

Mansfield Park

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With Jane Austen you associate mild and decorous novels of feminine feelings, carried by wit and subtle social commentary, in which nothing of the harsh real world gains a purchase. It is all idyllic, taking place in physical serenity, far away from the bustle of world. This may be so in 'Emma', and also to a large extent in 'Pride and Prejudice', both of them often adapted to the screen to provide nostalgia for a world that never was except in the imagination. 'Mansfield Park' has quite another tenor. It is pure melodrama, and as such it succeeds admirably, in spite of obvious shortcomings. But the object of fiction is not verisimilitude as such, or believability; it is as Aristotle well knew, to engage the readers imagination that he sacrifices his good sense and suspends sober judgement, in being carried away by a story.

The heroine of the novel is Fanny, literally a poor cousin, plucked away from her family and planted into the luxury of the estate of her uncle and aunt, through the whims of her other aunt, a childless widow. As such she is immediately cast in the role of Cinderella, while her two female cousins are admirably playing the role of the evil step-sisters. There is no benevolent father, at least not initially, but at least another cousin, a male, who acts as her protector. Now Cinderella is pursued by the Prince, whom her elder cousins have in vain wooed, and seems to have won his heart by no active design only by the sweetness of her temper and the valor of her principles. But the twist is that the Prince is an evil person, or at least a rake of no consequences, although a most desirable match from any rational point of view. She is terrified by his attention, and does everything within her feeble and gentle power to discourage him, but to little avail. What makes matters worse for her is that her uncle, who after an extended sojourn across the ocean in order to tend to his plantations in the West Indies, has discovered upon his return her beauty, which had been getting into bloom during his absence, greatly berates her for her headstrongness in opposing such an admirable match, which would solve so many problems, and be to her unquestionable advantage. Never would anything like this ever come her way again. Even, Edmund, her favorite cousin and protector, with whom she has enjoyed such an intimacy, berates her, although in softer ways, and tries to persuade her to see the good sides of the suitor in addition to the obvious benefits of the suit. His motivations in this regard no doubt clouded by he himself fancying himself to be in love with the Prince's sister a miss Crawford, who needless to say is assiduously cultivating the friendship of Fanny, and also scolds her for her wistful compunctions. All the time Fanny is suffering all the torments of having disappointed those who love and care for her and unwittingly earned the sin of ingratitude. But for the life of it, she simply cannot love that Mr Crawford, their temperaments and interests are just too far apart for their really being the possibility of any real bond between them, based not only on mutual trust and respect, but more importantly on natural and honest intimacy. So Fanny so unassuming and retiring, so adverse to call attention to herself and stand out in society (a trait that

originally made Miss Crawford to dismiss her altogether), has when it comes to love, such principles and demands, on what she expects from anyone desiring to win her heart. As readers we feel with Fanny as we have been privy to the recklessness of Mr Crawford, the evil Prince. Not only have we, along with Fanny, seen him paying court to her two cousins, just to amuse himself, but we have also been present when Crawford first conceives of the idea of making Fanny fall in love with him, as a frivolous game, the challenge of which, he cannot, as an accomplished seducer and breaker of heart, resist, especially as he is cheered on by his sister in his new project. In short, any conjugal relation between the two, we cannot conceive as anything but rape. We feel with Fanny, in spite of her being such a timid little girl of no apparent character. Still she has principles, and we learn that she also has a lot of social sense. Her accomplishments as to French and general learning, may have been an object of derision between the two elder cousins and that other aunt; but when it comes to reading character, she shows that it usually is the quiet one who is the best observer of other people and their characters. But as readers we are also torn. On one hand we root for her and wish her to resist the advances of her would-be-suitor, on the other hand we do, just as her uncle and cousin Edmund, hope that she will relent. After all the young man of excellent means and prospects, may after all have potential to reform. His suit that started as a mere game, has changed him, and his frustration may have turned pretended passion into real. After all Fanny is a young and beautiful woman, enough of a physical attraction to touch his true instincts. Romantic love may be but the window dressing of animal desire, but as far as that desire is true and base, it is an expression of sincerity. As readers we also want to be taken in. Does Mr Crawford not have unusual and admirable talents, beyond that of his general station in life? Is he not able with the engagement of a natural actor, read a play by Shakespeare (incidentally the very peripheral one concerning Henry VIII) with such ardor, as to engage Fanny against all her resolutions?

The oldest cousin was already engaged to a Mr Rushworth, a stupid young man of no wit, be it in his head or conversation, when she met Mr Crawford, and after a brief affair of flirtation, carried through during a theatre rehearsal of a German play of dubious morals (the production of which was aborted by the demand of the uncle - Sir Thomas, upon his return from Antigua), consenting to marry her fiance. She obviously had no principles when it came to love and mutual affection, seeing marriage as an instrument for advancement. They are both out of the picture, amusing themselves in London, when Crawford carries his suit. Sir Thomas, still aggravated by the refusal of his niece to see common sense, seizes upon the excellent idea to send Fanny back home to Portsmouth for a while, hoping that this will cure her of her affectations, and make her realize what the true alternative will be to rejecting Crawford's suit. His idea seems almost to work.

Fanny is reunited to her family after an absence of a decade, but this lost family of hers is far too big and disorganized to take much notice of her. There is a multitude of children, living in cramped circumstances. Her mother is prematurely worn out by worries, and her father is a good-for-nothing drunkard. Austen's depiction of the scene is almost dickensian, twenty-five years before Dickens. Fanny is miserable, although she does at first not acknowledge it. The only comfort is to be found in establishing relations with a younger sister Susan trying to bring manners to her, in the way she once was being

made a beneficiary at Mansfield Park. Much to her horror, Mr Crawford pursues her to Portsmouth. His perseverance is remarkable, and insistent enough to make a stone relent, and thus do we not discern in Fanny herself a certain softening. Could it be true, as Edmund her protector advised his friend, that given enough time to get used to the idea she would relent.

Her sustained tenure at her family home weighs more and more on her. Used as she is to experience spring in the country, its progress in a dirty city is a painful one. Due to sudden, but persistent illness, of his oldest cousin, her return to what she has realized to be her real home -Mansfield Park, is continually being postponed. There are offers from the two Crawfords to release her from her plight, she only need to express her wish, and they will take her to London and then, supposedly back to Mansfield Park. She is torn, the attractions of such a scheme are hard to relinquish. She has even had tentative thoughts about being properly settled with a Mr Crawford, whose character she has admitted has improved considerably, and that this would enable her to bring her younger sister, and thus rescue her, as she once was rescued from a life of abject poverty and lack of prospects. Still she cannot bring herself to give it her encouragement.

And then suddenly through dramatic events the plot comes to an unexpected, but of course utterly logical climax. It brings misery on everybody, except on Fanny herself, which becomes triumphantly vindicated, with everything falling into place. So what has happened? Mr Crawford has eloped with her eldest female cousin. One can well understand the utter scandal this would have caused in the kind of society Austen is devoted to depict. Also the other cousin, has eloped with a rather unsavory character. Edmund scandalized by the flippant way that Miss Crawford views the matter, the culpability of the two parties, consisting not so much in any moral transgression, as to pure folly and clumsiness in being found out, breaks with her with great sorrow. Mr Crawford's suit is of course gone forever, and Fanny can enjoy permanent relief from his amorous attentions.

In a final chapter Austen lays it all out, as a detective in a crime story, dotting the i's and explaining what happened later. Although rather melodramatic and crude, it nevertheless gives the reader great satisfaction (as it may also have done to the author, who can spell out her moral principles in a triumphant mood). The two daughters, the equivalent of the evil step-sisters are turned away from their home. Sir Thomas does not want to have anything more to do with them. He realizes that he has been deficient in their education, not properly dissuading them to develop their indulgent tastes and checking their natural vanities, nurtured, not to say, fanned, by the continuous praise of his sister-in-law, the aunt Mrs Norris. But now it is too late. Mrs Norris is to go from the vicinity as well, and he does not understand how he had been able to stand her presence in his household for so long. Mrs Norris is missed by nobody, and will eventually take up residence with the eldest daughter Mary, whose social prospects are forever dashed, through no fault but that of her own folly. His eldest son Tom is slowly recovering from his lingering illness, and after having suffered privations for the first time in his life, his willful spirit of youthful irresponsibility is broken, and he becomes malleable material for his fated occupation. Edmund mourns the loss of Miss Crawford, or rather his idealized picture of her, but eventually finds comfort in the love of Fanny. They both move to a nearby parsonage, and the gap that she leaves at the residence is filled by her younger

sister, who in no time will be able replace Fanny in the heart of the aunt, and eventually gain an affection that surpassed that Fanny was able to muster, for all its worth, because her aunt is but a spoiled creature of habit who never sees beyond her own convenience. So in short a very satisfying happy ending, with the virtuous rewarded and the villains punished, just the way we hope it should be done in the real world. Except of course in the real world, it is never as clearcut who is the good or the bad guy, we all having claims on the first category. And of course there is never closure of the kind well-designed fiction can supply. Maybe those should not be seen as deficiencies of fiction, but their lack as deficiencies of real life, an unfortunate state of affairs, fiction is designed to address.

A crucial element in the novel is the theatric play the cousins and the Crawford are to perform. The idea of a play comes before that of the chosen play, and is transmitted by a certain rake - Yates (the one with whom Julia, the younger cousin, for want of alternatives, eloped with), who had his hopes of performance dashed at his previous residence. After much bickering they decide on the slightly scandalous trifle of German provenience, which Yates had been meaning to perform in. The Crawfords are very exited about it, and the cousins, even reluctant Edmund, due to his infatuation with miss Crawford are drawn into it. Maria, the oldest has a crush on Henry Crawford (so does her younger sister as well) and now gets a chance to act with him, while poor Rushworth is given a minor role, which even that seems beyond his capabilities. The only one who stays aloof and refuses to act is of course Fanny. To her, even more consistently than with the case of Edmund, she can see nothing but the inappropriate in the whole design. On the face of it the spectacle of a theatre seems out of bounds, as far as Austen is concerned, but apparently in her home, acting in a play was considered good fun. And does she not depict the whole thing with singular abandon? Still, acting is somehow inappropriate. It is a sign of insincerity and lack of authenticity. At least to someone like Fanny who is singularly principled. How fitting that the life of the party are going to be the siblings Crawford, a whiff of the metropolitan London world in the rural feudal setting of Mansfield Park. Now Crawford is a born actor. He thrives on it, and indeed his flirtation with Maria, engaged to hapless Rushworth, is an excellent case of playacting, given further legitimacy by the play itself. Fanny must sense that. Henry Crawford is but an inconstant fellow, filled with sweet words but with no real feeling. How fitting that he should be such a superb reader of Shakespeare, playing all the roles with equal flair, identifying with none. So why should Fanny see his suit to her as anything but playacting? A frivolous game, but with nothing but the void behind the pleasant mask. No wonder she feels such horror.

Acting has traditionally a bad reputation. Why? Maybe because the most interesting characters on the stage are morally ambiguous not to say degenerate. Here we see yet another example when fiction and real life part company. One is reminded of Sylvie Weil, who pointed out that happiness is blend when spoken and written about, but truly wonderful when experienced in real life. With misery it is the other way around. Thus there was a not unreasonable fear (cf. the concerns about violent movies and computer games today) that playing bad characters would rub off. That there would be no real watertight barriers between make believe and the real thing.

Fanny Price is often discounted as a prig, a most boring character. As noted, how much more fun would the book not have been, with Mary Crawford as the heroine. It is a

testimony to Austen's skill in making us engaged with the fate and personality of Fanny, such unpromising material. She is indeed the proverbial wall-flower, wilted before her time to bloom. This is what shyness is to society. Invisible. But she does have an inner life, and we do get some explicit glimpses thereof when she meets Mary Crawford and tries to engage her in a discussion of some philosophical content. She very soon realizes that this does not get any purchase on the slippery surface of Mary's mind, which is only attuned to the trivial. Or could it be that the charms of Fanny are only apparent to those who are susceptible to them, who can identify with her plight as a social non-entity. Great literature (and art) gives you the illusion that it is written for you and for no one else¹.

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¹ cf Reger in Bernhard's *Alte Meister* Xb p. 114