

Sex, Self and Society in *Mansfield Park*

GIULIA GIUFFRÈ

Sexuality is not a topic which springs immediately to mind on considering Jane Austen's novel, *Mansfield Park*, but, in fact, much of the energy of the novel derives from the powerful machinations of sexual politics and much of the novel's interest comes from the usually suppressed—though all the more fervid for that—love of Fanny for Edmund. Sexuality in *Mansfield Park* is, as I hope to show, central to Jane Austen's treatment of personality and to her most profound concerns about society.

Jane Austen is fully aware of the power of sexual attraction. As in the final scenes of *Pride and Prejudice*, where the sexual tension of attraction is operating between Elizabeth and Darcy but thwarted by card-games and intervening guests, so too in *Mansfield Park* Jane Austen dramatizes the importance of social "trivia", of outings and of games in the arena of sexual politics. Fanny acknowledges that "if Edmund were not there to mix the wine and water for her", she "would rather go without it than not";¹ Mary acknowledges the spice of flirtation that is necessary to her social intercourse when she bemoans the departure of Tom Bertram:

In comparison with his brother, Edmund would have nothing to say. The soup would be sent round in a most spiritless manner, wine drank without any smiles, or agreeable trifling, and the venison cut up without supplying one pleasant anecdote . . . (p. 46)

Jane Austen does discover "the Venusberg in the modern drawing-room":

We do not go into society for the pleasure of conversation, but for the pleasure of sex, direct or indirect. Everything is arranged for this end: the dresses, the dances, the food, the wine, the music! Of this truth we are all conscious now, but should we have discovered it without Miss Austen's help? It was certainly she who perceived it, and her books are permeated with it, just as Wordsworth's poems are with a sense of deity in nature; and is it not this deep instinctive knowledge that makes her drawing-rooms seem more real than any-body else's?²

- 1 Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. John Lucas, Oxford University Press, London, New York and Toronto, 1970, p. 59. All subsequent page references to the novel are to this edition.
- 2 George Moore, *Avowals*, London, 1924, pp. 39–40. Cited in Marvin Mudrick, "Jane Austen's drawing-room", in *Jane Austen. Bicentenary Essays*, ed. John Halperin, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 250.

When Tom Bertram views the dancing couples at Fanny's first ball, he concludes, more accurately than he knows, that

They had need be *all* in love, to find any amusement in such folly—and so they are, I fancy.—If you look at them, you may see they are so many couple of lovers— (p. 107)

The Crawfords, both Mary and Henry, appear at first to be the most sexually attractive characters in *Mansfield Park*. They also seem to represent, especially to a post-Romantic bias, a desirable degree of individual freedom. More than one critic has been "seduced" by Mary Crawford's vitality and physical allure: "Edmund is in love with Mary, which is natural enough, as she is the only woman in the book whom any sensible man could be in love with."³ Mary bursts upon the scene of the novel with her equally glamorous brother, and together they set up a flurry of sexual excitement which does not abate as long as they are present. Mary is described as remarkably pretty, vivacious, pleasant and witty, with lively dark eyes and clear brown complexion. She is small, compact, neat, physically strong, confident, agile and active. In the spectrum representative of female sexuality in the novel, she is allied to the active conciseness of Mrs Norris and the healthy Bertram sisters, while Fanny is actually *physically* "related" to Lady Bertram in her passive beauty and her benign inertia. Fanny, on first meeting, seems distinctly unattractive: physically weak, "somewhat delicate and puny" (p. 9), "exceedingly timid and shy, and shrinking from notice" (p. 9). She is described as having "an obliging, yielding temper" (p. 14). (We later learn to understand the exact limits and operations of that "yielding temper".) Her bedroom is a little white attic; when she goes to dinner at the Grants she is dressed all in white and her favourite ornament has nun-like simplicity. No contrast could seem more marked than that between this virginal, seemingly vapid, seemingly passive creature and the vibrant Mary Crawford.

The male counterparts to Fanny and Mary are Edmund Bertram and Henry Crawford. Again it is the Crawford who apparently outshines the other completely. Edmund, kind, sober and inclined to pedantry appears to full advantage in comparison with Henry who "though not handsome, had air and countenance" pp. 36-7). Henry, like his sister, has a filmstar quality

3 Frank O'Connor, "Jane Austen: The Flight from Fancy", in *Discussions of Jane Austen*, ed. William Heath, D. C. Heath and Company, Boston, 1961, p. 70.

and it is no accident that he is the best actor in the projected amateur theatricals. He too is witty, pleasant, lively. Special mention is made of his good teeth, useful for the smiling, self-promoting life of the public personage.

What the Crawfords possess in abundance is what we might term sex-appeal. They are sexually powerful and they do not scruple to use the force of their attractiveness and their charm. Both Fanny and Edmund are assailed by the Crawfords. Edmund, for instance, finds he is "impelled to seek" Mary out (p. 253); he finds that her sheer attractiveness silences any incipient disapproval of her:

Edmund was sorry to hear Miss Crawford, whom he was much disposed to admire, speak so freely of her uncle. It did not suit his sense of propriety, and he was silenced, till induced by further smiles and liveliness, to put the matter by for the present. (p. 51)

Fanny is not so susceptible to Mary's charm. Her insight painfully sharpened by her own love for Edmund, she sees that Edmund "was in a line of admiration of Miss Crawford, which might lead him where Fanny could not follow" (p. 58). But even Fanny for a time enters into a spurious closeness with Mary Crawford, also compelled by "a kind of fascination", a closeness which, according to the author, had "little reality in Fanny's feelings" (p. 187). Henry sets himself to conquer Fanny: "my plan is to make Fanny Price in love with me" (p. 206). The way he states his dilemma to his sister makes clear the brutal power-politics of his sexual quest:

'I do not quite know what to make of Miss Fanny. I do not understand her. I could not tell what she would be at yesterday. What is her character?—Is she solemn?—Is she queer?—Is she prudish? Why did she draw back and look so grave at me? I could hardly get her to speak. I never was so long in company with a girl in my life—trying to entertain her—and succeed so ill! Never met with a girl who looked so grave on me! I must try to get the better of this. Her looks say, "I will not like you, I am determined not to like you", and I say, she shall.' (pp. 207-8)

But Jane Austen's *forte* is the discrimination of different varieties of the same quality. If in the Crawfords she portrays a superficially attractive type of sexuality, it is in Fanny that the author examines a truer type of sexual allure, a type of sexuality bound up closely with an integrated sense of self. More movingly and profoundly than in the other novels—with the possible exception of *Persuasion*—Jane Austen dramatizes in *Mansfield Park* the idea that one must possess oneself in order

to give oneself.

Not nearly as important as an attractive appearance is the generalized appeal of self-possession, and it is this quality which, as the novel progresses, Fanny gains and Mary seems to lose. The reader learns to make discriminations *within* the black-white contrast which seems initially to be presented. Fanny, though so shy and apparently yielding, has a powerfully integrated sense of self—which is itself attractive. She never gives in where she feels it a compromise of herself to do so. She does not need a Knightley or a Darcy; she herself realizes that “We have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be” (p. 376). It is by attending to her own inner self, by retreating to her East room and meditating on her own motives and perceptions that Fanny is able to withstand the powerful pressures, usually of male authority, that are brought against her.

Jane Austen shows that such self-possession requires a constant struggle of assessment. That is why the comments of critics as to Fanny’s passivity and as to her being “never, ever, wrong”⁴ need to be looked at very carefully. Fanny’s stillness is actually the hard-won tranquillity of constant self-appraisal; it comes from a mature acceptance of self, tempered by knowledge and the memory of the former self.⁵ She has to work very hard in order to stand still and in order to possess that true peace of mind that other Jane Austen heroines, such as Emma, require a long educative process to achieve. In fact, what Fanny’s self-knowledge requires is heroism, as Mary Lascelles points out.⁶

Mansfield Park is far more dynamic a novel than is often thought. Fanny Price is herself a battleground and it is only once she has conquered her own complexity, by understanding and accepting it, that she can enter into the wider context of

4 Tony Tanner, Introduction to *Mansfield Park*, Penguin, 1966, p. 8. See also C. S. Lewis, “A Note on Jane Austen”, reprinted from *Essays in Criticism*, IV (1954), 359–71, in Heath (ed.), *Discussions of Jane Austen*, p. 60. Edward M. White, “A Critical Theory of *Mansfield Park*”, *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, VII (1967), 659–77, insists on “the almost medieval saintliness of Fanny” (p. 671).

5 See Barbara Hardy, *A Reading of Jane Austen*, Peter Owen, London, 1975, pp. 91ff. for a sensitive discussion of Fanny’s “kind” imagination and “compassionate” memory.

6 See Mary Lascelles, “Jane Austen and the novel” in Halperin (ed.), *Jane Austen. Bicentenary Essays*, p. 238. Mary Lascelles’ comments on Fanny’s strength and constancy, though brief, are illuminating.

social life. *Mansfield Park* shows us Fanny heroic in a series of increasingly testing confrontations. Because Fanny is aware of her own instinctive and deep opposition to the impropriety of the theatricals, she is able to withstand considerable pressure from the others to act. We see her painfully teasing out her own motives, even before Edmund, hitherto her mentor, informs her that he himself has agreed to act:

She had begun to feel undecided as to what she *ought to do*; and as she walked round the room her doubts were increasing. Was she *right* in refusing what was so warmly asked, so strongly wished for? What might be so essential to a scheme on which some of those to whom she owed the greatest complaisance, had set their hearts? Was it not ill-nature—selfishness—and a fear of exposing herself? And would Edmund's judgement, would his persuasion of Sir Thomas's disapprobation of the whole, be enough to justify her in a determined denial in spite of all the rest? It would be so horrible to her to act, that she was inclined to suspect the truth and purity of her own scruples, and as she looked around her, the claims of her cousins to being obliged, were strengthened by the sight of present upon present that she had received from them. (pp. 137–8)

It is clear that it is only through such attempts “to find her way to her duty” (p. 138) in private that Fanny is able to be stalwart in public:

‘It is not that I am afraid of learning by heart,’ said Fanny, shocked to find herself at that moment the only speaker in the room, and to feel that almost every eye was upon her; ‘but I really cannot act.’ (pp. 131–2)

It is clear, too, that what the others want is not so much Fanny's participation in the theatricals, as her approval of themselves. They sense that such approval, coming from Fanny, is valuable, precisely because her judgements are so hard-won. Edmund is explicit about this desire for Fanny's endorsement: “Give me your approbation, then, Fanny. I am not comfortable without it” (p. 140).

Fanny's sessions of self-examination punctuate the novel. Because of Jane Austen's psychological realism, these attempts to justify the self may inevitably sound complacent, without in fact being so. Perhaps it is Fanny's very self-searching and self-finding which has tempted some readers to see her as “a monster of complacency and pride”.⁷

7 Kingsley Amis, “What Became of Jane Austen? *Mansfield Park*”, reprinted from the *Spectator*, 4 October, 1957, pp. 339–40, in Heath (ed.), *Discussion of Jane Austen*, p. 101.

Fanny demonstrates her heroism not only with regard to the theatricals, but also in the conflicts arising from Henry Crawford's proposal of marriage. She cannot accept him because her head and her heart say "no", no matter who tries to persuade her otherwise. Fanny is able to resist Henry Crawford's proposal even though he attempts to use her natural gratitude about William's promotion to his own advantage. She is able to retain her judgement and integrity even in the midst of her strong emotions: "She was feeling, thinking, trembling, about every thing;—agitated, happy, miserable, infinitely obliged, absolutely angry. It was all beyond belief! He was inexcusable, incomprehensible!" (p. 274). She is able to withstand the terrible charges of ingratitude and selfishness from Sir Thomas; she is able to weather a dreaded confrontation with Mary Crawford; she is even able to withstand the ultimate test of her beloved Edmund urging her to marry Henry Crawford. Fanny's sturdy self-reliance when it comes to important matters, her happiness with her own company and her own pursuits, are attractive qualities in themselves and it is not surprising that the other characters in the novel gradually come to appreciate her, desire her approval and gravitate towards her as a stable, self-possessed person. An exchange like the following illustrates tellingly the more subtle power of selfhood that Fanny possesses when compared with Mary Crawford. Mary reveals all her emotional insecurity and parallel lack of judgement as she expresses her anxieties about Edmund succumbing to one of the Miss Owens while he is away:

'How many Miss Owens are there?'

'Three grown up.'

'Are they musical?'

'I do not at all know. I never heard.'

'That is the first question, you know,' said Miss Crawford, trying to appear gay and unconcerned, 'which every woman who plays herself is sure to ask about another. But it is very foolish to ask questions about any young ladies—about any three sisters just grown up; for one knows, without being told, exactly what they are—all very accomplished and pleasing, and *one* very pretty. There is a beauty in every family.—It is a regular thing. Two play on the piano-forte, and one on the harp—and all sing—or would sing if they were taught—or sing all the better for not being taught—or something like it.'

'I know nothing of the Miss Owens,' said Fanny calmly.

'You know nothing and you care less, as people say. Never did tone express indifference plainer. Indeed how can one care for those one has never seen? . . .'

'The Miss Owens,' said she soon afterwards—'Suppose you were

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to have one of the Miss Owens settled at Thornton Lacey; how should you like it? Stranger things have happened. I dare say they are trying for it. And they are quite in the right, for it would be a very pretty establishment for them. I do not at all wonder or blame them.—It is every body's duty to do as well for themselves as they can. Sir Thomas Bertram's son is somebody; and now, he is in their own line. Their father is a clergyman and their brother is a clergyman, and they are all clergymen together. He is their lawful property, he fairly belongs to them. You don't speak, Fanny—Miss Price—you don't speak.—But honestly now, do not you rather expect it than otherwise?

'No,' said Fanny stoutly, 'I do not expect it at all.'

'Not at all!'—cried Miss Crawford with alacrity. 'I wonder at that. But I dare say you know exactly—I always imagine you are—perhaps you do not think him likely to marry at all—or not at present.'

'No, I do not,' said Fanny softly—hoping she did not err either in the belief or the acknowledgement of it.

Her companion looked at her keenly; and gathering greater spirit from the blush soon produced from such a look, only said, 'He is best off as he is,' and turned the subject. (pp. 261-3)

Fanny is not only appealing in her qualities of self-knowledge and perceptiveness (she, for instance, sees that her own parents care more for their sons than for their daughters); but she does actually become more physically attractive as the book progresses. Like Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*, Fanny blooms with the acceptance of the fact of her love, almost irrespective of its fulfilment. Sir Thomas finds Fanny very pretty on his return from Antigua; Henry Crawford comes to find her "absolutely pretty" (p. 207) especially with one little curl falling forward when she writes (p. 268). More important than these affidavits as to Fanny's beauty is her own enjoyment of her attractiveness on the night of the Mansfield Park ball, an attractiveness heightened by her love for Edmund:

Fanny saw that she was approved; and the consciousness of looking well, made her look still better. From a variety of causes she was happy, and she was soon made still happier; for in following her aunts out of the room, Edmund, who was holding open the door, said as she passed him, 'You must dance with me, Fanny; you must keep two dances for me; any two that you like, except the first.' She had nothing more to wish for. She had hardly ever been in a state so nearly approaching high spirits in her life. (p. 247)

Fanny's own power of attractiveness emerges most clearly during her brother William's visit. Her unselfconscious glow of love makes her irresistible: "the sensibility which beautified her complexion and illumined her countenance, was an attraction in itself" (p. 212).

Fanny's strong emotions run like electricity through the novel. Unlike Elizabeth of *Pride and Prejudice*, or Emma, Fanny is fully aware of her thoughts and feelings. Her self-acknowledged love for Edmund endows even apparently trivial exchanges with a certain poignancy for the reader. For instance, Edmund's compliment on Fanny's dress has its inadvertently bitter postscript: "Your gown seems very pretty. I like these glossy spots. Has not Miss Crawford a gown something the same?" (p. 200). Like Edmund's offer of any dance "except the first", the comment is charged with the bitter-sweet realism so characteristic of this novel—the quality which Jane Austen herself describes as, "à-la-mortal, finely chequered" (p. 248). The fact that Fanny is in love and knows that she is in love gives the novel a suspenseful, sexually tense atmosphere. There is a minute-by-minute feeling to the description of Fanny's succeeding moods, and the result of such immediacy is to demonstrate, tellingly, both the vulnerability and the strength of the heroine. Fanny Price is both emotional and strong. Consider the emotional acrobatics that she is compelled to when Edmund gives her the gold chain with its accompanying half-finished note and calls her one of his two dearest objects on earth:

He was gone as he spoke; and Fanny remained to tranquillize herself as she could. She was one of his two dearest—that must support her. But the other!—the first! She had never heard him speak so openly before, and though it told her no more than what she had long perceived, it was a stab;—for it told of his own convictions and views. They were decided. He would marry Miss Crawford. It was a stab, in spite of every longstanding expectation; and she was obliged to repeat again and again that she was one of his two dearest, before the words gave her any sensation. (p. 239)

The interior debate and the personal maelstrom of pain and pleasure go on for some time and end for the present with the picture, human, slightly comic, but also courageous of Fanny cherishing the "scrap of paper" headed "My very dear Fanny": "Two lines more prized had never fallen from the pen of the most distinguished author—never more completely blessed the researches of the fondest biographer" (p. 240).

Alone of all the characters in *Mansfield Park* Fanny Price is able to "psychoanalyse" herself, and to face her true emotions no matter how "unsuitable" or strong they may be. For example, she utterly dreads a solitary confrontation with Mary Crawford after Henry has made his proposal of marriage; she dreads the sheer power of her rival. But she does face Mary and the parallel fullness of her own feelings:

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She was safe in the breakfast-room, with her aunt, when Miss Crawford did come; and the first misery over, and Miss Crawford looking and speaking with much less particularity of expression than she had anticipated, Fanny began to hope there would be nothing worse to be endured than an half-hour of moderate agitation. But here she hoped too much, Miss Crawford was not the slave of opportunity. She was determined to see Fanny alone, and therefore said to her tolerably soon, in a low voice, 'I must speak to you for a few minutes somewhere'; words that Fanny felt all over her, in all her pulses, and all her nerves. Denial was impossible. Her habits of ready submission, on the contrary, made her almost instantly rise and lead the way out of the room. She did it with wretched feelings, but it was inevitable. (p. 324)

Fanny's "habits of ready submission" may cause her to agree to the interview but there is nothing truly abject about her honest recognition of her own fears. Fanny also freely expresses her frustration and sorrow about Edmund and Mary Crawford in an outburst towards the end of the novel which has the ring of impatient truth about it. She conducts a kind of passionate dialogue with Edmund's letter:

She was almost vexed into displeasure, and anger, against Edmund. 'There is no good in this delay,' said she. 'Why is not it settled?—He is blinded, and nothing will open his eyes, nothing can, after having had truths before him so long in vain.—He will marry her, and be poor and miserable. God grant that her influence do not make him cease to be respectable!'—She looked over the letter again. 'So very fond of me!' 'tis nonsense all. She loves nobody but herself and her brother. "Her friends leading her astray for years!" She is quite as likely to have led *them* astray. They have all, perhaps, been corrupting one another; but if they are so much fonder of her than she is of them, she is the less likely to have been hurt, except by their flattery. "The only woman in the world, whom he could ever think of as a wife." I firmly believe it. It is an attachment to govern his whole life. Accepted or refused, his heart is wedded to her for ever.—"The loss of Mary, I must consider as comprehending the loss of Crawford and Fanny." Edmund, you do not know *me*. The families would never be connected, if you did not connect them. Oh! write, write. Finish it at once. Let there be an end of this suspense. Fix, commit, condemn yourself.' (pp. 386–7)

Fanny's "soliloquy"—as Jane Austen calls her heroine's analyses of her perceptions—"works" through this phase as well, to a calmer plane of resignation. But the point to be made is that Fanny plumbs the depths of her psyche. Only very rarely do we gain the impression that Fanny might not be totally aware of her motives, as for instance, when she tells herself she wishes *not* to appear impatient for the return of Edmund's mare when

Mary has been riding it, and she walks "to meet them with a great anxiety to avoid the suspicion" (p. 61). It is just conceivable that such an action would be more likely to arouse a feeling of guilt in the tardy pair and could have been unconsciously designed to do so. Fanny is subject to psychosomatic debility when she feels that Edmund's love has been withdrawn. She "can't be seen" in the sofa at the far end of the parlour because she is "hiding" there, feeling rejected. She has a headache not simply from "walking *as well as* cutting roses" (p. 65, my italics) but chiefly from the pain of Edmund's neglect. As Jane Austen points out:

The state of her spirits had probably had its share in her indisposition; for she had been feeling neglected, and been struggling against discontent and envy for some days past. (p. 67)

But, generally speaking, Fanny Price shares the shrewd and compassionate insight of the author. For Jane Austen herself psychoanalyses her characters. The author's psychological acuteness is able to indicate the operation of unconscious, hidden motivation as well as that of more socially acceptable conscious motivation. Jane Austen lays bare the whole armoury of human defences, repressions and sublimations, to use Freudian terminology. A character like Mrs Norris specializes in self-deception and rationalization. She disguises her malicious envy of Fanny as solicitude for the Bertram family. For instance, she tells herself that the carriage ordered to take Fanny to dinner at the Grant residence is really on Edmund's account:

'Quite unnecessary!—a great deal too kind! But Edmund goes;—true—it is upon Edmund's account. I observed he was hoarse on Thursday night.' (p. 200)

Maria Bertram disguises her true motives for marrying Mr Rushworth from Sir Thomas and partly from herself. Jane Austen makes the full range of her unsightly motives horribly explicit:

Mr Rushworth could hardly be more impatient for the marriage than herself. In all the important preparations of the mind she was complete; being prepared for matrimony by an hatred of home, restraint, and tranquillity; by the misery of disappointed affection, and contempt of the man she was to marry. The rest must wait. The preparations of new carriages and furniture might wait for London and spring, when her own taste could have fairer play. (p. 182)

Just as Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* can for a time tell herself that Wickham is so handsome that he must be truthful, in like manner, Edmund, at least intermittently, deceives himself

about Mary Crawford. With the ingenuity of love (or of selfishness) all the characters, except Fanny, deceive themselves. Sir Thomas wants to believe that Maria is fond of Rushworth because he is a useful match for her; Rushworth wants to believe that Henry Crawford is an "under-sized man" because he is jealous of his relationship with Maria; Mary Crawford wants to think that Edmund will not become a clergyman because that would make him ineligible as a husband, and so it goes on.

Fanny's perception of things and people is, apart from the author's, the only sure vision. The heroine's humane shrewdness in this context is frequently overlooked, not only by the other characters in the novel, but by subsequent readers and critics of *Mansfield Park*. Gradually Fanny supersedes her "teacher", Edmund, in the exercise of a kind of *loving* judgement. Because she knows herself, the heroine can know other people. Unlike Lady Bertram and Mary Crawford, Fanny gives of herself and actually listens to other people ("Fanny, being always a very courteous listener, and often the only listener at hand, came in for the complaints and distresses of most of them"—p. 147). Fanny loves individual people, where Mary Crawford is gregarious, a far more self-directed and ultimately selfish mode of being. In the midst of the fracas over the theatricals, Fanny alone can sense the pain and difficulty of others, especially Julia:

Julia *did* suffer, however, though Mrs. Grant discerned it not, and though it escaped the notice of many of her own family likewise. She had loved, she did love still, and she had all the suffering which a warm temper and a high spirit were likely to endure under the disappointment of a dear, though irrational hope, with a strong sense of ill-usage. Her heart was sore and angry, and she was capable only of angry consolations. The sister with whom she was used to be on easy terms, was now become her greatest enemy. . . . Maria felt her triumph, and pursued her purpose careless of Julia; and Julia could never see Maria distinguished by Henry Crawford, without trusting that it would create jealousy, and bring a public disturbance at last.

Fanny saw and pitied much of this in Julia; but there was no outward fellowship between them. Julia made no communication, and Fanny took no liberties. They were two solitary sufferers, or connected only by Fanny's consciousness. (pp. 145-6)

Fanny's observation is always characterized by this close attention, the product as much of the "x-ray vision" lent by love as of the rational discernment of her intelligence. The almost obsessive detail of her observation of Edmund and Mary frequently gives the novel a Richardsonian intensity:

A look of consciousness as he [Edmund] spoke, and what seemed a consciousness of manner on Miss Crawford's side as she made some laughing answer, was sorrowful food for Fanny's observation. (p. 193)

Fanny dared not make any further opposition; and with renewed but less happy thanks accepted the necklace again, for there was an expression in Miss Crawford's eyes which she could not be satisfied with. (p. 235)

Jane Austen not only analyses the motives of her characters in *Mansfield Park*; she fashions the incidents of the novel in a symbolically significant way. This is where individual perception (usually Fanny's) and social morality begin to merge in the novel. By being true to herself Fanny is able to achieve a harmony with man and with nature that the superficially attractive, apparently individualistic characters like the Crawfords are barred from. For instance, Fanny's instinctual feeling "from her heart" is that she should not accept the gold chain that Mary Crawford gives her. This feeling for the rightness and wrongness of things is symbolically vindicated: the gold chain which her beloved Edmund gives her "fits" her ornamental cross from her brother William, while the chain from her distrusted rival, with its associations of deceit and betrayal (the chain was originally a gift from Henry to Mary, or so she says) simply does not fit. Fanny's feeling is authenticated by the objects themselves. Fanny achieves a symbolic union expressive of her two loved ones, Edmund and William. Moreover, Fanny, in the strength derived from her continued striving for integrity, is able finally to *include* Mary's chain as well, thus neatly symbolizing the generosity of true social harmony.

Fanny's moral feelings about the ill-fated jaunt to Sotherton ("Fanny, feeling all this to be wrong . . ."—p. 90) enable her to act as the normative centre of truth and judgement for the whole social event. For nearly all the other characters this expedition is almost oppressively fraught with sexual tension and conflict: only Fanny has the strength to be at peace. Like the bemused and potentially tragic lovers of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the others, as Fanny can see, had, throughout the day, "been all walking after each other, and the junction which had taken place at last" had been "too late for re-establishing harmony" (p. 94). An early indication of the steamy nature of this outing is given in the naked rivalry between the Bertram sisters for a seat beside Henry Crawford on the coachride to Sotherton. Jane Austen never flinches from

the nastiest indications of a fierce rivalry between these two sisters. With regard to Henry Crawford, Julia considers Maria to be "her greatest enemy". At Sotherton itself there is the "serpentine" wandering through the "wilderness". Symbolically, Mary Crawford leads the way into the "wilderness". As they set out, Edmund has Fanny on one arm and Mary on the other, thus suggesting the image of the choice of Hercules between virtue and vice. They leave "the first great path", a manoeuvre which certainly suggests serious alienation and then, most important of all, Edmund leaves Fanny seated to wander in the wilderness with Mary. The sexual symbolism of this cannot be ignored. Nor can that of the Rushworth-Maria Bertram-Henry Crawford triad. Significantly, Crawford leads Miss Bertram around the enclosure of the gate and into a "circuitous" route while Rushworth, the proprietor, goes to fetch the lawful key to the gate. This is both prophetic and symbolic of subsequent events. Again, as in the events surrounding the theatricals, Fanny as hero(ine) is able to be the representative of true judgement and harmony even in the midst of social discord. In a moment of clarity Henry Crawford later reminisces about the excursion to Sotherton: "it was a hot day, and we were all walking after each other and bewildered" (p. 221). All except Fanny, who literally sat still and figuratively kept constant.

Of course the most important social pact of all is the marriage, and Jane Austen's views on sexuality and personality reach their finest synthesis in the treatment of marriage in the novel.

Sexual attractiveness, or at least true sexual attractiveness, not the superficial glamour of the Crawfords, plays an important role in the general concern of *Mansfield Park* with the necessity for "that higher species of self-command, that just consideration of others, that knowledge of . . . [one's] own heart, that principle of right" (p. 82). In *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen takes care to have the sensitive heart and the accurate judgement coincide, and both "sense" and "sensibility" are seen to be necessary, not only to the proper integration of the personality, but also to foster maximum harmony in the social union of marriage. Very early in the novel, Edmund is convinced of Fanny "having an affectionate heart, and a strong desire of doing right" (p. 14). Fanny alludes to the same nexus between head and heart when she disapproves of Edmund's participation in the theatricals: "Her heart and her judgment were equally against Edmund's decision" (p. 143). The most blatantly attractive

people in the novel are also morally reprehensible. The Crawfords come to amply demonstrate their poverty of principle, sensed but not known for much of the novel. It is the more secretively attractive characters, like Fanny and, to an extent, Edmund, who are morally vindicated. The author seems to dramatize the thesis that love enhances and "sanctifies" sexuality and the union of both love and sexual attraction suggests the integration of head and heart, mind and body, judgement and feeling so central to her novels.

Jane Austen does not offer a bloodless concept of the marriage of minds only, but shows the importance and interaction of personal allure. The author's ideal love may be generous, but it is not saintly: it relies on strong feelings of sexual attraction. Gratitude, esteem and respect are necessary to love, especially on the part of the heroine for the hero. (In *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* this is reversed and it is the hero who must learn from the steady wisdom of the woman he loves.) Gratitude without esteem is ultimately powerless as an "aphrodisiac". This is demonstrated in the proposal of Henry Crawford to Fanny, where her gratitude to him for his securing of William's promotion only momentarily disorients her. True love based on a similitude of heart and mind can even suffer a temporary or slight loss of esteem, as in Fanny's disapproval for Edmund's succumbing to the theatricals. It is like spirits who unite in *Mansfield Park*. Edmund argues for the desirability of opposites as partners: "I am perfectly persuaded that the tempers had better be unlike" (p. 317). He is ostensibly talking to Fanny of herself and Henry Crawford, but in reality referring, as Fanny sees, to himself and Mary. But the novel demonstrates the opposite of Edmund's opinion. Similar types of sexuality unite and there is even a curious fatalism in the evolution and resolution of the various unions, for instance that of Henry Crawford and Maria Bertram-Rushworth. In a sense, Jane Austen appears to "cut the knot" of the debate as to suitability of opposites rather than resolve it. She does this by having the Crawfords emphatically demonstrate the inadequacies of their characters—Henry by his elopement with a married woman and Mary by her attitude towards this. This also obscures in a way the evaluation of Fanny's motives. Her vision into her own feelings is clearer than that of the other characters, but it can never be fully decided to what extent Fanny's unfavourable opinions of Mary Crawford can be attributed to jealousy, nor to what extent her distrust of Henry

and resistance to his proposal might be dictated by the prior claim of Edmund on her heart: in both cases Fanny's feelings are equated with accurate judgements by the authorial condemnation of the Crawfords.

The Crawfords do give rise to marital expectations in the world of Mansfield Park, especially for Edmund but more complicatedly, for Fanny. What of the possibility of "opposites" uniting? Of Edmund and Mary, of Fanny and Henry? Jane Austen, with customary skill and tact, does depict a point of possible balance, a point when the liaisons could conceivably have gone in different directions. For instance Henry Crawford appears much improved to Fanny on the occasion of his visit to her at Portsmouth; Mary appears much more trustworthy on her parting from Fanny at Mansfield Park. The author even says, quite straightforwardly, that had Henry Crawford "persevered, and uprightly, Fanny must have been his reward—and a reward very voluntarily bestowed—within a reasonable period from Edmund's marrying Mary" (p. 426).

But the Crawfords as people, and therefore as marriage partners, should be examined in more detail. They are potent sexual beings, but their sexuality is unreflecting, wayward, unfocused, and therefore (Jane Austen implies) dangerous for society as well as for themselves. They are literally untrustworthy because they act "to the moment", with the *seemingly* attractive spontaneity of the disintegrated personality. Henry, for instance, enjoys role-playing, which naturally involves the prompt assumption of different identities. He falls in love with Fanny not simply because of her goodness and (true) beauty, but because he is not strong enough to withstand the pressures of the role of "lover" that he has taken on.⁸ Because of his fragile hold on himself he is subject to the vagaries of fortune and influence. Like John Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey*, Henry is actually a victim of his unexamined will, and frequently his personal chaos is resolved only by acting the bully or the rake. (Thorpe forces Catherine Morland to ignore her friends by literally driving her away from them, despite her protestations, and Henry plans the "conquest" of Fanny.) Similarly, Mary is unreliable because of her radical lack of self-knowledge. Her actions are reactions to different stimuli. Significantly, she cannot bear to be alone,

8 Robert Alan Donovan, "Mansfield Park and Jane Austen's Moral Universe", in *The Shaping Vision. Imagination in the English Novel from Defoe to Dickens*, Cornell University Press, 1966, p. 167.

because by herself she has nothing to respond to and therefore is nothing. Where Jane Austen's heroines are customarily strengthened by periods of solitary reflection, Mary is eroded and weakened by solitude. Because Mary is ruled by impulse, she can at times seem, or even be, sympathetic. But Jane Austen is a rather stern moralist, and Mary's unreliability is simply not good enough; her actions do not spring from a stable possession of the self but from the immediate stimulus, whatever it may be. Mary's total lack of self-regard may be interpreted as winning self-confidence, but it is the willed confidence of the unaware, rather than the tranquil security of the self-knowing. Likewise, Mary's vitality and spontaneity can be seen as signs of freedom. But both the Crawfords, Jane Austen suggests, are not really free: they trap the weak and are themselves trapped by their very susceptibility to outside influence. Jane Austen demonstrates in *Mansfield Park* her belief that character is action, that under pressure people behave characteristically. This accounts, at least in part, for the morally shabby pictures we have of the Crawfords at the end of the book. Indeed, it accounts, too, for Fanny's stalwart resistance to anything she feels to be wrong.

If the unreliability of the Crawfords is remembered, the momentary suggestion of redemption of, and softening in, them does not have quite so high a cost for the novel in terms of narrative credibility. The Crawfords act like that because that is how they would act under those circumstances. Their type of appetitive sexuality has been shown to be as dangerous and destructive as Jane Austen's ultimately comic vision can allow it to be. The sexuality of the Crawfords is irrational: they act as divisive forces precisely because they are not harmonized with themselves, with other people or with nature.⁹ Mary Crawford cannot understand why there is no transport for her harp when it is harvest-time: she is totally out of step with the needs of other people and the natural rhythms of the countryside.

Marriage in *Mansfield Park* is finally for familiars, not for strangers: the "brother" and "friend" that Fanny has in Edmund become one and the same with her "lover" and "husband". This has led some critics to invoke the concept of "incest" for the novel,¹⁰ but to do so seems to crudify Jane Austen's under-

9 For a different interpretation of the "asexuality" of the Crawfords, see Lionel Trilling, *Mansfield Park*, reprinted from *The Opposing Self*, 1955, in Heath (ed.), *Discussions of Jane Austen*, pp. 93-4.

10 See especially R. F. Brissenden's excellent psychological analysis of

standing of sexuality. Edmund is Fanny's "brother" in the sense of "soul-mate" and it is part of Fanny's maturity that she recognizes Edmund as her brother, friend, lover and mate very early on. The sexuality endorsed in *Mansfield Park* is not the narrow instinct conjured up by the word "incest", but rather, a diffused (though still powerful) personal and social force for integration. The Crawfords are "expelled" from Mansfield Park precisely because their sexuality is disintegrating.

Mansfield Park, the place and itself the symbol of conservatism and decorum, only truly suits Fanny, and through her the union between herself and Edmund.¹¹ Fanny's attachment to Mansfield Park has been as dear and as developing as that to Edmund. When she is away from Mansfield Park she misses it as much as she does Edmund; she counts the days of absence in the manner of a lover counting the days of absence from the loved one: she returns to Mansfield Park with the joy of a lover. Fanny says "I love this house and everything in it" (p. 22). Fanny has also always loved nature, unlike Mary Crawford who "saw nature, inanimate nature, with little observation", and whose "attention was all for men and women" (p. 73). At first glance this formal contrast between Fanny and Mary seems to ally Mary more with the human and therefore the sexual dimension. But we grow to learn that Mary's interest in the world of men is more akin to a trivial gossiping interest in liaisons and intrigue—see, for instance, her revealing letter to Fanny at the end of the novel—while Fanny, like Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*, is more closely attuned to the larger, deeper rhythms of life, not excluding the human. Fanny responds to the sun, trees, the warmth of fire, the seasons, the elements, natural beauty in general. Her observation of those around her is consistent, probing, one might even say tender. But in this, as in all else in *Mansfield Park*, there is a decorum to be observed. Fanny responds to natural things growing *properly* and attractively, not to "wilderness" as at Sotherton nor, conversely, to the excessive artifice

11 On the moral significance of *Mansfield Park*, see especially Alistair M. Duckworth, "Mansfield Park: Jane Austen's Grounds of Being", in *The Improvement of the Estate. A Study of Jane Austen's Novels*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1971, pp. 35-80, and Ann Banfield, "The Moral Landscape of *Mansfield Park*", *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 26 (1971-2), [1]-24.

the novel in "Mansfield Park: freedom and the family", in Halperin (ed.), *Jane Austen. Bicentenary Essays*, pp. 156-71.

of “artificial flowers” and wasted “gold paper”. She responds to people relating to each other calmly and responsibly, not to the noisy, chaotic household at Portsmouth. What Fanny responds to, and—in conjunction with *Mansfield Park*—exemplifies, is an eighteenth-century ideal of nature improved upon or perfected. The best “improvement” on nature is to appreciate its beauty in union with the loved one. There is a telling incident early in the novel. Fanny, lost in admiration of the starry night, has Edmund by her side:

Fanny . . . had the pleasure of seeing him continue at the window with her, in spite of the expected glee; and of having his eyes soon turned like her's towards the scene without, where all that was solemn and soothing, and lovely, appeared in the brilliancy of an unclouded night, and the contrast of the deep shade of the woods. Fanny spoke her feelings. ‘Here's harmony!’ said she, ‘Here's repose! Here's what may leave all painting and all music behind, and what poetry only can attempt to describe. Here's what may tranquillize every care, and lift the heart to rapture! When I look out on such a night as this, I feel as if there could be neither wickedness nor sorrow in the world; and there certainly would be less of both if the sublimity of Nature were more attended to, and people were carried more out of themselves by contemplating such a scene.’
(p. 102)

Fanny wants Edmund to share this “sublimity of Nature” with her, but at this point, significantly he chooses Mary Crawford's world of “men and women” and gradually drifts towards the glee singers. But Fanny remains by the window, true to her vision of a higher, deeper realm of nature: star-gazing does make the singing of glee-catches appear just a little puny and unnecessary. In time, Edmund learns to appreciate the deep attractiveness of Fanny's qualities and values. The heroine's return to the ambience of *Mansfield Park* and Edmund's “recognition” of her as the one chief friend who is also the true lover, constitute together an epitome of the kind of private emotional life and public ideal endorsed in *Mansfield Park*.