁴

That same year on her visit to the summer exhibition in Spring Gardens she noticed Mrs Bingley 'a small portrait—excessively like her', but was quite unable to find Mrs Darcey whom—she had supposed—would be wearing yellow. In a postscript written later that evening—she had since been to a second exhibition—Jane Austen referred to her disappointment, 'there was nothing like Mrs D at either.'¹⁵ It seems not unlikely that this repeated failure to find Elizabeth among the exhibition portraits was really because, in all essentials, Elizabeth Bennett was herself looking at them.

Critics as distinct in their views as Marvin Mudrick and Lionel Trilling have drawn our attention to the similarity which exists between Elizabeth Bennett and Mary Crawford—a point which, if conceded, also extends to relate Mary Crawford and Jane Austen. The implications of Lionel Trilling's comment, as noted by Robert Garis, are that by her repudiation of Mary Crawford, Jane Austen was, in effect, attacking herself and the irreverent side of her character so often to be seen in her letters, with 'quiet ruthlessness.'¹⁶

. . . to outward seeming Mary Crawford of *Mansfield Park* is another version of Elizabeth Bennett, and . . . the antithesis of Fanny Price. The boldness with which the antithesis is contrived is typical of the uncompromising honesty of *Mansfield Park*. Mary Crawford is conceived—is calculated—to win the charmed admiration of almost any reader. She is all pungency and wit. Her mind is as lively and competent as her body. . . . Irony is her natural mode and we are drawn to think of her voice as being as nearly the author's own as Elizabeth Bennett's is. Yet in the end we are asked to believe that she is not to be admired, that her lively mind compounds, by very reason of its liveliness, with the world, the flesh and the devil.

What matters here is the Elizabeth—Mary identification and

13 Letters 24 January 1813 and 14 September 1804.

14 Letter Friday 29 January 1813.

15 Letter 24 May 1813 and 13 April 1811 'my preference for Men and Women' in relation to shrubbery.

16 Learning Experience and Change, by Robert Garis. Ed. B. C. Southam *Critical Essays* p. 69.

the question whether, if such an identification exists, Mary Crawford's rejection of religion could in any sense represent Jane Austen's views.¹⁷ In fact the Evangelical associations provide valuable evidence that the religious practice of the period was minimal and that Mary Crawford's strictures were only too well deserved. It was a period when over half the country clergy were absentees and when as many as twenty bishoprics might be in the hands of a single ducal family. Communion was seldom celebrated more than the obligatory three times a year. In a sermon preached at Danbury on June 11th 1787 and 'Published *not* by Request' the Rev. Dr. William Luke Phillips arraigned the country clergy on four charges: "Immoral conduct; Professional Ignorance; Inattention to Duty; and, lastly, Attachment to the World." In general, he claimed that they were clergymen 'one Day in the Week and all the rest of it mere Laymen, Men of the World.'¹⁸ It is a picture drawn again by Cowper, Crabbe and Hannah More, and it is hardly to be supposed that an intelligent clergyman's daughter and a keen observer of the human comedy would have had any difficulty about subscribing to it. In one sense, of course, Mary Crawford and Edmund Bertram are in agreement: both can see that a good deal is wrong. Mary has come to regard the whole edifice of Christianity as quite without value in regulating society or even individual behaviour. Consequently she is unable to understand Edmund's choice of a profession which is 'nothing'. Edmund's view of his clerical duties as 'the guardianship of religion and morals', together with his declared intention of living in his parish, is evidently a reformist concept of a type increasingly common at the turn of the century.¹⁹ The difference between them is not just a matter of town versus country—and it is remarkable that Edmund can have been able to ignore such representative figures as Mr Norris and Dr Grant—but that whereas he still sees vitality and strength in the traditional institutions, Mary does not. If there is a further measure of difference it lies in his blindness—or perhaps simply an unwillingness to concede—just how far the clergy had become

¹⁷ In drawing comparisons between Jane Austen, Mary Crawford and Elizabeth Bennet some notice may be taken of Jane Austen's letter of 4 February 1813 in which she speaks of *Pride and Prejudice* as 'rather too light, and bright and sparkling; it wants shade; it wants to be stretched out here and there with a long chapter of sense, if it could be had; if not of solemn specious nonsense about something unconnected with the story'. As this was written at the same time as *Mansfield Park* it is of some moment whether Jane Austen was happily joking or making a genuine critical observation. If she was serious then it becomes more difficult to approximate Miss Austen to her heroine—but if—as I suppose—she was in a mood of mocking high spirits—then her sheer delight and playfulness bring her closer than ever to both Elizabeth Bennet and Mary Crawford. (See also Marilyn Butler p. 202).

¹⁸ Open University Booklet A 302. No. 31-32. pp. 9, 10.

¹⁹ *A Reading of Mansfield Park*, by Avrom Fleishman, p. 22. Marilyn Butler says that Mary Crawford fails to see either the social or private utility of religion.

corrupted.²⁰ "There are such clergymen, no doubt, but I think they are not so common as to justify Miss Crawford in esteeming it their general character" and he goes on to claim that she has been misled by the 'common-place censure' of 'prejudiced persons'. Yet as a matter of generally agreed history we now know just how deep the contamination went and how far the combined reforms of Methodists, Evangelicals and Tractarians would fall short of success.

²⁰ Independent evidence exists, of course, in the works of Henry Fielding; Cowper and Eighteenth Century diarists.

Prophets, Spouses and Story-tellers in Africa

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In trying to understand the world, or, at least that part of it with which we are involved, we can look for a prophet, or even turn prophets ourselves, or we can tell stories about the world. The excellence of the prophet is that he parts the wheat from the chaff; the excellence of the story-teller is that he makes chaff look like wheat, perhaps even transmutes it into wheat. The poet, if he is lucky, is something of both prophet and story-teller: the theologian, if he is, as many theologians appear to be, unlucky, will falter when he should speak in prophetic judgement, and fail too in the task of imaginative transmutation. In apocalyptic, the two modes of understanding are fused, as we see in Daniel or Revelations, much to the bafflement of most of us. But for the purposes of this review¹ it seems possible to see prophecy and story-telling as complementary and inter-acting opposites. Perhaps I should say that I am myself more in sympathy with the story-teller than the proph-

¹ The books reviewed in this article are: *African Christianity* by Adrian Hastings. Geoffrey Chapman, London 1976. pp 105 £1.50. *African Christian Marriage* by Benezri Kisembo, Laurenti Magesa and Aylward Shorter. Geoffrey Chapman, London 1977. pp 242 (no price indicated). *African Tradition and the Christian God* by Charles Nyamiti. pp 76. (No price or date of publication given). *Spearhead No 49*, Gaba Publications, P.O. Box 908, Eldoret, Kenya. *Prayer in the Religious Traditions of Africa* by Aylward Shorter. Oxford University Press, Nairobi 1975. pp 146 £5.75. *Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa*, edited by T. O. Ranger and John Weller. Heinemann, London 1975. pp 285 £2.50. *Regional Cults* edited by Richard P. Werbner, ASA Monographs, 16, Academic Press, London, New York, San Francisco 1977. pp 256 £7.20. *Myth, Literature and the African World* by Wole Soyinka. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1976. pp 168 £5.95. *Uhuru's Fire* by Adrian Roscoe. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1977. pp 281.