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Revisiting the Controversy of *Mansfield Park*: Undermining Fanny Price and Repudiating Didactic Writing

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By **Lorraine Yang**

Lorraine Yang (email: Lyang9@leeds.ac.uk) has written a master's thesis on irony in Jane Austen at the National University of Singapore. She obtained her Ph.D. (University of Leeds, 2022) for her work on aesthetic education and campus novels. She is now a post-doctoral fellow at the Leeds Arts and Humanities Research Institute.

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Many readers markedly dislike *Mansfield Park* because they believe that it supports the value system of its protagonist, Fanny Price, whom they consider boring and priggish. Virginia Woolf expects “Elinor Dashwood and Fanny Price [to] bore us frankly” since Austen “is content to take it for granted that such characters and conduct are good without trying to see them in a fresh light for herself” (12). Somerset Maugham says that Fanny and Edmund “are intolerable prigs and all [his] sympathies go out to the unscrupulous, sprightly, and charming Henry and Mary Crawford” (462). Kingsley Amis has a similar revulsion to *Mansfield Park*, claiming that, although *Mansfield Park* “never holds up the admirable as vicious, it continually and essentially holds up the vicious as admirable, an inversion rendered all the more insidious by being associated with such dash and skill, and all the more repugnant by the co-presence of a moralistic fervor which verges at times on the evangelical” (75). On the other hand, scholars like Alistair Duckworth, Joseph Duffy, and Marilyn Butler approve of the apparent moralism of the novel. As Claudia Johnson says, these scholars believe that *Mansfield Park* is “Austen’s most characteristic work insofar as it posits stability, authority, custom, sobriety and staunch morality as values cultivated in the country-houses of the Tory gentry” (59).

It is clear from these responses that the controversy over the novel is generated by opposing reactions to a

premise shared by both supporters and detractors of the novel: the assumption of Austen's didacticism in *Mansfield Park*. This essay attempts to provide an explanation for the reaction to *Mansfield Park* by throwing the premise of Austen's moral didacticism into question through a brief elaboration of her writerly aims. Given Austen's general dislike of fiction in which authors use their work to disseminate their opinions, the mixed reactions to *Mansfield Park* can be explained through Austen's attempt to get the reader to question the reliability of its heroine as a moral paragon and of the apparently omniscient narrator who supports the heroine's point of view. Since *Mansfield Park's* rhetoric mimics that of omniscient narrators, we are primed to read it as a didactic novel. Yet, attention to Fanny's negative judgment of Mary Crawford *vis à vis* the novel's structural parallel between these two characters suggests that Fanny is overly harsh to Miss Crawford, who might not be as morally flawed as Fanny makes her out to be. Thus, when we attempt to read the novel with its heroine as moral center, we quickly realize the disjunction between her thoughts (accessible through free indirect discourse) and the lofty moral position in which the narrator seems to place her.

The clearest suggestions of Austen's dislike of didactic writing can be found in her juvenilia and in her letters. In the juvenilia, despite their supposed allegiance to conduct-book norms, heroines behave as conduct heroines should not. "The female philosopher," for example, is dedicated to her newborn niece, Fanny Catherine Austen, in the manner common to female conduct books: "I think it is my particular Duty to prevent your feeling as much as possible the want of my personal instructions, by addressing to You on paper my Opinions and Admonitions on the conduct of Young Women, which you will find expressed in the following pages" (J 215). The letter that follows, written by Arabella Smythe to her friend Louisa Clarke, details her opinions on Julia and Charlotte Millar and on Louisa herself. Arabella's assiduous detailing of the features of the Millar sisters—whom her correspondent knows—likens her to characters satirized in Austen's novels. As Martin Amis notes, "Jane Austen expends little energy on physical description. Her characters are 'handsome' or 'pleasing' or 'not at all handsome.' The feature-by-feature inventory she leaves to the hags and harpies." Peter Sabor points out that Julia, celebrated for her "sensible reflections," repeats "commonplaces" in the style of Mary Bennet (J 477 n4). And Arabella disparages Louisa in the very letter she writes to her: "Louisa Clarke (said I) . . . neither wants Understanding nor is without some pretensions to Beauty, but these are so very trifling, that the value she sets on her personal charms, and the adoration she expects them to be offered are at once a striking example of her vanity, her pride, and her folly" (217). This parody of conduct literature and epistolary novels like Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, which feature a heroine who is a moral paragon and model for its readers, is meant to amuse Fanny in the future and her parents in the present through its ironization of didactic writing.¹

Austen's letters to her sister, Cassandra, also suggest her distaste for the interference of idea or opinion with the story. In a letter about Sir Egerton Brydges's novel *Arthur Fitz-Albini*, she writes: "My father is disappointed—I am not, for I expected nothing better. Never did any book carry more internal evidence of its author. *Every sentiment is completely Egerton's*. There is *very little story*, and what there is told in a strange, unconnected way" (25 November 1798, emphasis added). This observation suggests that Austen disapproves of Brydges because he is so preoccupied with filling the book with his opinions that the story ends up badly told. In letters of 11–12 October 1813 and 24 November 1814, she criticizes Mary Brunton's *Self-Control*, in which a dramatic and didactic storyline and a narrator preaching the moral value of each incident contribute to its lack of "Nature or Probability" (11–12 October 1813).

Austen's dislike of didacticism can be seen in this mockery. "Female philosophers" like Arabella, who dispense opinions on how other women should behave, are suspect. Notably, Austen does not offer her niece Fanny an unironic framing of how Arabella's letter *should* be read. Since Austen disliked didactic tendencies in fiction, it seems highly unlikely that the ostensibly didactic tendencies of *Mansfield Park* should be accepted as in line with Austen's intentions. Rather than reading it as an attempt to enforce the moral principles of Fanny and Edmund, can the novel be read instead as a provocation to readers to engage critically with its apparent didacticism? If so, then the controversy over *Mansfield*

Park results from the novel's performing its provocative function and not its writer's trying (and failing) to win readers to her heroine's side.

Why, then, do so many readers assume that *Mansfield Park* is an intentionally didactic work? The novel itself contains rhetorical features that encourage us to believe that it is meant to be read as a didactic piece of writing. For example, David Lodge suggests that the novel is cut through with the "subtle and untiring employment of this vocabulary [of judgment], the exact fitting of value terms to events" that "have a rhetorical effect which we cannot long resist" (105). The narrator's comment on Henry Crawford's motivations for returning so quickly to Mansfield Park to "trifle" with the Bertram sisters, for instance, is full of value-judgment: "had he been more in the habit of examining his own motives, and of reflecting to what the indulgence of his *idle vanity* was tending; but, *thoughtless* and *selfish* from prosperity and bad example, he would not look beyond the present moment" (MP 114–15, emphasis added). Fanny, however, is often portrayed positively: out of "pity and kind-heartedness," she is "at great pains to teach" Mr. Rushworth his speeches in the play (166). Instances of this kind of value-laden vocabulary compose descriptions of Fanny and those around her, leading us to "pick up the habit of evaluation" and to be schooled into "[feeling] all along that Fanny [is] right" (Lodge 105–06). Lodge here begins to get to the heart of the problem. The strong reactions to *Mansfield Park* have largely been due to readers who conflate Austen with the narrator, who approves of Fanny Price. As Wayne Booth says, our search for meaning in the text is often dependent upon our sense of the author's "second self," the implied author, an "official scribe, so to speak, for that narrative" (71). Although this "second self" should be differentiated from the narrator, the narrator, especially if third person, is often viewed as speaking *for* the author. Thus, Lodge can conclude that our approval of Fanny must be unequivocal or "we should suspect Jane Austen of losing confidence in her moral scheme" (105).

William Nelles's study of narration in Austen's novels sheds light on why so many critics have thought that *Mansfield Park* is didactic. He notes that "while the narrator of *Mansfield Park* does admit to being a writer, she adopts the familiar realistic pose that she can direct the presentation of a story, but not alter the fabula itself," thus "approaching the rhetoric of omniscience" that we are so familiar with in many other novels (121). The most obvious example of this tactic is the narrator's "step[ping] forward on the final pages to wrap things up at an accelerated pace" (Nelles 121). The resulting perception of the narrator's omniscience explains why Lodge, Maugham, and Woolf, among others, feel that *Mansfield Park* and, by extension, Jane Austen, is didactic and prosing: like Marvin Mudrick, they see the world of the novel as "a world which the author intrudes into . . . and which she has engaged herself to affirm" (180).

Yet it is entirely possible that, given her dislike of didactic novels, Austen may have intentionally structured *Mansfield Park* to provoke us into distrusting not only Fanny but also the narrator and her whole-hearted support of Fanny. Hence, I want to propose that the famously mixed response to the perceived heavy-handedness of *Mansfield Park's* moral messaging may be due to readers picking up on evidence in the text that undermines Fanny's views and thus the narrator's support of Fanny.

The most obvious example of narrative undermining is Fanny's harsh opinion of Miss Crawford, who, as Amanda Claybaugh notes, seems to be "the very model of a Jane Austen heroine": "spirited, warm-hearted, and, above all else, witty" (xiii). Yet, much to the chagrin of readers, the narratorial voice (and Fanny herself) think of her as inferior, at least in comparison to Fanny, who "seldom moves or speaks, and never . . . alters" (Claybaugh xiii). Consider this remark: Miss Crawford "had none of *Fanny's delicacy of taste, of mind, of feeling*; she saw nature, inanimate nature, with little observation; her attention was *all for men and women, her talents for the light and lively*" (MP 81, emphasis added). The narrator sees Fanny's aesthetic appreciation of nature as indicative of a nuanced appreciation of moral feeling and thought, whereas Miss Crawford's warm-hearted personality evinces a lack of ability to deal with serious matters. Yet, despite the use of free indirect discourse allowing us to empathize with Fanny and the declaration of the narrator's overt support of Fanny's stances, readers like Woolf and Maugham feel that Fanny is a less attractive

character than Miss Crawford. To explain reactions like theirs, we should examine the novel's structural parallels between Fanny and Miss Crawford to see how the novel undermines both Fanny's perspective and the narrative's support of her.

As is evident from the responses of Woolf, Maugham, and Kingsley Amis quoted above, one of the things that makes Fanny Price unlikable to readers is her uncharitable opinion of Miss Crawford, inseparable from her judgmentalism. For example, just after getting to know Miss Crawford, Fanny is already judging. Mary's tendency to speak her mind and be less observant of the rules of social propriety, which leads her to freely poke fun at her uncle and his apparently debauched lifestyle before Fanny and Edmund, is described as "very indecorous" by Edmund (63). For Fanny, Miss Crawford's criticism of her uncle is not only unseemly but also morally suspect: Miss Crawford's negative opinions about her uncle are evidence of her being "very ungrateful" to him (63). Even though Fanny does not voice her opinions to Edmund, she

was a little surprised that [Edmund] could spend so many hours with Miss Crawford, and not see more of the *sort of fault* which he had already observed. . . . Edmund was fond of speaking to her of Miss Crawford, but he seemed to think it enough that the admiral had since been spared; and *she scrupled to point out her own remarks to him, lest it should appear like ill-nature.* (66, emphasis added)

In this passage, the vocabulary of judgment that Lodge notes is already at work on Mary Crawford. Although Fanny thinks that Miss Crawford is flawed, the novel suggests that one of the differences between Fanny and Miss Crawford is simply a difference in voicing opinions that may not be socially acceptable; Fanny refrains from voicing negative judgments out of fear that she will look mean-spirited. The novel makes it clear that her passive reserve is motivated not by moral courage but rather anxiety. For readers like Joyce Jenkins, Fanny's tendency to judge others is made even more unpalatable by her passivity: Fanny "sits, making negative moral judgments about the actions of others, while doing nothing herself" (346).

Fanny's "surprise" at what Edmund doesn't notice about Mary Crawford (quoted above) is heavily imbricated with irony that undermines Fanny's opinion of Miss Crawford's failing: like Miss Crawford, Fanny herself has negative opinions of other characters that she believes are justified. Fanny refuses to voice these thoughts, however, for fear that they would make her *appear* ill-natured. In this example as in others, Fanny's fear of looking bad to others often triumphs over any motivation to voice her judgments. Another example where Fanny refuses to voice her criticism due to fear is her disapproval of the planned performance of *Lovers' Vows*. Fanny, who is a "quiet auditor of the whole" (136), waits for Edmund to be the mouthpiece of her disapproval: "Agatha and Amelia appeared to her in their different ways so totally improper for home representation . . . that she could hardly suppose her cousins could be aware of what they were engaging in; and longed to have them roused as soon as possible by the remonstrance which Edmund would certainly make" (137). Although undoubtedly resulting from her disempowered situation in the Mansfield household, her judgmentalism, when combined with her need to avoid criticism from other characters, can make her appear cowardly, if not hypocritical, to readers.

Fanny's anxiety about voicing her criticism of Miss Crawford to Edmund prioritizes how she herself might appear rather than the truth, but her remarks would be indicative of the truth even if they *seemed* to make her look ill-natured. Miss Crawford's disclosure about how her stay at her uncle's has revealed to her the petty power struggles and the sexual licentiousness of admirals (60) might be considered indecorous, but her negative opinion of her uncle and the admirals in the navy might also be a statement of truth. After all, early in the novel a distinctly narratorial voice pronounces judgment on Admiral Crawford: "the Admiral was a man of vicious conduct, who chose, instead of retaining his niece, to bring his mistress under his own roof" after the death of his wife (41). It may well be that, like Fanny, Miss Crawford believes that her negative judgments of others are justified; the difference between the two is that Miss Crawford articulates these opinions. Ironically, though Fanny thinks that other people may *wrongly* assume that she

is mean-spirited if she voices negative opinions of other people, this insight is not applied to her own uncharitable opinion of Miss Crawford's behavior. Fanny fails to consider Miss Crawford's privileged position; Miss Crawford voices her opinions because she can *afford* to, and Fanny does not spare her.

This is one instance in the text where the active reader may weigh up evidence against Fanny and the narrator's support of her. Like Miss Crawford, Fanny does have an older family member whom she dislikes and who behaves to her in an unkindly manner: Mrs. Norris. The difference between the two women is that Fanny, in talking to Edmund, rather than focusing on Mrs. Norris's numerous character flaws, frames her resistance to moving into the White House as consequent on her lack of importance to Mrs. Norris (26–27). While it might be true that Fanny genuinely feels herself to be unimportant to Mrs. Norris and might feel that she deserves it, a reader more likely concludes that Fanny reacts as she does to Mrs. Norris not out of sympathy but because she is so painfully aware of her indebtedness to the Bertram family that she cannot conceive of herself as equal to criticizing anyone associated with them. This withholding of criticism for the failings of others, however, is not extended to Miss Crawford. The narrator's insinuation that Fanny is naturally disposed to be kindly is wrong: "Fanny's *disposition* was such that she could never *even* think of her aunt Norris in the meagerness and cheerlessness of her own small house, without reproaching herself for some little want of attention to her when they had been last together" (282, emphasis added). This sense of obligation is a recurring theme where Fanny is concerned: she is acutely aware of what she thinks she owes others, especially the Bertram family. Fanny is inclined to be sympathetic to characters because of her anxiety over what she feels she owes them; it is duty, not kindness, that drives her to think of others sympathetically.

In fact, contrary to the narrator's assertions, the novel provides us with evidence that one of Fanny's most prominent traits is not kindness but self-centeredness. Fanny more than once refuses to voice her opinion about Miss Crawford, not because she wishes to be kind but because she wants to avoid making herself look ill-natured (often when her jealousy is evident): "Fanny could have said a great deal, but it was safer to say nothing, and leave untouched all Miss Crawford's resources, her accomplishments, her spirits, her friends, *lest it should betray her into any observations seemingly unhandsome*" (199, emphasis added). For someone whom Edward describes as "firm as a rock in her own principles" (351), Fanny's refusal to speak out is ironic: it is precisely because she tailors her responses with an eye to others that Edward thinks she is a paragon of virtue.

Since evidence in the novel often turns the irony onto Fanny's views, the implied author seems to have arranged it so that we take Fanny's views with a pinch of salt. In fact, at the end of the novel, the narrator's use of the possessive pronoun to refer to Fanny can be read as highlighting her partiality towards the character: "My Fanny indeed at this very time, I have the satisfaction of knowing, must have been happy in spite of every thing" (461, emphasis added). Fanny's harsh judgement of Mary Crawford and her refusal to criticize the sycophantic Mrs. Norris suggest that she is often wrong, but she still dodges the consequences of her mistaken judgments. No wonder many readers of the novel strongly dislike her. It is even more understandable that readers will react badly to the narrator, who paints Fanny as better than the evidence in the novel suggests and seems to provide her with the marriage that she desires despite her failure to account for her own mistakes. Unlike Emma Woodhouse or Marianne Dashwood, Fanny does not have to face the consequences of having judged others wrongly.

If we examine the narration in *Mansfield Park*, therefore, we can find good cause for antagonistic reactions to it and its support of Fanny Price. Reading the novel without reflecting on how its affective dimensions play a part in our interpretation masks the fact that both supporters and detractors of Fanny share the same assumptions about the narrator's omniscience and the implied author's intentions. Much of how we react to the novel depends on our own stances: for example, how we judge Henry Crawford's feelings and behavior towards Fanny depends on our own views regarding sexuality and relationships, and how sorry we feel for Fanny will determine how charitable we are to her quiet but severe judgments of others. Our

reaction to *Mansfield Park* is also determined by how much sympathy we feel towards Crawford because of his genuine feelings for Fanny and the degree to which we disapprove of his treatment of Maria.

While our readings reflect our own biases, we seldom realize how deep these biases run. In the case of *Mansfield Park*, the combined effect of critical biases and emotional reactions to the text affects understanding of the text's narratology, ultimately leading to a lessening of interpretative variety regarding the text. Increased attention to the intricacies of Austen's narration and the ways in which this narration affects its readers, on the other hand, might encourage more readings of the novel that go beyond either defending or condemning its protagonist.

NOTES

¹I mention *Pamela* as an example of an epistolary novel that also serves the function of a conduct book. As Aislinn H. Niimi's essay on *Northanger Abbey* points out, Austen "cleverly ridicule[s]" the "absurdities" of conduct literature in her novels.

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