

“A BETTER GUIDE IN OURSELVES”:

Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* on Education and the Novel

“A BETTER GUIDE IN OURSELVES”:
JANE AUSTEN’S *MANSFIELD PARK* ON EDUCATION AND THE NOVEL

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Abstract

The least popular of all her novels, Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) depicts a heroine, precariously situated in the margins of the aristocracy, who is intellectually educated rather than accomplished. As the timid Fanny Price navigates the morally fraught social world of Mansfield Park, Austen comments on the exclusion and mistreatment of women in the British public sphere at large as well as criticizes the practice of educating women into accomplishment as exemplified by the sparkling socialite, Mary Crawford. This thesis positions Austen in context with educational writers William Cowper, the poet, and Mary Wollstonecraft, the philosopher. I analyze all three writers' messages about education, along with the implications of the genre/form with which they choose to enter public discourses, including the poem, the political tract, and the novel. Considering the historical and cultural conceptions of the novel as trivial and feminine during Austen's day, her decision to employ this form suggests that she is interested in reforming the novel into a platform for serious public engagement. Austen ultimately anticipates the Victorian novel by revealing the form's potential value as intellectual exercise and an important tool for women to join public conversation.

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List of Abbreviations

<i>MP</i>	<i>Mansfield Park</i>
<i>PP</i>	<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>
<i>SS</i>	<i>Sense and Sensibility</i>

Introduction

“The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid.” –Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*

When the Prince Regent’s librarian, the Reverend James Stanier Clarke, suggested that she write about a clergyman “closely resembling himself” in her next novel, Jane Austen responded that “Such a Man’s Conversation must at times be on subjects of Science & Philosophy of which I know nothing...And I think I may boast myself to be, with all possible Vanity, the most unlearned & uninformed Female who ever dared to be an Authoress” (Clery quoting Austen 332). For those familiar with Austen, it is clear that her signature irony is at play here. Yet her depiction of herself as “uninformed” and uninvolved in the realm of ‘serious’ conversation reflects the prevailing gender notions of her day that viewed women as incapable of intellectualism. But her novels quietly defy this view of both the “Authoress” and women in general. This thesis will examine Austen’s 1814 novel *Mansfield Park*, considered the ‘black sheep’ of her works, as her fictional attempt to culturally and socially position an educated female intellectual within upper class English society where manners are often prized above character. Using a historicist perspective and situating Austen in the tradition of educational writers such as William Cowper and Mary Wollstonecraft, I argue that in *Mansfield Park* Austen reinvents the typical function of the novel, offering it as a tool by which women can enter into public intellectual discourses.

I will be working within a particular historical context and in conjunction with a particular set of cultural (mis)conceptions throughout this project. Firstly, women were valued for being accomplished rather than intellectual. As Sabine Augustin explains, “the conformist view” at the time that Austen wrote was that “women’s primary occupation was to please men...

[so] there was no perceived need for intellectual development” (4). Instead of the subjects of “Man’s Conversation”, such as the “Science & Philosophy” that Austen mentions, “they were trained in household duties and accomplishments—music, sketching, dancing” (4). This superficial education was necessary for women to accept their subordination (5) and was also a result of women’s confinement to the private sphere: “Whereas men required [moral and intellectual capital] for professional and public life, and had outlets for such capital there, women of course did not” (Kelly 176). Instead, what they needed to learn was how to market themselves for marriage since they could only “improve their station by marrying up” (Bermingham 10). They attracted men by their accomplishments, manners, and fashionable dress, transforming into objects of the gaze (10). But their self-commodification only confirmed for men their “lack of reason and originality” (14) while their mental weakness became “proof” of their natural “inferiority”, justifying their exclusion from the public sphere (Augustin 4). Paradoxically, women’s education in accomplishment both further produced and was produced by men’s belief that their female counterparts were “not suited by nature to reason abstractly and thus comprehend broad philosophical arguments” (Bermingham 14). They were considered incapable of intellectualism; however, in reality, women were denied the opportunity to be educated in serious subjects and to join public conversation rather than lacking in the ability.

Secondly, Austen’s own identification of her “daring” to be “an Authoress” in her response to the Reverend Stanier Clarke evokes the precarious position of the woman writer. The rise of both the novel and the middle class at this time meant that women came to constitute a large portion of the reading public (Augustin 26). Although some moralists warned women against reading novels because of the passion they could inspire, novels were also considered suitable material for women because they had a reputation as low-brow, frivolous tales of

sentimental romance and did not address ‘manly’ subjects (11-12). Although a woman who entered the public eye risked censure, increasing numbers of female-authored novels were being published in the late 1700s (Fergus 4). There were several reasons for this development. Novel writing did not require the classical education from which women were typically excluded, they could earn money from publication, and it was a way of expressing their own female experiences (Augustin 34-35). To write, and especially to publish, was transgressive or “daring” because “silence and modesty were still considered a woman’s most attractive quality. [They were] taught to keep their female physical experience to themselves” (35). Furthermore, “Proper women were modest, retiring, essentially domestic and private. Authorship...entailed...thrusting oneself before the public eye—thus loss of femininity” (Fergus 5). Men accepted women’s writing, however, so long as it treated “women’s subjects” such as “love and marriage” and remained within the bounds of the established male literary tradition (Augustin 36). In this way, the novel was not only feminized but trivialized in prevailing discourses of learning.

While women did often write on the subject of education, either in essays or thinly veiled didactic novels, this thesis will address two women writers whose works do not conform to and reproduce these cultural conceptions of female education and behaviour. The first chapter will consider a model of educational writing by a man in a traditionally masculine form by examining William Cowper’s long poem, “Tirocinium: or, A Review of Schools” (1785). Cowper’s poem focuses particularly on male education and identifies the public school system as responsible for the religious and social corruption of his day. He advocates for private education which will inculcate good habits and moral principles and ultimately improve the moral state of society in preparation for the after-life with God. As well, I look closely at the poem as the platform through which Cowper chooses to voice his engagement with a public issue. The public role of

poetry, its easy transition into conversation, and the poet's moralizing mission made it a particularly well-suited genre for entering public, argumentative discourses. The classical education required for writing poetry and difficulty of composing rhyming couplets meant that it was considered a serious form; however, it could also be difficult to access for some marginalized and/or uneducated groups.

In the second chapter, I examine a radical female voice in the public discussion of education. This chapter focuses briefly on Mary Wollstonecraft's first work, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and more deeply on her famous *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). In both, Wollstonecraft criticizes the system of female education that focuses solely on artificial accomplishment and calls instead for women to be treated as rational creatures, capable of both thinking and feeling. She claims that giving women an intellectual education would allow them to better perform their duties as wives and mothers, thereby becoming active citizens. Although women were not supposed to concern themselves with important social issues such as education nor were they expected to participate in public discourse, Wollstonecraft chose to write in a consciously public and political form in her quest to inspire social change. In doing so, I argue, she models the potential of the female intellectual for which she is arguing and actively carves out a space for women amongst public intellectual discourses.

After introducing the implications of two other forms—the poem and the political tract—the last and longest chapter treats the possibilities of the novel and, particularly, the ways in which Austen creates a new type of novel, one which values intellectual exercise just as much as entertainment. In *Mansfield Park*, Austen represents in Fanny Price a marginalized woman who, already morally, spiritually, and intellectually educated, must navigate a patriarchal, class-based

society that severely defines and limits women's roles. I discuss the famously hostile response to Fanny and to *Mansfield Park* in general, as well as the similarities between Austen and her heroine, to ultimately suggest that Austen uses Fanny as a tool through which she can explore the ways in which women have access to public discourse and discuss intellectual issues. Through the characters of Fanny and Mary Crawford and their value within the novel and by readers, Austen sets up a polarity that both reflects and critiques the social treatment of the female intellectual versus the accomplished female. While Fanny is accepted by the Bertram family, *Mansfield Park's* ambiguous conclusion both resists the conventional novel's demand for a happy, romantic ending and subsumes a practical, political solution to the intellectual woman's exclusion from the public sphere. Wollstonecraft's notorious posthumous reputation reveals the dangers posed to women visible to the public eye; thus, when Austen chose to contribute to public discourses, it is significant that she turned to the novel rather than a poem or tract. The novel could be more subtle by conveying messages through characterization and it could entertain as well as instruct. Her choice validates the novel as a form, revealing its intellectual value and its utility as a platform through which women too can participate in public discourse.

Chapter 1

The Poem: William Cowper's "Tirocinium: or, A Review of Schools" (1785)

In *Mansfield Park*, while exiled to Portsmouth, Fanny Price experiences such "longings" for Mansfield "such as to bring a line or two of Cowper's Tirocinium for ever before her. 'With what intense desire she wants her home', was continually on her tongue, as the truest description of a yearning which she could not suppose any school-boy's bosom to feel more keenly" (*MP* 338). William Cowper was Jane Austen's favourite poet, so it is not surprising that she would draw on a line of his poetry to express the interior thoughts of a heroine who shares her love of reading (Newey 5). While the line serves a specific purpose in describing Fanny's feelings, Austen also forges a connection between the two texts. "Tirocinium", like *Mansfield Park*, is about education and the effects that a deficient education can have on the state of the family, and, as an extension, the nation. In "Tirocinium", Cowper focuses on male education, particularly the practice of sending young boys from home to public schools. He directly addresses fathers and evokes their natural duties as parents to be custodians of their sons' minds and, more importantly, their souls. For Cowper, a proper education will not only cleanse what he sees as a corrupt and atheistic society, but it will also prepare its students for the afterlife with God. In this chapter, I begin by parsing Cowper's views on the public school system as he describes the degradation of boys' characters that occurs there as well as the ignorance it perpetuates in men later in life. He specifically objects to separating boys from their homes which he argues severs the natural ties between father and child. He ultimately advocates for private education, either at home by parents or at the home of a pastor or parson who will teach his students good habits and form them into useful citizens of the state as well as faithful followers of God's teachings. Finally, I consider Cowper's choice of the poem form as a platform for his social message in context of the public role of poetry during the eighteenth century. By writing a poem, Cowper

takes on a masculine form with a mostly male readership and is able to inspire serious public conversation on his topic. Furthermore, his use of rhyming couplets marks his poem as an ambitious achievement that enters the realms of public argumentative discourse while also offering an enjoyable reading experience. A poem was thus the best form for Cowper to express his concerns about education due to its public role and its unique ability to influence public conversation and thought in spaces that could create real social change.

Cowper's "Review"

The title of Cowper's review of schools, "Tirocinium" is a Latin word which means "'a soldier's first service', and hence, 'pupilage', 'first experience of anything'" (Baird and Ryskamp, "Commentary", 427). The phrase is fitting, as Cowper argues that public schools are the "first experience" of life for the young boys of England, a 'pupilage' that prepares them to be "a sot or dunce/ Lascivious, headstrong, or all these at once" rather than active, contributing members of society (Cowper 201-202). He begins his poem by evoking nature and humanity's God-given purpose on earth. Cowper suggests that God gave humans "kingship and dominion o'er the rest" (96); thus, part of our responsibility to earn our right to reign is to mould the minds of youth and bestow "heavenly truth" and wisdom upon them (106). In Cowper's eyes, society is corrupt and secular. The enlightened parent's job must be to redeem their young from such "irreligion and atheism" (Baird and Ryskamp, "Cowper and his Poetry" xvii). Not only will religious principles benefit the development of the individual and thus, society, but Cowper believes "that the underlying purpose of education must be preparation for the next world rather than for this one" (xvii). Clearly, for Cowper, moral and intellectual educations go hand in hand, with the former taking precedence. If parents are to prepare their children for the after-life, they must begin early for "In early days the conscience has in most/ A quickness, which in later life is

lost” (Cowper 109-110). Cowper claims that parents can “feed” their children’s minds with religious reading material, such as the Lord’s Prayer and his own favourite, *Pilgrim’s Progress*¹ (145-146). Public schools, however, teach “much mythological stuff” rather than “sound religion” which causes “early notices of truth [to be] disgraced/...lose their credit, and are all effaced” (197-200). The mind’s early quickness can instill good principles in children which will serve them for the rest of their life, illustrating the importance of the early education received at home and then subsequently at school. Once he has established his own views on the aims of education, Cowper then turns to expose the faults of the current public school system that “disgraces” and effaces” early positive notions in England’s young boys.

In a knowledgeable and warning tone, Cowper argues that boys at public schools are educated more in bad habits and criminal activity than in Latin, Greek, or intellectual subjects. Both humourously and seriously, Cowper advises parents, “Would you your son should be a sot or dunce,/...Should prove your ruin, and his own at last,/ Train him in public with a mob of boys” (201, 205-206). His choice of the word “mob” is telling, suggesting disorder and danger. At public schools, boys turn into a “mob” of lazy, irresponsible, and corrupt drunkards who pawn, instead of read, their books and believe that taverns teach more of life than pedantic teachers. Their best friends will likely be the local barkeep and their first love will be a prostitute. A boy who was once “meek and bashful” soon grows “rude” and “wild” amidst such surroundings and activities (338, 340, 345). Cowper criticizes the aristocracy particularly for their indulgence in such vices as more is expected from them due to their privileges of “titles, riches, birth” (346). He addresses instead the middle class, those “families of less illustrious fame/ Whose chief distinction is their spotless name/ Whose heirs, their honors none, their

¹ Cowper draws from his own personal experience here and in other instances which helps to make the poem emotionally, as well as rationally, persuasive. As a child, he loved *Pilgrim’s Progress* and John Gay’s *Fables*, given to him by an aunt (King 9).

income small,/Must shine by true desert, or not at all” (354-357). This group has ambitious hopes for their sons, perhaps a shining career in law or a respectable one in the Church, and they wrongly believe that the public school system is the route to such glory. They send their sons like prostitutes, Cowper says, to make connections amongst their higher class, well-connected school fellows that will help them advance later in life (405). Forming such advantageous friendships is more important than knowledge and learning at schools. Cowper is especially appalled that religious (and other) authority figures receive their positions by knowing the right people rather than merit. Their qualifications do not matter for the job, as “The parson knows enough who knows a Duke” (403). Although Cowper himself made lasting friendships at school,² he argues that public school friendships do not always last into later life because the boys’ personalities are not fully formed and, besides, schools only breed “envy, hatred, jealousy, and pride” (467). They become petty rivals who study only in order to compete with and spite their classmates, instead of for improvement’s sake, scorning those who succeed and enjoying others’ failures. In Cowper’s opinion, learning is of little use if “*Morals* languish” (514). All boys may not possess genius but “all are capable of living well”; thus, a moral education is just as important as intellectual development, if not more so (510).

Worse yet, the ignorance and bad habits that boys acquire at public schools remain with them into manhood and breed further ignorance. Human nature dictates that “We love the play-place of our early days” (297) as it provides “Such recollection of our own delights,/ That viewing it, we seem almost t’obtain/ Our innocent sweet simple years again” (311-313). Cowper is perhaps thinking of his own fondness for his childhood surroundings, as he wrote later in

² Cowper writes that, despite the immorality of school boys, “We sometimes see a Lowth or Bagot there” (435), referring to his school friends Robert Lowth, who became Bishop of London, and Lewis Bagot, Bishop of Bristol, Norwich, and St. Asaph (Baird and Ryskamp, “Commentary”, 433). Baird and Ryskamp explain that Cowper mentions Bagot to show “he has no objection to bishops; he knew and valued Bagot and his brothers at Westminster School, and he wishes to vindicate Bagot from an attack in the *Monthly Review* in June 1781” (433).

adulthood, “There was neither Tree nor Gate nor stile in all that country to which I did not feel a relation, and the House itself...I preferred to a palace” (King 8). But other men in Cowper’s day are therefore fond of public schools and the dissolute places they frequented while there, such as taverns and brothels. They cannot wait for their sons to go off to school and engage in the same “*frolics* (‘tis a name/ That palliates deeds of folly and of shame)” that they did (Cowper 332-333). These “frolics” that the father passes down to his son include “driving chaise”, “bilking tavern bills”, “spouting plays”, getting in scrapes, being flogged, and gambling (326-330). In this way, “public folly”, or, in other words, the ignorance of men, feeds public schools and vice versa (250). Cowper thus identifies education as at least in part responsible for the moral state of the nation—England is increasingly corrupted because of this cycle of bad education. Men are not able to think critically so they do not deviate from the “foolish precedent” already established and thereby remain blind to the harm of public schools (255). Sons indulge in the same vices as their fathers, halting improvements in an irreligious and degenerate society. Evidently, for Cowper, reforming education will also be a method of reforming moral and social values and practices that have gone astray. A proper education will lead its students back to God and form them into enlightened citizens. Public schools are currently an obstacle to this process, shaping boys into boisterous heathens and perpetuating the corruption of a world that has forgotten God.

Finally, to conclude his poem, Cowper directly addresses parents, particularly fathers, in order to articulate his vision of education and to advocate for the private system. Cowper questions why a father would assign the important task of education to a stranger when “God and nature and your int’rest too/ Seem with one voice to delegate [it] to you?” (553-554). Parents’ natural duty is to ensure that their son receives a worthy education. Cowper presents this duty as sanctioned by God; to do otherwise is to fail one’s child and to fail God. Firstly, sending one’s

son away from home has detrimental effects on him. For a father and son intimately attached, a “second weaning” (sending him off to school) “lacerate[s] both your heart and his!” (557-558). The school boy’s joy centers entirely on his expected holiday when he can go home again; however, “A disappointment waits him even there” (566). He finds that he is now a stranger in his own home and to his parents. Cowper paints a touching picture of the estranged young boy: he “blushes, hangs his head, is shy and strange,/No longer takes, as once, with fearless ease/ His fav’rite stand between his father’s knees” (568-73). His relationship with his father, once a friendship, is now distant and cold which is “the natural effect/ Of love by absence chilled into respect” (575-576). Cowper despairs that confidence between father and son can never be regained and thus a son may neglect his father in old age.³ Parents do not even have the comfort of knowing that at least their son is improving as he does not bring home any accomplishments from school of which they can be proud. Cowper asks fathers whether they are satisfied with their sons having such shallow and superficial knowledge rather than an in-depth understanding. Students memorize rules and concepts but are not taught “sav’ry truth” and/or “wholesome common sense” (629). In this case, a father’s job is to guide his son to “some not steep, though philosophic height” (631). He should guide him, be a friend and a role model to him, and make abstract learning relevant to him. Fathers who are either too busy with their profession or too unlearned, or who run houses of vice where their son will be sure to pick up bad habits, should send their sons to a pastor, a private tutor, “A man of letters, manners, morals, parts,/ Unpatronized, and therefore little known” (673-674).⁴ Such a tutor will undoubtedly be a positive moral influence and instill good habits in his students. Private tutors also only have two

³ Cowper’s description of “love by absence chilled into respect” rings true in Austen’s depiction of the Bertram children, particularly Tom, Maria, and Julia who repress their spirits in front of their father and do not have any affection for him.

⁴ Austen would most likely have agreed with Cowper’s advice since her own father, a parson, privately tutored boys at the Steventon rectory, her childhood home, as a way of supplementing his income (Byrne 20).

boys at a time to teach, rendering discipline easier in contrast to public school masters who cannot control the crowd of boys left to their safekeeping. In this private environment, boys will learn positive habits:

Where stillness aiding study, and his mind
Serene, and to his duties much inclined,
Not occupied in day dreams, as at home,
Of pleasures past or follies yet to come,
His virtuous toil may terminate at last
In settled habit and decided taste. (773-778)⁵

From this description, Cowper evidently values quiet, stillness, a sense of duty, and work ethic, rather than the hustle and bustle of modern urban life or the luxurious lifestyle of the aristocracy. Quiet study is portrayed as beneficial in recommending the fulfillment of duties and in creating steady habits; it is a “virtuous toil” that encourages morality and, by extension, reconnection with God. Ultimately, a private education will help to create active, content citizens who quietly go about their duties on earth in order to earn a place in the afterlife.

Once he has painted this ideal portrait of his hopes for man, Cowper lapses back into pessimism. In the next line, he exclaims, “But whom do I advise?” (779); the answer is the ignorant majority who do not care enough about their sons to save them from the den of dissipation, the “brood of asps”, that is public school (870). According to Cowper, most people will ignore his warnings but those whose children are their “dearest care” will need no further proof of the dangers of public education (800). He appeals once again to the middle class, imploring them to recognize the corrupted state of their current world, the cause of which he ties back to the lessons acquired at school. A father’s duty is to take care of his own “miniature, thy flesh, thy bone”, to guard him against evils; therefore to send him to school where harm is

⁵ These qualities of “stillness” and “virtuous toil” are shared by Fanny Price, the quiet and timid heroine of *Mansfield Park*.

certain to befall him violates nature (874).⁶ He cares for his child because one day his son will reciprocate and take care of him in his old age. To secure such care, the father must gain his son's love and respect early on in childhood. Make him grateful, Cowper advises, or one cannot complain when "attachments lewd and base/ Supplant thee" (889-890). Even if a father does his best in raising him and the boy still "prove[s] unkind", since man is always fallible, at least the father can comfort himself in the knowledge that he performed his duty (895). Cowper ends his poem by suggesting that the public schools be pulled down as "From education.../ The public character its colour draws,/ Thence the prevailing manners take their cast" (911-913). Thus, if his readers, like he, wish to improve the world, they must reform their education system. Cowper ultimately proves with his poem the two quotations he includes as epigraphs: firstly, that "education...consists in that right nurture" from Plato and, secondly, from Diogenes Laertius, that "The foundation of every society lies in the upbringing of the young" (Baird and Ryskamp, "Commentary", 427-428). He shows that each individual must be properly nurtured during his youth in order to grow into a responsible and virtuous adult and that each responsible and virtuous adult comprises the public character and the state of their society, whether it be just or unjust, enlightened or atheist. For Cowper, preparing for the next world is the ultimate aim of education but in so doing, this world will be purified and find its way back to nature and back to God.

The Poem

In 1784, Cowper wrote in a letter to William Unwin, "I am mistaken if Tirocinium do not make some of my friends angry, and procure me enemies not a few. There is a sting in verse that

⁶ Once again, Cowper could be thinking of personal experience. At a school in Bedfordshire, Cowper was bullied mercilessly by a fifteen year old which was especially jarring treatment for him because of the "tenderness" he received at home from his mother (King 11). Such experiences at school either harden boys to become bullies themselves or haunt them for the rest of their lives—either way, they do irreparable damage.

Prose neither has nor can have, and I do not know that Schools in the gross, and especially Public Schools, have ever been so pointedly condemned before” (Ella quoting Cowper 18). Here, Cowper suggests that “Tirocinium” may provoke readers, not only because of the subject matter but because of the unique “sting” of verse. This “sting” helps to explain why Cowper chose to write a poem, rather than a pamphlet or a tract, to launch his attack against public schools. Poetry, however, was also the mode traditionally used to enter and inspire public discussions during Cowper’s day. Before the eighteenth century, poetry was “largely the province of the elite” (Benedict 63). Books were expensive and free time was necessary to read or write them; thus, “virtually only the privileged and highly educated ranks possessed, wrote, or read written texts” (63). Poetry was particularly difficult because it required “close, sustained attention” and depth of understanding due to its syntax and allusions (63). Readers and writers of poetry generally needed a classical education, which would have been available to aristocratic men but excluded most women and the lower classes. In the eighteenth century, however, writing developed into a paid profession due to technological advancements and the rise of the middle class, igniting a shift in the cultural position of the writer: “The writer thus changed from that of a courtly nobleman amusing himself in crafted language...to that of an ink-stained drone, a lean Grub Street hack...shivering in his garret as he scribbled sensationalistic pamphlets at the printer’s demand” (63-64). These “hacks” wrote what would sell and so literature came to be considered low brow, including poetry although it still “solicited a more exclusive audience” because of traditional conceptions of the form as overly sophisticated and/or intellectual (64,67). Topics of poems expanded to include “politics, science, and scandal” in order to attract a larger readership (67). Poems could have ordinary, everyday subjects or could contemplate the significance of historical events or philosophical and social issues, like class distinctions,

colonization, morality, gender roles, and slavery (Hunter 11). In this way, poetry became “a blend of high art and popular verse” (Benedict 67). Poets who wished to be taken seriously such as Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift distinguished themselves from the Grub Street hacks by representing themselves and the role of the poet as “moral monitor[s]” of society (72). They were responsible for lashing out at vice and corruption through the written word.

Poets certainly had an important public role in eighteenth century England. In his essay on “Couplets and Conversation,” J. Paul Hunter discusses how, in contrast to today’s poetry which is typically deeply personal and emotive, poets during Cowper’s time viewed themselves as performing a public service. Their poems were “more critical or satirical in stance and tone, and often more argumentative than lyrical or celebratory” (13). Poets

felt themselves to be participating in the public sphere, not just commenting on it; they expected active readers who would respond to their formulations of policies, ideas, and opinions. Readers of poetry represented a strong and diverse cross-section of population...Poetry was issue-dominated, highly rhetorical, and centered on present-day happenings. (13)

In fact, anyone who wished to stay informed about public matters had to read poetry to do so, prompting the latest poems to become the basis for public discussion (15). Hunter claims that this practice both of discussing poetry and of poetry taking on topical subjects marked the development of a Habermasian public sphere “in which an informed citizenry becomes more widely active in discussing and, ultimately, deciding issues of public concern” (15). It is important to note that while women too increasingly became readers of poetry, the pervading cultural conception, which influenced their insufficient education, was that because women were confined to the private sphere and therefore not actively contributing to public life in a professional capacity, they had no need to learn about public issues or to think critically. As well, women who were intelligent and informed enough to speak on serious subjects were rarely

granted an opportunity or a platform to do so. Instead, they were encouraged to keep quiet about their learning and told that writing was an unsuitable activity for a woman.⁷ Furthermore, Hunter argues that integral to this developing public sphere was the interrelationship between texts and conversation (12, 16). Poetry produced conversation and conversation also produced poetry. While anyone could take part in these generative discussions, they were “far more likely to occur in London than in the country, in ‘polite society’ rather than among the working classes or servants, and among men rather than women” (12). Thus, while poetry acquired a wider readership in the eighteenth century, especially towards the end, it was still intended for a particular kind of public audience and to inspire serious conversation.

A poem was the perfect platform for Cowper to voice his condemnation of public schools because of the conversation it could generate throughout public and intellectual discourses. If Cowper wanted to critique an ongoing practice and to effect change, poetry was the typical vehicle with which to do so. By tackling a prevalent and much debated national issue such as education, Cowper was sure to procure attention for himself as a writer and for his poems (12). The public role of poetry ensured that the concerns Cowper expresses in “Tirocinium” would be discussed and debated by readers interested in public affairs. In the poem, he particularly addresses men—fathers and sons—and the middle class, not only because this group is most affected by the public school system but also because they make up the majority of his readers. Although women were increasingly reading and writing poetry, and literacy was spreading amongst the lower classes, especially in 1785 when *The Task and Other Poems* (of which “Tirocinium” is a part) was published, Cowper’s review of schools is geared towards a male, middle to upper class audience—in other words, men in positions of power, professionals

⁷ Dr. John Gregory gives such advice in his conduct manual *A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters* which Mary Wollstonecraft critiques in her tract *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The implications of his advice and her critique will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

actively engaged in the public sphere. It is addressed to the men who participate directly and actively in the kinds of conversations that Hunter proposes—the conversations that comprise a Habermasian public sphere and that influenced and are influenced by texts.⁸ Essentially, Cowper identifies a public problem and begins a conversation. In writing a poem about education, Cowper effectively enters into public intellectual discourses, informing the public and working towards changing it through the power of the written and spoken word.

While Cowper makes his foray into the discussion about education with a specific audience in mind, his simplicity of language renders his poem accessible to a wider variety of reader. Vincent Newey argues that Cowper anticipates Romantic poets like William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge by writing on ordinary subjects and employing a “plain and natural style” (6). Cowper expresses lofty ideas and insightful wisdom in his poems but “speaks to all men, describing in ‘a language intelligible even to the vulgar...what the village swain has contemplated in common with the philosopher’” (quoting Knox 6). Newey is discussing Cowper’s poetry more generally, but this common style is evident in “Tirocinium” which treats its subject directly, clearly, and thoroughly. Although the philosophical musings that begin the poem may be a little dense, both intellectual and swain can understand, for example, his incisive criticism of religious authority:

Behold your Bishop! well he plays his part,
Christian in name, and Infidel in heart,
Ghostly office, earthly in his plan,
A slave at court, elsewhere a lady’s man,
Dumb as a senator, and as a priest
A piece of mere church-furniture at best. (Cowper 420-425)

⁸ The Habermasian public sphere, theorized by Jurgen Habermas, was a gendered and exclusionary sphere because its discussions of public issues often took place in coffeehouses. While there is debate about women’s role in the coffeehouses, it was a predominantly male space and thus women did not have the same opportunities to contribute to the development of this sphere (Cowan 128-129).

The balance and parallelism of these lines emphasizes the incongruity between what the Bishop appears to be and what he is in reality, while colloquial phrases such as “lady’s man” and “dumb” render the passage’s meaning easy to grasp. In his poetry, as in “Tirocinium”, “Cowper has something useful to say and never subordinates matter to manner” (Newey 5). In most instances, such as the above quotation, Cowper effectively integrates matter and manner, but his choice of simplistic, sometimes colloquial, language means that he would rather his readers understand him than impress the critics. For Newey, there is “something distinctly appealing about a writer who makes demands on our comprehension and perceptiveness... without constantly putting us under strain” (18).⁹ Cowper’s poem demands that its readers think and discuss, stimulating their mental energies without being overly intellectual, obscure, or dull.

What poetry does, according to Joseph Addison, is “bring the ideas of understanding to life in the imagination” (Sitter 144). It uses imaginative language and narrative in order to both entertain and to instruct: “it speaks to readers for whom philosophy—admittedly finer—would be too abstruse... for poetry [possesses] a power and human scope that philosophy generally lacks” (145). If a poet wants his work to sell, to be read, and to be popular, as well as to become the subject of public conversation, and express a certain statement that has serious socio-political implications, poetry was the best genre with which to accomplish this. Unlike the political/philosophical tract (discussed in the next chapter) which presents a labourious reading experience, a poem such as “Tirocinium” can entertain despite its important social function and remain understandable to a variety of readers. In this way, Cowper is sure to gain a large reading public as well as secure the attention of powerful men and he models the very reforms for which he calls. His poem itself becomes an education for those casual readers who may not have gone

⁹ Austen completes a similar balancing act in that her novels are both entertaining and invested with deeper meaning. This topic will be expanded on in the third chapter.

to school or who have not as of yet recognized the harm of public schools. His use of common language and imagination makes potentially didactic material interesting to readers, perhaps inspiring more people to join his cause in advocating for educational reform.

In “Tirocinium”, Cowper’s use of rhyming couplets enables him to establish himself as a serious poet and to build a persuasive argument. The “typical eighteenth-century poem” was written in couplets, “the expected, almost obligatory mode for serious poetry”, because it “signaled ambition and seriousness, indicated the express intention of engaging in extended argumentative discourse, and promised the basis for systematic consideration of important issues” (Hunter 21). Perfected by Pope, rhyming couplet poems indicated “ambition and seriousness” because they are “hard to write, requiring both technical skill that can be learned and talent that cannot” (25). Their difficulty means that Cowper was declaring himself to be a capable and highly skilled poet by employing them to convey his social message. It shows the craftsmanship and detail of his work and suggests that the poem has been carefully put together and worked upon, which is a sign of professionalism. He places himself among the ranks of the great poets of the time such as Pope and Swift. The couplet particularly suits his desire to create and enter an “argumentative discourse” and to consider an important issue, like public education’s effects on society. Hunter argues that the couplet gained this reputation because of the “building-block possibilities of two-line units—their gathering, ruminative, cumulative functions” as well as “Its habits of brevity and conciseness—the art of focusing quickly on the crucial issues and terms”, especially in long poems (22). In this way, the structure and flow of the poem mirror the building and unravelling of an argument itself, with each topic functioning as a springboard for the next. Once each building block is put in place and “the edifice stands fully built, [readers] will see a conversation being created, a persuasive argument made, an

interaction started between text and reader” (29). Just so, “Tirocinium” proceeds logically and persuasively through Cowper’s argument, beginning with humankind’s duty on earth, onto the types of boys that public schools produce, next, the types of men, and then into a more affective appeal to parents along with an alternative plan of education. He concludes with a final call for public schools to be torn down, beseeching his readers to discover for themselves what harm the schools perpetuate if they still disagree with him. Each set of rhyming couplets elucidates a particular detail which contributes to the whole picture. Cowper’s poem, in this way, also echoes the very conversation it hopes to inspire, since the “ideal of conversation” in the eighteenth century was “to be both clear and elegant—to say something in an organized, persuasive way, to have a point and to speak it eloquently” (28). Cowper does speak his point eloquently and persuasively through verse and rhyme, thereby beginning the conversation as well as inspiring continued dialogue and debate throughout the public sphere about education.

The rhythm and conciseness of the rhyming couplets also lends the poem a conversational quality and gives it that “sting in verse” that prose lacks. Despite their rhyme, couplets “provide a tone and simplicity of vocabulary and syntax that make them as understandable as a clear spoken sentence while still being guided by visible strategies that show us the signs of conscious craft and complex thinking” (25). Eighteenth century readers “could read them gracefully” as couplets tripped easily off the tongue (25). Thus, couplets were not only enjoyable to read out loud, but their conversational tone (coupled with Cowper’s simplistic language) attracted the casual and, perhaps, unskilled reader, ensuring that Cowper would garner a wider readership. Yet deeper meaning is also present for those who choose to look beyond the surface: “couplet poems are seldom as simple as they may seem; their aim is not transparency but...a surface ease that requires close reading, contemplation, and analytic replaying to come to

a full understanding” (25). Whichever way that readers approach the poem, it translates easily into conversation and broaches an important public issue while remaining entertaining.

This quality is important for a poet as moral and religious as Cowper. The concise and critical focus of the couplet adds humour to his condemnation, such as when he paints a tender picture of a man “With his own likeness placed on either knee,/ Indulges all a father’s heart-felt glee/ And tells them as he strokes their silver locks” of his hopes for them, only to deflate this image in the next lines: “That they must soon learn Latin and to box;/ Then turning, he regales his list’ning wife/ With all th’adventures of his early life,/His skill.../In bilking tavern bills.../How he was flogg’d, or had the luck t’escape,/ What sums he lost at play, and how he sold/Watch, seals, and all, ‘till all his pranks are told” (Cowper 320-330). What begins as a heart-warming scene of a father bestowing wisdom upon his children turns into a comically absurd moment where, instead, he teaches them how to fight, evade bills, avoid punishment, and pawn gifts. The rhyme of “locks” and “box” exemplifies the contrast Cowper wishes to draw between the innocence of the children and the noisy, rough vices of school boys. Readers can laugh at such incongruities in the couplets as they provide “sting”. This humour adds weight to the lessons Cowper hopes to teach in his poetry, as like Pope and Swift, he viewed the poet as a teacher or a moral monitor whose job it was to “strike at ‘vice, vanity and folly’ and ‘allure the reader...to the reading of what may profit him”” (Newey quoting Cowper 35). Cowper’s simple style and readable rhythm all serve his moralizing purpose; they help him to “sting”, to condemn, to strike at “vice, vanity, and folly”. Cowper too believes in the public role of the poet and provides a public service by commenting on the moral state of his society and advocating for improvements. The flexibility and imagination of the poem form allows Cowper to appeal to a wide audience and to build an argument that is both pleasing to read and compelling as a basis

for intellectual debate. Cowper is a man writing to other men in a masculine form, beginning a conversation, raising a topic he knows will be taken up by the public sphere, and, perhaps, creating positive change in this world to better prepare for the next.

William and Mary

Like other major poets of the eighteenth century, Cowper saw himself as a moral agent whose job it was to improve society in order to prepare his people for the afterlife with God. He views public schools as breeders of ignorance and vice, institutions that go against nature to sever the natural ties between fathers and sons, and holds them responsible for the increasingly irreligious world in which he lives. Instead, Cowper argues for private education, either at home or at the home of a tutor. Education is the foundation for social change in Cowper's eyes—to improve society, one must improve individuals; to improve individuals, one must give them an education that will positively shape and develop their character. By writing a poem, Cowper becomes a public servant, introducing a new topic for public consideration. His use of simplistic language and rhyming couplets ensures that his poem is readable and thus garners attention and a wide readership while the socio-political and philosophical implications of his subject demand that it be taken seriously in public discourses. During Cowper's day, a poem was the typical form for writers to create an argumentative public discourse, especially for a man writing to other men. It was a quicker and easier read than the political tract while still holding all the weight of such a form. While women too wrote poetry, male poets such as Pope, Swift, Johnson, Gray, Goldsmith, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and, of course, Cowper dominated the day. Modern criticism is increasingly uncovering the important contributions of female poets that have been previously overlooked. Poetry, however, had its limits; it was often discussed in spaces like the coffeehouse where women were excluded and it required a formal education and a combination

of natural skill and training to write. Many female and working class poets were endowed by nature with poetic ability but lacked the education to rival their well-esteemed, educated male counterparts. Some women poets imitated the style of popular poets such as Milton and Pope, in lieu of formal education, while others sought different forms with which to express their thoughts (Kairoff 162). After all, only a few years after “Tirocinium” hit the bookstands, a woman’s voice rang out with a similar criticism of education; however, this critique was even stronger, more incisive, and more revolutionary and it needed the form of the political tract to be so. That woman was Mary Wollstonecraft.

Chapter 2

The Political Tract: Mary Wollstonecraft's *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)

Amidst the clamours and chaos of the French Revolution and the anxieties it produced in England and throughout Europe, Mary Wollstonecraft called for another revolution, just as radical and progressive—a “REVOLUTION in female manners” (*Rights of Woman* 281). Many scholars and historians credit the revolutionary fervour—the complete dismantling of traditional hierarchies and structures that shaped society and the outpourings of philosophical and political ideas—that the French Revolution fostered with Wollstonecraft’s ability to envision a different and more equal role for women in her most famous work. Today, Wollstonecraft’s 1792 political treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is considered a touchstone work of feminist thought. At the time, it was a follow-up to her 1790 *Vindication of the Rights of Men* as well as another tract lending its voice to the conversation on national education, but it was also entirely new and original. In a letter, Wollstonecraft called herself “the first of a new genus” and indeed she was—“a female intellectual living by her pen” (Lynch, “Introduction”, vii). She was the first woman writer hired on retainer by her publisher Joseph Johnson (who published Cowper as well), which meant she would have a steady stream of projects assigned to her and thus a regular income (Gordon 118). She wrote and published novels, tales about children’s education, translations, and reviews, and political tracts (119-122). She contributed to Johnson’s magazine *Analytical Review* which aimed to inform the public, mostly middle class men, through literary reviews about recently published books that were worth reading to further one’s knowledge of important subjects (142). These books included works on education, history, religion, science, poetry, moral philosophy, and even novels (Altenbernd Johnson 29)—what Jane Austen called in her letter to the Prince Regent’s librarian, the subjects of a “Man’s Conversation” (Le Faye 332).

That Wollstonecraft was a major contributor to such serious, intellectual topics means that she had entered discussions from which women were usually excluded. When she penned *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* in response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, her real name and identity were unknown¹⁰—but this anonymity was not the case in her vindication of women's rights (Gordon 170). In a firm tone and bold style, Wollstonecraft calls for women to be treated like rational creatures, capable of logic and reflection. She lays the blame for women's current state of ignorance on the faulty education system and gender misconceptions propagated by men and society. Not only was her name included on the front page but it was work where "I myself...shall certainly appear"—just one of the many reasons for revolutionary nature of the work (quoting Wollstonecraft 170).

In this chapter, I will firstly discuss Wollstonecraft's views on education and her suggestions for reform as put forth in *Rights of Woman* as well as its precursor, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* which influenced the later work. In both, she envisions a society where the female intellectual is embraced and esteemed at the same time she declares herself to be this new type of woman—one whose opinions, ideas, and thoughts have value and should be heard on a public platform. I argue, like other Wollstonecraft critics, that her call for revolution addresses not only female manners, but the position of men and wider systems of power that comprise the very structure of society itself as well. Furthermore, considering that such 'manly' subjects and political writings were typically the exclusive domain of men, Wollstonecraft's choice of a political tract to air her views on education has significant implication. I identify three aims this form allows Wollstonecraft to pursue. Firstly, it permits her to directly respond to other philosophers' ideas and writings, placing her own within an ongoing conversation and

¹⁰ Her identity was revealed in the second edition of *Rights of Men*, to the surprise of many male writers who had praised the work when its author was anonymous. Upon discovery, many of them detracted their support and discredited her arguments, although Wollstonecraft did receive support from her fellow radicals (Gordon 152-3).

public debate. Secondly, it addresses her intended audience of men whom she believes must begin to improve themselves before women can. Lastly, it enables Wollstonecraft to model the very change she wants to effect in women and in her society in the act of writing in a supposedly ‘manly’ form and in her style and manner of doing so.¹¹ To combat popular opinion about women’s deficiencies, she exemplifies the existence and potential of an intellectual woman by being one in the public eye. Wollstonecraft ultimately believed in the power of the pen as a means of improving the world and changing cultural consciousness. To close, I look at Wollstonecraft’s controversial legacy, one which may have influenced a young Jane Austen when she too decided to make her foray into public discourses as a female author.

Wollstonecraft’s Revolutionary Thoughts

Wollstonecraft first picked up the pen to express her thoughts on female education when she needed money to travel to Ireland where she had gotten a job as a governess (Altenbernd Johnson 15). She called it *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters with Reflections on Female Conduct in the More Important Duties of Life* and it too was published by Joseph Johnson (16). Since she was in need of quick cash, *Thoughts* is often considered a much shallower treatment of the subject she takes up so skillfully in *Rights of Woman*. Gina Luria, in her introduction to the work, calls it “an immature, awkward, and stoic literary attempt” (7). But it plants the seeds for *Rights of Woman*: “Her book shows that she was dissatisfied with the status of her sex, but that as yet she had not formulated her objections or traced them to the basic human rights to which women as well as men were entitled” (quoting Ralph Wardle 7). It demonstrates the beginnings of Wollstonecraft’s revolutionary thoughts and provides a foundation for the arguments that will be reconfigured, expanded upon, and refined when she picks up the pen again in 1792. At the

¹¹ This argument applies Mitzi Myers’ argument about the reviews Wollstonecraft wrote for *Analytical Review* to her work on *Rights of Woman*.

time, books on education were very popular and could sell quickly, especially those that addressed female education (Lynch, “Education”, 221). Both female and male writers took up the topic so Wollstonecraft would not have been a pioneering female voice on the subject. Neither was she years later when her *Rights of Woman* was published: “Women long before Wollstonecraft had enunciated much of the content...of her manifesto, but none had galvanized the attention and the energies of a generation of middle class men and women as she did” (Luria 8). As Luria suggests, her effect can be partly attributed to “prevailing spirit of the age” which highly valued human rights (8-9), but also to the boldness of her claims that treat not only women, but also men of all classes. I will firstly address the content of Wollstonecraft’s thought and then turn to how she forwards her arguments.

In both *Thoughts* and *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft deplores the current state of women’s intellects and characters but rejects the prevailing belief that this inferiority is natural; instead, she says, it is a result of their education. Like Cowper and Austen, Wollstonecraft believes that one’s moral and intellectual educations are inseparable, each informing the other. She claims that all humans are given reason to place them above beasts but that women are being denied reason, and thus the ability to attain virtue. Presently, women are taught only to be the play-things of men. In childhood, girls are not allowed to play outside like boys are, causing their muscles and nerves to weaken. Their education leaves them in the company of their mothers and female relatives; therefore, they begin to imitate them and acquire a fondness for dress. They are never left alone and so they learn to be dependent. They learn only sporadically, never pursuing any specific subject in depth, preventing their understanding from properly developing. As they are given no serious subject to study, their “natural sagacity” is “turned too soon on life and manners” (*Rights of Woman* 88). Learning, in the present system of female education, is

subordinate to “corporeal accomplishments” (88), or what she calls “Exterior Accomplishments” in *Thoughts*: “Under this head may be ranked all those accomplishments which merely render the person attractive; and those half-learnt ones which do not improve the mind” (24). She describes,

Girls learn something of music, drawing, and geography; but they do not know enough to engage their attention, and render it an employment of the mind. If they can play over a few tunes to their acquaintance, and have a drawing or two (half done by the matter) to hang up in their rooms, they imagine themselves artists...the foolish, indiscriminate praises which are bestowed on them only produce vanity. (25-26)¹²

In this way, female education prioritizes pleasing manners and elegant appearances over intellectual knowledge like science or philosophy, which ultimately leads to the development of vanity and selfishness. Women are denied rationality and genius and thus cannot be intellectual: “what deserves the name of intellect, the power of gaining general or abstract ideas, of even intermediate ones, [is] out of the question” (*Rights of Woman* 273). Wollstonecraft suggests that it is this education that renders them simpletons, incapable of contributing to the intellectual discourses of the day, rather than an innate inability to grasp lofty subjects. Finally, the last essential component of their education is obedience, or, at least, show of obedience: “Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, *outward* obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, every thing else is needless” (84). The ultimate aim of such an education, as this statement reveals, is to teach women to entrap husbands. Once married, Wollstonecraft writes that society dictates that “She was created to be the toy of man, his rattle,

¹² Ann Bermingham in her article on “The Accomplished Woman” discusses this subject more in depth, detailing how “accomplishments” were used as a method of display on the marriage market, to advertise that a young lady would make a suitable and attractive wife. The object of such an education was to perform for the gaze, not to develop the mind beneath the surface, which Wollstonecraft finds “morally and intellectually corrupting” (Bermingham 9).

and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused” (100). This portrait represents the present state of women.

In *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft identifies female weakness as a cyclical problem propagated by their education—foolish mothers misguide their daughters who then grow up to be foolish mothers. What Wollstonecraft calls for most fervently as the most important and essential purpose of female education is the exercise of women’s understandings. Women who are able to develop their minds and enlarge their understandings will possess stronger characters and achieve greater independence. To supplement this, women must be granted equality and economic independence. If women were allowed to support themselves economically, with dignity, they would not need to make pleasure the business of their lives. As it is, they have to attract a husband to subsist in society so they spend their time and effort in dressing and adorning themselves with pretty ornaments. As Wollstonecraft knew firsthand, the job market open to single women was slim and demeaning—they could either do menial work as milliners and/or mantua-makers or occupy a marginal position in a household as a governess. Wollstonecraft wants women to be allowed to work as midwives, as well as physicians, nurses, politicians, business people, and academics. This way, they could support themselves financially and not have to rely on entrapping a husband for security. An occupation would also exercise their understandings usefully, towards some contribution to society, whereas presently women are left to lounge around the house with little to do but make up their appearance. If women are to be useful and virtuous, they must be equal in law because “how can a being be generous who has nothing of its own? or, virtuous, who is not free?...take away natural rights, and duties become null” (227). In their present oppressed state, women have no choice but to become contemptible, either in menial and marginalized jobs or as clinging and pathetic wives, but if they were granted

equality and a civil existence, they could be useful citizens. Furthermore, Wollstonecraft believed women could be useful in their duty to be a good wife and mother. Financial independence would mean women would not have to cling to their husbands for support and equality between the sexes would make husband and wife companions rather than just lovers. She suggests ways that their education could better prepare them for these roles. Wollstonecraft says girls should be allowed to run wild during childhood so as to develop a strong body which will lead to a strong mind. Girls too should learn the truth about reproduction in order to toughen their minds and instill sense. Wollstonecraft finds nurseries and boarding schools at fault for much of girls' bad behaviour; there, they learn immodest habits and become too familiar with each other. Instead, she believes that the "decent personal reserve" which is the "foundation of dignity of character" must be kept up between women for them to gain sense and modesty¹³ (206). They should be taught to wash and dress alone without the help of lady's maids to render them independent and teach them the value of cleanliness. For Wollstonecraft, "cleanliness, neatness" and "personal reserve" ought to adorn beauty (206). Each of these characteristics reflects dignity and an ordered, rational mind. Reason working in conjunction with emotion is important to Wollstonecraft as she allows women to feel and have appetites but she stipulates that they should be checked by reason. They need some noble duty, such as childrearing, in order to channel their energies and exercise their understandings. If they are educated to have inner virtue and a strong sense of morality for morality's sake, not for sake of reputation, then the restraints placed on female behaviour would not be necessary. She writes that "the most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart. Or, in other words to enable the individual to attain such

¹³ Wollstonecraft defines modesty in Chapter VII as "soberness" that "teaches a man not to think more highly of himself than he ought to" (198). She differentiates it from humility which is a type of "self-abasement" whereas modesty means that one has a "just" opinion of oneself (198).

habits of virtue as will render it independent. In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason” (86). In this statement, Wollstonecraft adeptly sums up her vision for female education and for women’s potential.

Finally, Wollstonecraft believed that, contrary to the prevailing notions of her time, women could be intellectual and active citizens. Instead of acquiring “exterior accomplishments”, women should dedicate themselves to an intellectual pursuit that will lead to purity of mind and inner virtue. Wollstonecraft believes women are capable of intellectuality, as she herself proves; however, their education leads them astray. She argues that women have a duty to be active citizens just as men do; while their husbands fulfill their duties away from home, wives should be active in managing their family, educating their children, and assisting their neighbours. Thus, women can contribute to society in their own way. She recommends, “Make the heart clean, let it expand and feel for all that is human, instead of being narrowed by selfish passions; and let the mind frequently contemplate subjects that exercise the understanding, without heating the imagination, and artless modesty will give the finishing touches” (200-201). Women will be generous, intelligent, rational, and modest—in other words, good *female* citizens. The set of qualities that she invents to define a feminine form of citizenship is, paradoxically, both conservative and innovative. By modern standards, Wollstonecraft’s model perhaps does not seem radical; she is happy to leave women in their gender assigned roles of wives and mothers:

[by] fulfilling the duties of a mother, a woman with a sound constitution, may still keep her person scrupulously neat, and assist to maintain her family, if necessary, or by reading and conversations with both sexes, indiscriminately, improve her mind...And did they pursue a plan of conduct, and not waste their time in following the fashionable vagaries of dress, the management of their household and children need not shut them out from literature, or prevent their attaching themselves to a science, with that steady eye which strengthens the mind, or practising one of the fine arts that cultivate the taste. (279-280)

Yet, her claim for their citizenship and broadening of the term to accommodate femininity is itself original, in that she gives women a public existence and a public responsibility. She breaks them free from the confines of the private sphere, giving them a platform to contribute to society. There are moments, however, in *Rights of Woman* where a self-consciously radical voice pushes through. Indeed, many writers and philosophers recognized the need for women to be better educated to be sensible mothers, but Wollstonecraft also calls for women's political involvement. She says that although "I may excite laughter," she insists that "I really think that women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of governments" (228). Here, Wollstonecraft confidently and defiantly states her opinion, even though she knows that it is not only contrary to popular belief but may also result in being mocked. She believes that women should be involved in politics and the public sphere and that their voices should be heard in cultural consciousness. Even one of her most positive reviewers, William Enfield, wrote that while he agrees that "both the condition and the character of women are capable of great improvement; and that, by means of a more rational plan of a female education", he does not see that "the condition or the character of women would be improved, by assuming an active part in civil government" (277,276). Thus, Wollstonecraft was clearly venturing into uncharted and radical territory by proposing that women could not only be active citizens as capable wives and mothers but as intellectuals, as politicians, as philosophers, as moralists, breaking the gendered public and private divide.

To deny women political representation, she continues, is to serve and perpetuate the current system of despotism (*Rights of Woman* 228). After her death, Wollstonecraft was called a whore and a prostitute for both her writings and the 'scandalous' details of her personal life which effectively diminished, obscured, and quieted her revolutionary legacy, preventing future

generations from taking up her torch (Gordon 515). Wollstonecraft had to be discredited because she challenged the very foundation on which anti-revolutionary Britain was built. While *Thoughts* may be an educational tract that seeks to reform female education in order to render women useful and virtuous, *Rights of Woman* calls for a complete reordering of society through its suggestions for educational reforms. Wollstonecraft identifies women's ignorance and oppression not as a reflection of the defects of women, but of a defect in men and in society. Women will never become what she wants them to be until both men and government change, as the social conventions of the day unavoidably make up part of its citizens' education. Firstly, men must improve their own behaviour and learn to value the intellectual female. Men are responsible for the current state of women because they seek only pretty play-things; they want to keep women ignorant and thus obedient. They declare it to be their duty to guide women but are not moral or chaste themselves, so it is only logical that women go astray. Women make up their appearances and play the part of coquette to attract men, but if men were not beguiled by such false charms, they would have to develop character. Wollstonecraft calls for men to change what they value in a woman: "a pretty woman, as an object of desire, is generally allowed to be so by men of all descriptions; whilst a fine woman, who inspires more sublime emotions by displaying intellectual beauty, may be overlooked or observed with indifference" (*Rights of Woman* 115). When men are shallow and vain, they appreciate only pretty, sexually desirable women while intellectual women are ignored. Wollstonecraft entreats men to "assist to emancipate their companion, to make her a *help meet* for them! Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers—in a word, better citizens" (231). Thus, she places the onus on men to improve

women's position in society and "the important task of education" which can never properly begin until "the person of a woman is no longer preferred to her mind" (280). The government and institutions of power are also to blame for women's folly as they create unequal and "unnatural distinctions" between the sexes (221). Throughout the work, Wollstonecraft's most prevalent push is for equality, as she views the enslavement of women as symptomatic of all of humankind's enslavement to tyranny. To give one man absolute power "degrade[s] the human character" because "Birth, riches, and every extrinsic advantage that exalt a man above his fellows, without any mental exertion, sink him in reality below them...And that tribes of men, like flocks of sheep, should quietly follow such a leader...only a desire of present enjoyment and narrowness of understanding can solve" (112). Wollstonecraft questions why men choose to follow foolishly inept leaders who do not merit their positions of privilege but are merely born into them or inherit them. She believes that only through "mental exertion" can one person elevate themselves over others. She argues against laws such as coverture and the divine right of kings and instead posits that equality and independence should be granted to each person. Liberty and "sound politics" would foster virtue and wisdom (104). For this reason, revolution is necessary. If Wollstonecraft's system of education is going to work, tyranny, any system that demands blind obedience, needs to be dismantled and society needs to be restructured to award liberty to each citizen. What is truly revolutionary about Wollstonecraft's thoughts about education is that they extend beyond a classroom, beyond marriage, and beyond parenting to encompass the fight for basic human rights that the French Revolution inspired. She does not just denounce a system of education, but a system of government and the present organization of society. A "revolution in female manners" can only be instituted through a country wide revolution that would grant independence and equality to each human being.

To close *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft proposes a plan for national education which would mix private and public education to institute the changes she suggests. The main purpose of national education, Wollstonecraft argues, should be to make good citizens—the way to do that is to make good people, “for public affections, as well as public virtues, must ever grow out of private character” (246). To accomplish this, it is important that children should grow up in the company of other children in order to open their hearts to friendship. There will also be a sense of equality among them so they will be able to think and speak openly without fear of censure, which encourages honest behaviour. Boys and girls should go to school and be educated together as this practice will lead to companionate marriages. From age five to nine, boys and girls of all classes should be taught together, wear the same uniform, and submit to the same discipline. Wollstonecraft even suggests that students should be tried by their peers instead of punished individually by masters. Teaching masters should be chosen by a select committee in each parish and complaints about them can be made if it is circulated to and signed by six sets of parents. There is no need for an usher in Wollstonecraft’s plan because the masters’ treatment of ushers in current schools only teaches children to terrorize their inferiors. The school room should be surrounded by a large playground where the children can exercise. They should study reading, writing, arithmetic, natural history, and natural philosophy but more importantly, “they should not be confined to any sedentary employment for more than an hour at a time” (253). Other subjects such as religion, history, history of man, and politics should be taught through “the socratic form” while interest in botany, mechanics, and astronomy can be developed through hobbies (253). As well, this institution would be a day school; children would go home at the end of the day to sleep in order to encourage love of home.¹⁴ After the age of nine, boys

¹⁴ The importance of fostering fondness for home in young children is one of several similarities between Cowper and Wollstonecraft’s thoughts on education, as in “Tirocinium”, Cowper identifies separation from home and

and girls who are intended for domestic employments and/or trades should be removed to other schools for instruction while those students of money or ability can learn dead and living languages, science, history, politics, and polite literature more extensively. At the trade schools, boys and girls should be taught together in the morning and then separated in the afternoon where the girls will learn plain-work, mantua-making, and millinery. Regardless, mixing the sexes is essential for Wollstonecraft's plan and, she argues, would produce numerous positive outcomes such as early marriage which she believes is beneficial for morality.¹⁵ Women must also be allowed to partake in political and moral subjects to expand their minds and to respect themselves as intellectual beings as it would teach them to attend to their duties. As Wollstonecraft says, "A man has been termed a microcosm; and every family might also be called a state"; thus, if the man is corrupt, then so too is the state (264). If the man is virtuous and good, the state too will be just. Properly educating both women and men will improve England at large as private character informs public consciousness.

The Political Tract

Wollstonecraft was a versatile writer of essays, fiction, reviews, and children's tales, but when it came to what is perhaps her most important work—*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*—she chose to enter public intellectual discourses in the form of a political tract. As previously shown, *Rights of Woman* is more than another educational tract; instead, it calls for political and social change on a nationwide scale. While women often wrote tracts on education, such as Hannah More's *Strictures on Female Education* and Catherine Macaulay's *Letters on*

family as one of the most harmful aspects of public schools. For both writers, love of home makes children more likely to perform their familial duties and reflects a healthy relationship with parents, both of which are markers of good character.

¹⁵ This opinion on early marriage is reformed from the one she expresses in *Thoughts* where she believes it interrupts a woman's education and the development of her mind. She argues that a more mature woman can better perform the duties of wife and mother than a young girl swept away by passion (*Thoughts* 93-101)

Education, none had ventured quite as far or as boldly as Wollstonecraft does. A political tract goes outside the bounds of the typical educational tract and into dangerous grounds for a woman. An educational tract sticks to educational reforms, but a political tract can encompass all subjects and declares itself of national importance. There is room for her topic to be extended beyond women's issues into larger political concerns, perhaps even to challenge the very foundation of her society. Essentially, it allows Wollstonecraft to make points and enter intellectual discourses in ways that other forms cannot.

In *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft carves out a space for herself in public intellectual discourses by taking on popular male philosophers and writers, thereby positioning herself in dialogue with them. As she claims that male writers on the subject of female education have only harmed women's characters, she directly addresses many of their works, particularly the famous Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his *Emile*. Chapter V is entitled "Animadversions on Some of the Writers Who Have Rendered Women Objects of Pity, Bordering on Contempt" (*Rights of Woman* 150) and is broken up into sections that treat and critique different writers and thinkers. In it, Wollstonecraft takes on Dr. Fordyce's *Sermons*,¹⁶ Lord Chesterfield's *Letters to His Son*, and Dr. Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters*.¹⁷ She devotes an entire section to women writers on the topic, some with whom she disagrees, such as Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi, the Baroness de Stael, and Madame Genlis, and others with whom she agrees and respects, like Hester Mulso Chapone and Catherine Macaulay. The majority of the chapter, however, is

¹⁶ Readers may recognize Fordyce's *Sermons* from Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. It features in a scene where Mr. Collins reads to the Bennet girls and his choice of reading material suits his odious, ridiculous character, probably reflecting Austen's own dislike of the text.

¹⁷ Dr. Gregory's work is especially important for my purposes in its discussion of learned women. He recommends young women to "'Be even cautious in displaying your good sense...if you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men'" (Wollstonecraft quoting Gregory 172). This advice fits with the cultural norms of the time that dictated that women were incapable of intellectualism, despite proof to the contrary from women writers of the day such as Wollstonecraft. It also provides reasoning for Wollstonecraft's identification of men's values as a large part of the problem that keeps women ignorant, since a truly learned woman would be coached to hide their learning if they wanted to attract a husband.

devoted to Rousseau and the sketch of female education and character he presents in *Emile*. She quotes extensively from his work and then responds to the passage with her own “comments and reflections” (150):

‘The first and most important qualification in a woman is good-nature or sweetness of temper: formed to obey a being so imperfect as man, often full of vices, and always full of faults, she ought to learn betimes even to suffer injustice, and to bear the insults of a husband without complaint’ [Rousseau]... Formed to live with such an imperfect being as man, they ought to learn from the exercise of their faculties the necessity of forbearance; but all the sacred rights of humanity are violated by insisting on blind obedience; or, the most sacred rights belong *only* to man... The being who patiently endures injustice, and silently bears insults, will soon become unjust or unable to discern right from wrong [Wollstonecraft]. (156)

Wollstonecraft subversively confronts the male philosopher and intellectual, offering her own opinion as an amendment to his and by implication, superior to his. Instead of regurgitating the cultural norms with which society has attempted to imbibe her, her argument is entirely original and defiant. She moves rationally through Rousseau’s and other philosophers’ arguments and quotes from them at length to prove not only her readings of their views, but so that she can respond directly and methodically as well. By associating her thoughts yet setting them apart from other thinkers, she places her own voice in their midst and carves out a space for herself among public discourses—where women were generally excluded. Deidre Shauna Lynch says, of Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, that “Wollstonecraft had been a ‘lady-author’ for some time; but in 1791, in the course of defending the Revolution against the criticisms of the politician Edmund Burke, she became something much rarer: a woman philosopher” (248). The same can be said of what she accomplishes in *Rights of Woman* in defending women’s rights and in revising other male (and female) thinkers’ suggestions for female education. Her work is positioned in dialogue with men’s such as Rousseau’s which

suggests equality between them. In this way, Wollstonecraft announces herself as a female philosopher, taking on an identity previously believed impossible for women.

Wollstonecraft's decision to use the political tract when preparing *Rights of Woman* was natural in some ways, since it was a follow up to her *The Rights of Men* which was a work written in response to Edmund Burke and in defense of Dr. Richard Price.¹⁸ The success of *Rights of Men* and the subsiding clamour over the eventual revelation of her identity as a woman on the publication's second edition inspired Wollstonecraft to pick up the pen once again, but this time she would write on a subject entirely her own, not prompted in response to another's work (Gordon 170). Since she had already advocated for the rights of men, it is fitting that she uses the same form and title to defend women's rights—indeed, she argues that women should be granted the same liberty and independence as men. Altenbernd Johnson explains that the similar titles are sometimes taken as “an indication that Wollstonecraft was an essentialist, holding that women and men are essentially different, [but her] position is that men and women share a common human nature and so should share common rights” (40). If women were truly capable of the same rationality as men and should be treated similarly, then she would write about them in the same way. Furthermore, this form would address men who need to change just as women do in order for her reforms to work. Gordon writes that “she wrote *Rights of Woman* for readers who were learned and well versed in political theory—and in 1791 that usually meant men, not women” (171). The political tract form ensures that her work will be read, or at least discussed, in those (mostly male) circles that circulate cultural thought and can actually institute the changes she suggests. *Rights of Woman* is meant for the same audience as *Rights of Men* and

¹⁸ When Dr. Price, of whom Wollstonecraft was a great admirer and friend, preached a sermon called “A Discourse on the Love of Our Country”, Burke was prompted to respond with *Reflections on the Revolution in France* which discussed the importance of tradition (Altenbernd Johnson 33). Wollstonecraft was the first writer to pick up the pen in defense of Price in what resulted in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. Many writers followed after her in penning responses to Burke (34).

the change must begin with *men* before women can start to improve. Wollstonecraft blames women's enslavement on men and so her tract addresses them directly. Men also hold the positions of power needed to make reform whereas women are excluded from public roles. At the same time, a political tract is evidently intended for an educated, intellectual audience which, for the reasons laid out in Wollstonecraft's work, happen at this moment to be men. The wish implicit in her project, however, is that her audience will one day include women. Most women read 'silly' sentimental novels or conduct manuals, but if their understandings were enlarged and they were allowed to participate in public discourses, they could possess the ability to read, and even write, political tracts. In this way, the gendered form of *Rights of Woman* represents a shift away from her suggestion that women keep to 'feminine' forms of public participation in being capable wives and mothers, and extends a kind of literature that speaks in a masculine idiom, but that addresses both (present) men and (future) women. Her work is a precursor to the type of society which she hopes to produce—one where women are as equally addressed by masculine discourse as men are.

Finally, Wollstonecraft's decision to use the political tract as the platform for her political expression means that she becomes the very model of womanhood for which she advocates. Wollstonecraft shows her readers what women can and shall be by being it herself. In her essay examining Wollstonecraft's reviews written for the *Analytical Review*, Mitzi Myers argues that she rejects the "model of femininity typically inscribed" in sentimental novels, the prevailing fiction of her day, and supported by the cultural consciousness (83). She wanted to show that women could be rational, thinking beings, not just overly emotional. In these reviews, "Wollstonecraft reveals herself a real, complex woman with strong feelings and human foibles as well as rational understanding...As educative persona and exemplary reader, Wollstonecraft

offers her female audience a resistant model of reading that counters their cultural predisposition toward submersion in the events of the text” (89). She coaches women to be critical thinkers, to question the conventions of their society that limit them, and the representation of women that fiction offers them. In asking women not to submit blindly to what they read, she is also advising, by extension, against all forms of female submission (89). Myers’ argument can easily be extended to *Rights of Woman* where Wollstonecraft, in only a different form, ‘reviews’ the educational writings of Rousseau, Gregory, Fordyce, and others, criticizing their ideas and the state into which they have led women. Furthermore, Wollstonecraft’s very style of writing “forcibly illustrate[s] what the author evidently wishes to inculcate” (quoting Wollstonecraft 91). Myers cites the introduction to *Rights of Woman* where she sets out her stylistic goals, which mirror the female behaviour she prescribes throughout the text. For example, she stresses sincerity over “flowery diction”, she combines reason and passion in her tone, in order to be natural she writes of a topic as it comes to her, not in an established structure, and she appeals to both the head and the heart (91). Myers describes,

Very different from the Latinate and often periodic constructions of her colleagues, her loose, informal sentences embody the associative movement of a thinking and feeling woman’s mind as she strives to integrate the claims and language of sense and sensibility...her ‘running’ style—with its propulsive movement and its openness to experience—both mirrors her own mind and typifies the free play of the feminist mind. (92)

Just as Wollstonecraft integrates “sense and sensibility”, she too calls for women to be both feeling and thinking beings, to have strong passions controlled through reason. Her own passion for her topic bursts forth on the page; however, she still relies on rational arguments to elucidate her points. Even Wollstonecraft’s much criticized “disorganized” structure and “awkward” style, so different from the “linear style typical of the period” which “lays out ideas *already* classified and arranged”, her “syntactic structure mirrors the shifting perspective of the writer’s mind,

piling up clauses and phrases as they occur...its roughness testifying to the sincerity and artlessness she values” (92). While she employs reason to make her arguments, she also gives her mind free range, refusing to confine her thoughts to a strict or established structure just as she defies the rules of her patriarchal world. As well, Wollstonecraft’s positioning of herself as a female intellectual/philosopher capable of contributing to discourses and being an active citizen demonstrates to readers that not only is it possible to render women rational creatures, but that it may also be beneficial if England is to progress as a civilized nation. She provides a model to which women can aspire, whether consciously or not. Gordon says of Wollstonecraft’s decision to reveal her identity in the second edition of *Rights of Men*, “the best way to fight back was to prove what a woman could do, and that meant acknowledging her role as the author” (153). Similarly, she shows that a woman is capable of writing in a ‘manly form’, writing back against men who claim women do not possess intellectual capacities, although she does not necessarily write in the same style as her male colleagues. She does not write in a feminine style either—instead, she writes in her own way, appropriating the form for her own uses, and demonstrating that intellectuality is truly genderless. As Myers aptly states, “Wollstonecraft explicitly urges women readers to think and feel for themselves; implicitly she shows them how” (93). Through her own work in a male-coded form, Wollstonecraft also suggests that women can not only be active, ‘feminine’ citizens but that they too can excel in masculine forms of public engagement. By extension, the potential of her argument is that if women can work within masculine forms then men too can move into feminine forms, especially if these forms of work are validated as full public contributions like Wollstonecraft suggests. Rather than simply make women better wives and mothers, Wollstonecraft’s argument gestures towards a reciprocal breakdown of masculine/feminine distinctions and a shared form of collective active citizenship. Thus, her

choice of the political tract to convey her educational and political message is exemplary of Wollstonecraft herself—original, serious, revolutionary.

Mary and Jane

Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is an educational tract that proposes a new educational system, as well as a touchstone work of early feminist thought. It is also a call for complete revolution, not just in female manners but in how women are valued, treated, and educated, in men's values and behaviour, in cultural norms, and in structures of power. She argues that women can and should be rational creatures, capable wives and mothers, and active citizens. She makes the radical claim that women should be granted some form of political representation—a place within the public sphere. For Wollstonecraft, women are capable of intellectualism and of changing the world. Education is the route that will lead to social change and dismantle tyranny. In *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft pleads for the basic human rights and liberties that will encourage virtue in British citizens. Significantly, she chooses the political tract as the platform through which to express her views, a form that was generally considered men's domain. By employing this form, Wollstonecraft is able to address an audience that can actually effect the change she proposes and to place herself in dialogue with the current strain of thoughts on the topic, boldly claiming the identity of a female philosopher. Most importantly, she herself models the potentiality of women in the very writing of her work and shows readers what women should be by being it in her content, in her style, in her structure, and in her form. Wollstonecraft effectively reworks an apparently 'manly' form, ultimately demonstrating that the political tract, just like human rights and active citizenship, is genderless.

As Altenbernd Johnson claims, Wollstonecraft understood that she had "a moral responsibility on her to use her writing to effect social and political change" (31). But there were

certainly dangers to being an acknowledged female philosopher and Wollstonecraft's name and legacy endured the worst of such dangers. When she revealed her identity as the author of *Rights of Men*, Horace Walpole called her a "hyena in petticoats" while other reviewers retracted their support for the work despite previously praising it (Gordon 152). Similarly, reviews of *Rights of Woman* mocked Wollstonecraft for her unwed status and one journal even joked that "miss Wollstonecraft may take her choice" amongst their writers once she had fallen back into obscurity (Anonymous 273). After her death, her widower William Godwin published her memoirs and her name was further besmirched, her contributions to feminism and political theory mocked and nearly forgotten (Gordon 518). Wollstonecraft was even labelled a 'prostitute' due to the memoir's revelation of her intense passion for men such as Henry Fuseli and Gilbert Imlay and that she had an illegitimate child by the latter (Gordon 513). Women writers after her had to be careful to distance their own names from hers if they did not want to be labelled 'whores' or shunned from society (515). They also avoided venturing into "the 'male' territory of philosophy and politics" in order to ensure they were not associated with her and because the escalating horrors of the French Revolution made it increasingly unacceptable (515). Wollstonecraft may have been safer to have written novels, which were considered an acceptable form for women, and, indeed, she wrote two that fictionalized many of her political concerns. Her novels are not generally considered very successful, but they do reflect Wollstonecraft's ideas about what should comprise a novel. She wanted novelists to take on serious topics and to draw realistic characters, particularly female characters, as she was "forever exercised over how female life gets inscribed in literature and how literature molds life's rules and roles" (Myers 88). She hated sentimental novels because they regurgitated cultural conceptions of women as weak and submissive whereas "she hoped to improve her sex and held

the novel in high regard” in its ability to do so (88). Wollstonecraft’s idea that women writers can tackle a serious narrative and depict women of more depth than the foolish, fainting heroines represented in popular fiction, however, did eventually come to fruition with writers such as Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen (83). In *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft asks for “a judicious person, with some turn for humour, [who] would...point out both by tones, and apt comparisons with pathetic incidents and heroic characters in history, how foolishly and ridiculously [sentimental novels] caricatured human nature, [so that] just opinions might be substituted instead of romantic sentiments” (*Rights of Woman* 274). Austen accomplishes this very feat in her juvenilia (discussed further in the next chapter) where she parodies the tropes and conventions of novels of sentiment in the course of developing her own realistic aesthetic. Austen’s later novels contain fully fleshed out female characters, as complex as Wollstonecraft herself, who are thinking and feeling women doing their best to navigate their constricting world with dignity and grace. Wollstonecraft “insisted early in her reviewing that ‘to write a good novel requires uncommon abilities’” (Myers 93). Perhaps she would have agreed that Austen was one of such uncommon abilities.

Chapter 3

The Novel: Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814)

Mrs. Carrick, Jane Austen's family friend, said of Austen's first novel written in her adulthood that "All who think deeply & feel much will give the Preference to *Mansfield Park*" ("Opinions of *Mansfield Park*" 377). *Mansfield Park*, indeed, features a heroine, Fanny Price, who "thinks deeply" and "feels much" and the novel requests the same of its readers.

Historically, however, the preference has not been given to *Mansfield Park*. Lionel Trilling observes that in it Austen's "characteristic irony seems not to be at work" and it has long been considered the darkest and most controversial of her body of works (423). The heroine of the novel, Fanny Price, has much to do with *Mansfield Park*'s unpopularity and is almost universally reviled by critics and readers alike. Considering the novel in the context of Cowper's "Tirocinium" and Wollstonecraft's political tracts, *Mansfield Park* can be viewed as an extension of the debate on education and, particularly, women's roles within the intellectual community of Britain. In this chapter, I argue that the novel is Austen's fictional attempt to culturally and socially position an educated female intellectual within the English upper class where manners¹⁹ are valued over character.²⁰ Firstly, I identify similarities between Austen herself and her heroine, Fanny, as intellectual but marginalized women who must navigate a patriarchal, class-based society and ultimately suggest that Austen uses Fanny as a tool through which she explores the ways in which women have access to public discourses and discussions of intellectual issues. Through the Bertram family's treatment of her, Austen shows how the family

¹⁹ I will be using the term "manners" in the Wollstonecraftian sense throughout this chapter, to refer to mastery of society's customs and etiquettes (Footnote 6).

²⁰ My use of this term is informed by Deidre Shauna Lynch's book *The Economy of Character* which discusses the development of fictional, literary characters referred to as "round" at the start of the nineteenth century. A "round" character possesses a "peculiar Nature...a distinctive feature...virtue and vice that [make] the individual soul individual" (33-35). I would also like to add the OED's definition of "character" as "Strength and originality in a person's nature" ("Character").

works as a pedagogical space and as a microcosm for the British state at large.²¹ As well, while Fanny may be an ‘unlikable’ character, she represents a productive type of intellectuality whereas Mary Crawford, Fanny’s polar opposite and much admired rival, functions as a critique of the socially accepted form of female intelligence. Finally, I examine the controversial ending of *Mansfield Park*, which has elicited contradictory readings from critics over the years. My own interpretation falls in the middle as, regardless of Fanny’s personal happiness, Austen does not offer a convincing or reassuring solution to Fanny’s exclusion from public discourses and the intellectual sphere of Mansfield. Noting that Cowper writes a poem and Wollstonecraft writes a political tract to discuss the same issues of education, however, Austen does offer the form of the novel as a platform through which women can enter into and participate in public discussions and debates, just as she does in *Mansfield Park*. In this way, Austen not only validates the novel but reinvents its function, revealing its intellectual value and its utility as a tool by which women’s voices too can contribute to public discourses.

Jane and Fanny

Austen famously said that in *Emma* (1815) she would create “a heroine whom no one but myself will much like”; however, this description seems better suited to Fanny Price than Emma Woodhouse (Fergus 157). As Lionel Trilling declared, “Nobody, I believe, has ever found it possible to like the heroine of *Mansfield Park*” (425). While this claim is, of course, not exactly true—Austen’s sister Cassandra was “fond” of Fanny while her brother Frank thought her a “delightful character” (“Opinions” 376)—modern readers find that Fanny’s “virtue is not interesting” whereas they can identify with and be entertained by Emma’s follies (Trilling 425).

²¹ I am not the first person to view *Mansfield Park* as a microcosm for Britain—William Galperin (“The Missed Opportunities of *Mansfield Park*”), Joseph Lew (“‘That Abominable Traffic’: *Mansfield Park* and the Dynamics of Slavery”), and Paula Byrne (*The Real Life of Jane Austen*), to name a few, have also situated *Mansfield Park* in this way in their readings of the text. Lew suggests that MP as a microcosmic space reflects Gary Kelly’s idea of Anti-Jacobin fiction as “translat[ing] the political and public issues into private and domestic equivalents” (500).

Trilling maintains that “we do not like it that, by reason of her virtue, the terrified little stranger in Mansfield Park grows up to be virtually its mistress” (425). Nina Auerbach goes so far as to compare Fanny to Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, Frankenstein’s creature, *Beowulf’s* Grendel, and a bloodthirsty vampire in her jealous and cannibalistic consumption of the Mansfield party until they are so ruined that she is able to successfully insinuate herself into the center of the family from which she was previously excluded (448-51). Most critics can agree that an evening with Fanny and Edmund Bertram “would not be lightly undertaken” (quoting Amis 446). In contrast, critics and readers alike would only be too eager to spend an evening with Fanny’s creator, Austen herself, and imagine it would be full of wit, laughter, and conversation. We tend to think of Austen as more of an Elizabeth Bennet than a Fanny Price. While Austen does have much in common with Elizabeth, she too was fond of Fanny. There is a kind of maternal tenderness in her attitude towards her heroine by the end of the novel, suggested by her possessive address and the intimacy established between narrator and character as she is privy to knowledge readers are not: “My Fanny indeed at this very time, I have the satisfaction of knowing, must have been happy in spite of everything” (*MP* 362). Here, Austen reveals a genuine, loving concern for Fanny that perhaps stems from the similarities between the two women.

Indeed, Fanny is not witty, ironic, or confident as Austen must have been to publish her writings in her time and Austen would probably not have been happy to spend her life sitting on a sofa helping a foolish aunt with her stitch-work. As Jan Fergus says, “We sometimes tend to think of Austen as at her desk, writing, or in the parlour, sewing or reading or talking, but neither as child nor adult was she content to be desk-bound” (29). Austen’s niece, Anna Austen Lefroy remembers her aunt tramping about the snow to pay visits and entertaining children by telling dramatic and ridiculous stories (Austen-Leigh 157). In contrast, Fanny is usually characterized

by her immobility. D.D. Devlin identifies the Sotherton visit as exemplary of Fanny's position always "'at the still point of the turning world', as, in a series of complicated movements, all the others move round her while she sits still" (91). This statement is true of Fanny both physically and figuratively—she remains constant and unwavering while the other characters repeatedly change their minds, feelings, and opinions. Nonetheless, there are marked similarities between Austen and Fanny. Patricia Rozema even merges Fanny and her creator into one character in her 1999 film adaptation starring Frances O'Connor. Firstly, both women are "enmeshed in circumstance"—in other words, limited by their social position and gender (Fergus 146). In class terms, Austen belonged on the margins of the gentry, the landed classes, what has been termed "the pseudo-gentry" (46). The Austen family's status as unlanded is reflected in the various instabilities of their home life. Austen's father was a clergyman, her brothers were clergymen, naval officers, and one was a banker which means that their genteel aspirations and financial security depended on the men's advancement in their respective professions. They also relied on "the gentry network", or patronage—well-to-do relatives, friends, or acquaintances that were well connected and thus could help them get livings or places or even increase their incomes (48). For example, Austen's third eldest brother, Edward, was adopted by a rich uncle, Thomas Knight, who made the boy his heir when he and his wife had no children of their own, much like how Fanny is brought into the Bertram home to relieve her parents' financial strain (Byrne 14). Edward Austen-Knight inherited his fortune from these rich relatives and was able to help his family with his newfound wealth, largely enhancing his expected modest income. Austen's naval brothers, Frank (Francis) and Charles, had to rely on this network for promotions, just as Henry Crawford uses his uncle the Admiral's influence to secure William Price a promotion to

lieutenant (Fergus 48). The intricacy of this network is best illustrated in Henry's letters to the Admiral that he shows Fanny to announce William's promotion:

The first was from the Admiral to inform his nephew, in a few words, of his having succeeded in the object he had undertaken, the promotion of young Price, and inclosing two more, one from the Secretary of the First Lord to a friend, whom the Admiral had set to work in the business, the other from that friend to himself, by which it appeared that his Lordship had the very great happiness of attending to the recommendation of Sir Charles, that Sir Charles was much delighted in having such an opportunity of proving his regard for Admiral Crawford, and that the circumstance of Mr. William Price's commission as second Lieutenant of H.M. sloop Thrush, being made out, was spreading general joy through a wide circle of great people. (*MP* 234)

Clearly, advancement was about knowing the right people in the right places. Henry's designs on Fanny prompt him to involve his uncle who, in turn, uses a friend to write to the "Secretary of the First Lord" who receives a recommendation from a "Sir Charles" acting to "prove his regard" for the Admiral. This "wide circle of great people" is able to procure William his lieutenancy where his own hard work and merit could not (234). The problem with this system is the uncertainty and lack of independence it creates in a man like William. A man of this class and status can only rely on the actions and connections of others to secure his livelihood.

Furthermore, the Austens' position on the fringe of the gentry meant that both Jane and her elder sister Cassandra were left without a dowry. Their only hope for a comfortable, secure life after their father's death was to marry well. Neither of them married, though Cassandra was engaged to Tom Fowle in 1796. He unfortunately died a year or so into their engagement, which meant that the girls had to rely on the generosity of their brothers to subsist (Byrne 93). This dependence and limited set of means is probably what motivated Austen to become a professional and published writer in an effort to make some kind of income. Similarly, Fanny lives on her wealthy relatives' generosity (although Sir Thomas and Mrs. Norris often give readers reason to question just how generous their "charity" is). Despite the Prices being

assuredly of a lower class than the Austens, *Mansfield Park* opens with the very concerns that Austen and Fanny face as women on the margins of the class system. Austen describes Mrs. Price, pregnant with her ninth child, as “eager to regain the friends she had so carelessly sacrificed...she could not conceal how important she felt they [the Bertrams] might be to the future maintenance of the eight [children] already in being” (*MP* 4). Here Mrs. Price, despite being married, taps into the gentry network as a way of relieving her husband’s expenses since they live on a small income. Fanny’s adoption into the Bertram household means that she will be provided for and that she will make a good match when the time comes for her to marry: “introduce her properly to the world, and ten to one but she has the means of settling well, without farther expense to anybody” (5). Marriage therefore prevented women from becoming a burden on their relations, as it would have for Austen. For this reason, everyone is astounded at Fanny’s “luck” in capturing the heart of Henry Crawford and then at her subsequent refusal of him (228). Mary Crawford cries, “What an amazing match for her!” (208) while Sir Thomas is flummoxed that Fanny would reject a man “of sense, of character, of temper, of manners, and of fortune”—leaving what he regards as the most important aspect, “fortune”, for last (249). He warns her, “let me tell you, Fanny, that you may live eighteen years longer in the world, without being addressed by a man of half Mr. Crawford’s estate” (249). Both Mary and Sir Thomas are mistaken in believing that Fanny is the one who most benefits from the marriage. Austen asks readers to recognize that it is Fanny who is far too good for Henry while her family only expects her to marry, if not for love, than for financial security. Neither Austen nor Fanny would marry without affection despite their precarious situations. In 1802, Austen herself accepted an advantageous marriage proposal from Harris Bigg-Wither, the brother of her close friends and set to inherit an estate and fortune, only to change her mind and rescind her acceptance the next

morning (Byrne 181). Her niece, Caroline Austen explains, “My Aunts had very small fortunes and on their Father’s death they and their mother would be, they were aware, but poorly off—I believe most women so circumstanced would have taken Mr. [Bigg-Wither] and trusted to love after marriage” (quoting Caroline Austen 182). Caroline hits on exactly the point—Austen and Fanny are similarly “circumstanced”. Both occupy marginal class positions and both are aware of the instability of their position although neither is willing to compromise her principles or her happiness for worldly advantage.

Perhaps these heavy circumstances, this “consciousness of being born to struggle and endure” caused both Austen and Fanny to be serious readers and thinkers (*MP* 372). While both exist in the margins of society class-wise, they are also linked in that both are intellectual, well-educated females, capable of entering into public discourses within their male-dominated environments. In *Mansfield Park*, Austen uses the character of Fanny as a double through which she can navigate the positioning of an intellectual woman within a society that ultimately values superficial manners over depth of character. As a writer, Austen has often been considered “indifferen[t] to matters of ‘public’ interest” due to her domestic settings and marriage plots (Johnson 467). Her nephew and first biographer, James Edward Austen-Leigh, has much to do with this misconception. His memoir claims that “Of events her life was singularly barren: few changes and no great crisis ever broke the smooth current of its course...Her talents did not introduce her to the notice of other writers, or connect her with the literary world, or in any degree pierce through the obscurity of her domestic retirement” (9). Furthermore, to account for the naval knowledge Austen displays in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, Austen-Leigh also says, somewhat patronizingly, she “never touched upon politics, laws, or medicine...But with ships and sailors she felt herself at home, or at least could always trust to a brotherly critic to keep her

right” (18). Of course, Austen-Leigh had his own reasons for depicting his aunt as a quiet spinster, sequestered in a simple country life, but this depiction is far from the truth. Modern biographers such as Claire Tomalin and Paula Byrne have countered this image of Austen and instead present her as a lively woman deeply involved in the world around her while also ahead of her time. Her social sphere was considerably larger than the Steventon rectory, the home where Austen passed her childhood. Her father, the Reverend George Austen, ran a boarding school that provided lodging and private tutoring for boys in the family home in order to supplement his income, which brought Jane and her siblings into contact with a wide range of acquaintance, even among the aristocracy.²² Furthermore, Austen’s cousin, Eliza, Comtesse de Feuillide, brought the real life horror of the French Revolution directly into the parlour room of the Steventon rectory: “The notion that Jane Austen was somehow oblivious to the violent events of her time is belied by the fact that Eliza was with her and her family at the Steventon rectory in September 1792, one of the bloodiest and most dramatic months of that bloody and dramatic age, and that they remained in close contact at the time of the guillotining of Eliza’s husband” (Byrne 46). Thus, such “bloody” historical and political events surely “pierce[d] through the obscurity” of Austen’s alleged “domestic retirement”, making her aware, at a fairly young age, of the tumultuous times in which she lived and the violence of which humanity is capable (Austen-Leigh 9). Austen’s two brothers closest to her in age, Frank and Charles, were both employed in the Navy during the Napoleonic wars and, as affectionate brothers, kept up correspondence with their sister, providing her with detailed updates on the progression of the war. Through Frank and Charles, Austen had a personal and vested interest in the war and probably discussed the

²² Byrne identifies one pupil as the “Vampyre Earl”, John Wallop, who was rumoured to drink his servants’ blood and later declared officially mad (21). She fittingly observes that an insane, blood-sucking Earl does not really fit into “our customary image of Jane Austen’s family home” and goes to show the variety of people she encountered (21).

topic with her family often. Such personal connections to world events such as revolution and war demonstrate Austen's awareness of her own historical context and prove that she had a stake in the public and political issues of her day.

Austen gained worldly knowledge as well from personal tragedies and the material pressures that exerted themselves on her directly as a woman on the margins of the gentry. She experienced real loss that disturbed "the smooth current of [her life's] course" in 1797 when her beloved sister Cassandra's fiancé, Tom Fowle, died of yellow fever in the West Indies and then in 1801 when she was forced to leave her childhood home at Steventon for Bath, the news of which apparently distressed her so greatly that she fainted (Byrne 95, 159). Only a few years later, she lost both her father and her close friend, Anne Lefroy, within a period of five weeks (Fergus 104). With her father's death, Austen "lost her assured position, becoming... a poor dependent rather than a clergyman's daughter" (104). She was thus confronted with the dark realities reserved for women of a certain fortune—the stress of an unstable income, feeling herself to be a burden on her relations, and, perhaps worst of all, the helplessness of being unable to take action to improve her situation for herself. Financial difficulties caused Austen great distress and most likely exacerbated the illness that led to her death (Byrne 325). Her favourite brother Henry's bank failure as well as her own and her siblings' exclusion from the will of a wealthy relative who had always promised to provide for the Austen women were two significant sources of stress that occurred towards the end of Austen's life and from which she never recovered (325). Her health rapidly deteriorated following these events (325). These are just several details from Austen's fascinating life that undermine the conception of Austen as "indifferen[t] to matters of 'public' interest" (Johnson 467). Her life was certainly not "barren" of "events" as Austen-Leigh claims, and there were "changes" and "great cris[es]" (9). She did

not live in the “obscurity of domestic retirement”; she was in fact actively engaged with the world around her, aware of her historical context, and embroiled in its difficulties and its limitations, all of which seeps into the ‘everyday’ plots of her novels.

Jane: Education

Austen’s awareness of public issues such as revolution, war, the economy arise from her education—not just her formal education but her moral, spiritual, and intellectual education. She could think critically about public and intellectual discourses, discuss them seriously, and even write about them. Unlike Mary Crawford whose pleasing manners cover up a seriously deficient sense of morality, Austen was both a woman of wit and intelligence and a woman of deep feeling. I will discuss how both Austen and Fanny can be identified as educated female intellectuals within a genteel society that typically values women’s exterior appearance and manners over their critical faculties, excluding them from public discourses and instead subjugating them to roles as pleasing companions. This examination will lead me to a discussion of the character of Fanny Price and why Austen created her to be so “unlikable” as Trilling suggests. In discussing both women’s education, it becomes clear that Austen posits the family and the home as a form of private education as well as sites of training for public engagement.

Austen grew up in an incredibly intellectually stimulating environment which, as discussed before, awakened her to a sense of social awareness and laid the grounds for her genius. In terms of formal education, Austen was sent away from her childhood home in Steventon to school twice along with her sister Cassandra. The first time, the girls were not there very long as they both caught a dangerous infection going around the school, prompting Mrs. Austen to bring them home (Tomalin 38). They spent a year at home and then were sent to a boarding school in Reading. Tomalin describes, “The girls slept six to a room, and were taught

some spelling, needlework and French. They would certainly have had dancing lessons, essential basic training for every girl; and perhaps piano was taught too...plays may also have been a feature of Jane's and Cassandra's education" (44). This curriculum sounds like Mr. Darcy's description of "accomplished" young ladies in *Pride and Prejudice* and corresponds with the pervading desire for genteel females to be able to entertain company and to hold idle conversation. Wollstonecraft, and many other educational reformers, criticized this "essential basic training for every girl", arguing that it renders women superficial simpletons instead of active and contributing members of society. Bermingham's article identifies that the accomplished education became popular because accomplishments were the method that women used to market themselves for marriage. They hoped to catch men's eyes by displaying themselves similarly to an object of art, usually at a musical instrument or canvas (regardless of their level of skill at the activity) (11-14). Probably the larger part of Austen's education came from her home environment where there were always school boys around under the tutelage of her father, and her siblings were in various stages of learning. The young Jane would most likely have picked up some knowledge from them and Reverend Austen's "rows and rows of books" to which she had unlimited access (Tomalin 30). Like her father, Austen was a voracious reader. She read everything from histories to periodicals to novels, from Goldsmith and Hume to Johnson and Clarkson to Burney and Edgeworth (Byrne 60-79). Many biographers quote Austen's famous marginalia from her copy of Oliver Goldsmith's *History of England* which reveals an interest in politics and "Austen's youthful sense of herself: her ability to laugh at her most cherished feelings, to view them ironically without relinquishing them" (Fergus 40-41). In these scribbles, she voices her own opinion on the history of England:

On the subsequent change in dress of the Highlanders she writes—

'I do not like this. Every ancient custom ought to be Sacred, unless it is prejudiced to Happiness'...

She did not approve of Anne leaving her father's cause to side with her brother-in-law, and, being unwilling to blame any Stuart, finds her own way out of the dilemma—

'Anne should not have done so, indeed I do not believe she did'...

Goldsmith...described the extreme destitution of the poorer classes after the Revolution...On this her comment is ready—

'How much are the poor to be pitied, and the Rich to be Blamed!' (Fergus quoting Mary August Austen-Leigh 40-41)

These remarks show the strength and vivacity of Austen's engagement with her books and with their material. She was a critical thinker with her own interpretations, not content to accept a historian's version of events unquestioningly. She laughs at her "most cherished feelings" when she finds an excuse for Anne's behaviour, acknowledging what she views as a wrong step while also remaining constant in her loyalties. She parodies these conventions by writing her own "History of England...by a partial, prejudiced, and ignorant Historian" (*Love and Friendship* 151) which, while humourous, Fergus reads as also containing "serious intentions" to "revis[e] conventional views of Elizabeth [I]'s and Mary's [Queen of Scots] characters...in making them central to her narrative, she is revising history itself, which (as Catherine Morland laments) has 'hardly any women at all'" (42). Although Austen alleges to the librarian to know nothing of "Man's Conversation...[such as] subjects of Science & Philosophy", it is clear that she *was* well informed on such "serious" subjects as history to the point that she could parody them and, furthermore, that she held her own opinions on them. In this revised history, Austen comments on gender roles that subjugated women to the background of history and thus enters discourses on the role of women in history and in society. For her, women are major players, active, intelligent, and powerful; they are much more interesting to her than men. Her "History of England" also includes water colour portraits done by Cassandra of historical figures such as Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots. Byrne suggests that some of these portraits may have been

based on family members with Mrs. Austen as the antagonist, Elizabeth I, and Jane herself as her heroine, Mary Stuart (64). This work reflects the influence of the family on Austen's writing as well as the creative collaborative atmosphere of her home life. When Austen was thirteen and writing some of her earliest juvenilia, her brothers James and Henry launched a periodical called *The Loiterer* and "it is not implausible to picture James, Henry, and Jane Austen working together on their several projects within the comfort of the Steventon rectory" (Mack 38). Robert Mack's description paints a pleasant picture of the creative energy that pervaded the household as the Austen siblings brush elbows while scribbling away, perhaps encouraging each other, perhaps goading each other on. Mack suggests that James and Henry's publication of their periodical inspired the young Austen with the idea that she too could publish. Although I, like Kathryn Sutherland, am hesitant to place too much weight on her brothers' influence, many critics (Mack, Fergus) have pointed out the similar themes and ideas in *The Loiterer* and Austen's novels. What is most significant for my purposes about *The Loiterer* is the unique family atmosphere it reflects where each member was uncommonly intelligent, creative, thoughtful, funny, and furthermore, encouraging of others to pursue their own creative projects whether it be poetry (James, Mrs. Austen), drama (James, Henry), drawing (Cassandra), or even novel writing (Jane, niece Anna). This family unit made up a sort of community of intellectuals where all were free to participate and contribute—an environment Austen strives to find for Fanny. Fergus also recognizes Austen's education into genius: "for a child of Austen's powerful critical intelligence, the privilege of *not* feeling superior to those around her but being greatly appreciated by them must have been invaluable. If others are superior but loving, one is secure and protected—free to relax, to poke fun at oneself, at them, and particularly at others outside the enclave" (44). Austen's friends outside of her immediate family, like Mrs. Lefroy, were no less

intelligent or vibrant. Female community was essential to Austen's development as a person and as a writer and her close female relationships functioned similarly to her family unit in providing an open platform for creative expression. Austen's ongoing interest in exploring women's experiences and interiority perhaps stemmed from her own involvement in her many female friends' lives. Thus, Austen's education, spiritually, morally, and intellectually, took place in this thriving family environment where she, as a female, learned and was encouraged to critique the problems of her society, discuss serious public issues, and participate in the world around her, even if it was to poke fun at it.

Fanny: Education

One of the most intimate portraits of Fanny occurs about a quarter into the novel when Austen describes Fanny's personal room within the Mansfield household, the East Room. The East Room is the old school room where Fanny and the two Bertram girls, Maria and Julia, were taught by their governess. Once the governess is dismissed and the Bertram girls have deemed learning no longer necessary, Fanny stores her little treasures of books and plants there and then gradually appropriates the room for her own with the approval of the rest of the family:

The comfort of it in her hours of leisure was extreme. She could go there after any thing unpleasant below, and find immediate consolation in some pursuit, or some train of thought at hand.—Her plants, her books—of which she had been a collector, from the first hour of her commanding a shilling—her writing desk, and her works of charity and ingenuity, were all within her reach;—or, if indisposed for employment, if nothing but musing would do, she could scarcely see an object in that room which had not an interesting remembrance connected with it.—Every thing was a friend, or bore her thoughts to a friend; and though there had been sometimes much of suffering to her...yet almost every recurrence of either had led to something consolatory. (*MP* 119)

Fanny, in this way, is invested in a literal space of education or learning. Abandoned and ignored by the Bertram family, the East Room is treated similarly as Fanny. It represents not only a place of learning but Fanny's own interiority. It is a safe space where she is free to indulge in

“remembrance” or “musing”, two activities that occupy Fanny as the “still point of the turning world” for much of the novel (Devlin 91). In the East Room, Fanny grows plants which reflects her often expressed appreciation for nature and associates her with growth, life, and the natural world, in contrast to the mercenary city values of the Crawfords and the un-nurturing and sometimes cruel Bertram family who, under the instruction of the abusive Mrs. Norris (whose abuse of Fanny everybody tolerates), does not allow Fanny a fire in the East Room. Here, she also keeps her books, her writing desk, and her “works of charity and ingenuity”, reflecting her love of reading and intellectual pursuits as well her kindness (“charity”). Joyce Kerr Tarpley calls the East Room “a symbolic space where [Fanny] can pursue...the leisure activities that best promote liberal learning and engender self-knowledge...[it] specifically represents the process of using constancy for problem solving” (130). The East Room and its objects establish Fanny’s position as an intellectual and as a fully fleshed out female character. She is not the romantic heroine of a sentimental novel; rather, she “thinks deeply” and “feels much” and possesses the “self-knowledge” that makes her a positive citizen. It is significant that, with the exception of perhaps Edmund, the East Room is an isolated space where Fanny goes to be alone which contrasts the communal and collaborative working environment of the Austen home. Thus, the East Room also functions to establish Fanny’s position as an outcast from the rest of the Mansfield household and marks her as a ‘different’ model of feminine interiority.

In terms of formal education, Fanny undergoes a similar education in the school room (or East Room) as Austen received while she was away at school: “Miss Lee [the governess] taught her French, and heard her read the daily portion of History” (*MP* 18). In the opening chapters of the novel, Maria and Julia tell their aunt Norris that Fanny is

really so very ignorant!—Do you know, we asked her last night, which way she would go to get to Ireland; and she said, she should cross to the Isle of

Wight...she calls it *the Island*...I am sure I should have been ashamed of myself, if I had not known better long before I was so old as she is...How long ago it is, aunt, since we use to repeat the chronological order of the kings of England, with the dates of their accession, and most of the principal events of their reigns. (15)

Jane Stabler's explanatory note glosses Maria's description of their education thus: "Fanny uses what is still the local name for the Isle of Wight. Whereas her geography is based on limited practical knowledge, the Bertram sisters have a superficial control of textbook geography and history...boys and girls often learned historical and geographical facts from cards by rote" (395). Thus, while Maria and Julia have only a "superficial" understanding of certain subjects, propped up by memorization, Fanny's knowledge is based on real life experience—the "practical". From this description, it is easier to imagine Fanny finding her way to Ireland than Maria and Julia although they could point out the route on a map. They can also "repeat" the chronology of the monarchs of England but they cannot comment on or discuss in depth details of their reigns like Austen does in her "History of England". Their knowledge is only useful when they are repeating it proudly for others, not for the quiet reflection Fanny performs in the East Room. Furthermore, they are not educated in the "less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity, and humility. In every thing but disposition, they were admirably taught" (16). Their "superficial" learning extends to the formation of their character as they are taught only what is expected of them as fine young ladies rather than developing personal qualities such as "self-knowledge, generosity, and humility" which, for Austen, are an integral part of the education process and in developing a critical thinking faculty. In contrast to her cousins, Fanny's education is emphatically that "she is not a *Miss Bertram*", a lesson that she comes to internalize growing up in Mansfield Park. Several times readers are told that Fanny "thought too lowly of her own claims" (16) or "rated her claims as low as even Mrs. Norris could" (173). In this way, Fanny is taught humility, perhaps to an extreme and is continually reminded of the marginal

position she holds in the household just as Austen was always aware of the fate she would have to face once her father died. Fanny's status as outsider is a unique type of education in itself.

Austen situates Fanny in the realm of public and intellectual discourses when she is discovered by Edmund reading in the East Room. Edmund remarks on her reading material, “*You* in the meanwhile will be taking a trip into China, I suppose. How does Lord Macartney go on?...And here are Crabbe's *Tales*, and the *Idler*” (123). By “Lord Macartney”, Edmund refers to the aforementioned's account of an embassy to China that sought to establish trade relations with Britain (Stabler, “Explanatory Notes”, 406). He also points out George Crabbe's *Tales in Verse* and, of course, Samuel Johnson's periodical *The Idler*. Both of these works engage with public issues and were essential in both informing and being informed by the public sphere, in league with Cowper's “Tirocinium”. In her reading, Fanny is engaging with national and philosophical issues that reveal her to be a serious thinker. By reading such literature, she participates in the developing Habermasian public sphere that Hunter discusses. When Fanny herself becomes an educator to her younger sister, Susan, she uses primarily books as teaching tools, including Goldsmith's history that Austen famously marked up (*MP* 328). Although she now chooses her own books, Fanny's own education into reading and academia was guided by Edmund:

his attentions were...of the highest importance in assisting the improvement of her mind, and extending its pleasures. He knew her to be clever, to have a quick apprehension as well as good sense, and a fondness for reading, which, properly directed, must be an education in itself...he recommended the books which charmed her leisure hours, he encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgement; he made reading useful by talking to her of what she read, and heightened its attractions by judicious praise. (18)

Unlike Maria and Julia, Fanny's education becomes a way of life for her rather than just a matter of form. Austen reveals how valuable she believes reading can be to forming the mind—it is “an

education in itself". Fanny exhibits a "quick apprehension" and "good sense" that, through Edmund's guidance and the habit of reading, is coupled with the proper "taste" and "judgement". Her education is a part of her "leisure hours" and her relationship with Edmund where they are able to participate in an open exchange of ideas. Indeed, the East Room is the setting for several of their conversations and debates throughout the novel, becoming a forum for serious discourses like when Edmund consults Fanny's opinion on whether or not he should join the acting scheme in order to spare Miss Crawford from embarrassment (121) or when they discuss the propriety of which necklace Fanny should wear to the ball (205). Edmund's role in Fanny's education, one imagines, is similar to the one Austen's family and various friends played for her, challenging and guiding her to think for herself beyond the "basic training for every girl" (Tomalin 44). Similarly to Austen's other novels, Fanny and Edmund's romantic love begins as a pedagogical relationship with Fanny as a young woman flourishing in the challenging presence of an interested man.²³ But in this formulation, Austen makes her hero an actual relative of the girl he educates and eventually marries, firmly establishing education as a function of the family circle. Patrick Fessenbecker, in his essay on Austen's love matches, argues that, rather than preclude love, pedagogical relationships actually enable it. "Intelligent love" is the "deepest and truest relationship that can exist between human beings"; thus, Edmund's role as Fanny's educator marks him as her ideal partner (Fessenbecker 748).

Edmund is one of the few people with whom Fanny feels comfortable expressing her opinion. Often, when they are alone, "Fanny spoke her feelings" (*MP* 89). With him, she can rhapsodize over the glories of nature (89-90) and express her fears of her aunt Norris (20-22). She experiences a similar, even stronger sense of freedom with her brother William: "Fanny had

²³ Other models of this relationship are Catherine Morland and Henry Tilney in *NA*, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy in *PP*, and Emma and Mr. Knightley in *Emma*.

never known so much felicity in her life, as in this unchecked, equal, fearless intercourse with the brother and friend, who was opening all his heart to her, telling her all his hopes and fears, plans, and solitudes” (183). Austen then philosophizes: “Children of the same family, the same blood, with the same first associations and habits, have some means of enjoyment in their power, which no subsequent connections can supply” (183). This “equal” and “fearless” discourse echoes the safety of Austen’s own family environment—to which Austen is perhaps alluding in her commentary on sibling relations—and provides Fanny with someone other than Edmund, who usually assumes a mentor role, whom she can engage in open conversation. William serves as an even better interlocutor than Edmund as he is her “equal” as Edmund never can be, promoting a sense of security and kinship between them. It is this sense of safety and comfort in her relationships, the freedom to express herself that Austen enjoyed and that she desires for Fanny. I will discuss at the end of this chapter whether Austen finds a permanent relationship or space like this one for Fanny by the conclusion of this novel.

Another essential aspect of Fanny’s education is that she is to remain silent and there is no room for serious topics in polite conversation. When dining at the parsonage with the Grants, Mrs. Norris warns Fanny, “I do beseech and intreat you not to be putting yourself forward, and talking and giving your opinion...Remember, wherever you are, you must be the lowest and last” (173). Although Mrs. Norris perhaps represents an extreme, Fanny is taught that she should never seek to contribute to the conversation around the table nor is her opinion of any value. While it is acceptable for William to regale company with stories of his adventures in the navy, Fanny, because of her gender and her class, is always left out of the conversation, forced to be the “lowest and last”. Fanny does put herself forward on one occasion, resulting in the famous

slave trade discussion. Edmund accuses Fanny of being “one of those who are too silent in the evening circle”; she responds,

“But I do talk to him more than I used...Did not you hear me ask him about the slave trade last night?”

“I did—and was in hopes the question would be followed up by other. It would have pleased your uncle to be inquired of farther.”

“And I longed to do it—but there was such a dead silence! And while my cousins were sitting by without speaking a word, or seeming at all interested in the subject, I did not like—I thought it would appear as if I wanted to set myself off at their expense, by shewing a curiosity and pleasure in his information which he must wish his own daughters to feel”. (155)

Fanny is interested in prominent public issues like slavery, which was a source of great debate at the time. Much has been made of this topic in conjunction with the title “Mansfield” which has connections with the movement towards abolition²⁴ and most critics agree that slavery, literally and metaphorically, recurs as a theme throughout the novel. Austen was against slavery and greatly admired Thomas Clarkson and Cowper, both pro-abolitionist writers (“Introduction” xxxi). It is not clear which side of the argument Fanny or the Bertrams fall on but the point is that Fanny seeks to engage in discussion on important topics amidst the “evening circle” at home but she is not encouraged to do so. Although Edmund and Sir Thomas may have welcomed further questioning, Fanny is dissuaded by the “dead silence” of the rest of the family. The adjective “dead” falls heavily before the “silence” and invokes a sense of the stagnancy and complacency of the Bertrams’ table conversation. Neither Lady Bertram, Tom Bertram, Mrs. Norris, Maria, nor Julia is “at all interested in the subject”. To pursue a conversation when no one chooses to participate in it is difficult, especially for one as shy and timid as Fanny. She is also concerned with how the conversation with her uncle (or lack thereof) will reflect on herself

²⁴ The ‘Mansfield Judgement’, made in 1772 by Lord Mansfield, ruled that slaves should be freed once they touch English soil because English air is “too pure for slaves to breathe in” (Stabler, “Introduction”, xxxi). Stabler writes that Austen would have been aware of this judgement and the suggestion is that she deliberately calls the estate “Mansfield” to evoke connections with the anti-abolition movement (xxxii).

as well as Maria and Julia who care for nothing except talk of Henry Crawford and compliments to Sotherton (Maria's future home with Mr. Rushworth). Austen creates a clear divide between Fanny and the Bertram girls whose education unto vanity and selfishness means that they cannot and will not think, reflect on, or discuss any topics that do not directly relate to them. Fanny, in contrast, wishes to say more but realizes that Maria and Julia *should* be interested in the conversation even if their father does not notice and is silenced in acknowledgement of the hostile environment to intellectual discourses. She tells Edmund, "I suppose I am graver than other people...I love to hear my uncle talk of the West Indies...It entertains me more than many other things have done—but then I am unlike other people I dare say" (*MP* 154). Fanny knows herself—she would rather hear about a new place like the West Indies than act in an amateur production of *Lover's Vows* or listen to the empty witticisms of the Crawford siblings. Fanny is "unlike" others in her gravity, or in other words, her intellectuality—her ability to sit still, listen, learn, and reflect. Indeed, one of her main objections to Henry Crawford is that "he does not think as he ought, on serious subjects" or, as Edmund subsequently amends, "he has not thought at all upon serious subjects" (275). Stabler writes in her introduction to the novel, "Austen reverses the common cultural assumption of many male writers that women were not mentally equipped to cope with abstract concepts, and should therefore limit their concerns to domestic minutiae. Fanny, by contrast, finds it easy to relate to overarching principles, but falters when these generalizations are assailed by everyday life" (xviii). I am not convinced that Fanny "falters" to bring her principles into everyday life but it does often mean that she is not always socially pleasing or amusing in the way "accomplished" ladies were expected to be and certainly not in the way Mary Crawford is. What Fanny's upbringing at Mansfield does is give her the tools to be intellectual but ultimately no space with which to express it. By placing education in

domestic space, Austen uses Fanny's own precarious position in the Bertram family as well as her intelligence in contrast to their superficiality to criticize women's exclusion from the public sphere and the neglect of the female intellectual. While Austen was encouraged at her home, Fanny's treatment reflects more closely the treatment of women in England's public sphere, particularly the oppression of female intellectuals.

Uninteresting Virtue: Fanny versus Mary

Despite her intelligence, Fanny Price is the hardest of Austen's heroines to like as her "virtue is not interesting" (Trilling 425). Stabler writes that "Fanny intervenes in conversations to remind people of the correct line of conduct" (xviii) which means she does often function as a sort of "killjoy" as Auerbach claims (448), particularly when situated in opposition to her fun-loving cousins and the Crawfords. For example, when assigning parts for their amateur theatrical, Tom Bertram gives the role of Cottager's Wife to Fanny. But Fanny emphatically refuses to conform to his wishes, despite her usual tendency to always obey: "I could not act anything, if you were to give me the world. No, indeed, I cannot act" (*MP* 115). Her refusal prompts Mrs. Norris to call her an "obstinate, ungrateful girl" and she claims to feel "quite ashamed of you, Fanny, to make such a difficulty of obliging your cousins in a trifle of this sort,—So kind as they are to you!—Take the part with a good grace, and let us hear no more of the matter" (116). Fanny serves in this scene to remind the others (and later, Edmund) of the right conduct—that is, not to act at all. Instead of being commended for sticking to her principles, however, she evokes shame from her aunt and is blamed and abused by her. She is the "killjoy" who threatens to wreck the theatrical that promises them all such amusement. Her refusal renders her socially deficient as she lacks the "good grace" which Mary Crawford and Mrs. Grant show by immediately agreeing to play the parts they are assigned. Fanny will not

oblige their whims and collude on their acting scheme, thereby validating their course of action, and so she is not valued by the company. When Mrs. Grant plays Cottager's Wife, however, "Her pleasant manners and cheerful conformity made her always valuable amongst them" (134). Trilling's statement about reader response to Fanny that her virtue is not interesting also applies to her family members and friends within the novel. Fanny is only valuable when she is useful; when she is not, she is ignored.²⁵ Considering *Mansfield Park* as a microcosm for England itself, her treatment ultimately reflects the country's treatment of intelligent women—neglected and forgotten, ridiculed for adhering to their morals, expected to amuse, and with no space of their own within the public to express their thoughts.

Austen constantly characterizes Fanny in opposition to Mary Crawford, of whom Trilling says, "Irony is her natural mode, and we are drawn to think of her voice as being nearly the author's own as Elizabeth Bennet's is" (426). Readers are much more charmed and enthralled by Mary than they are by the timid, "Christian heroine" Fanny (427). Trilling continues, "Mary Crawford is the antithesis of Fanny Price...[she] 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; she can bring not only a horse but a conversation to a gallop" (426). Mary represents manners in contrast to Fanny's morals. She pleases wherever she goes and, as Trilling suggests, excels in all social situations and activities. While Mary often controls the conversation, she fulfills the social expectation of an accomplished woman to be an amusing companion for the male audience.²⁶ Specifically, she delights Edmund by playing the harp (*MP*

²⁵ It is important to note, however, that Fanny becomes increasingly thrust into the spotlight, particularly by Henry Crawford and her uncle, Sir Thomas. Though she begins as the 'ugly duckling', she becomes interesting enough for Henry Crawford to propose to her and for Sir Thomas to remark several times on his return from Antigua on Fanny's improved looks over the course of the novel.

²⁶ To quote Wollstonecraft, the accomplished woman is taught "to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused" (*Rights of Woman* 100).

52) and is ever obliging in joining the Bertram sisters in a “glee”,²⁷ which leaves “Edmund looking after her in an ecstasy of admiration of all her many virtues, from her obliging manners down to her light and graceful tread” (89). Austen uses “virtue” ironically here to draw attention to Edmund’s romanticized misreading of Mary as neither “obliging manners” nor a person’s “tread”—regardless of how “light and graceful” it is—can be constituted as “virtue”. These qualities actually reflect Mary’s personality and physical appearance, not her moral integrity or values but these pleasing surface qualities are what causes the others, especially Edmund, to praise and value her as a woman.

Mary is also skilled in manipulating conversation and social situations in order to evoke admiration. At Fanny’s ball, she “saw much of Sir Thomas’s thoughts” and possessing “a general prevailing desire of recommending herself to him, took an opportunity of stepping aside to say something agreeable of Fanny” (217). When she encounters Mrs. Norris, she “knew Mrs. Norris too well to think of gratifying *her* by commendation of Fanny; to her it was, as the occasion offered,—‘Ah! ma’am, how much we want dear Mrs. Rushworth and Julia to-night!’ and Mrs. Norris paid her with as many smiles and courteous words as she had time for” (217). Mary is an adept reader of people and uses her knowledge to say what she believes her interlocutor wants to hear. For Sir Thomas, who is self-congratulating himself for his “kindness” towards Fanny, Mary’s best way of “recommending herself” is to, by complimenting Fanny, compliment him. But with Mrs. Norris, Mary switches her tactics, instead lamenting her favourites, Maria’s and Julia’s absence, to gain “smiles” and “courteous words”. If Mary Crawford is calculated to charm readers as Trilling suggests, she also actively calculates to charm those around her with her polished social skills and acute social awareness. Thus, she is valued and adored by the

²⁷ “a drawing room musical entertainment of singing in parts with or without accompaniment” (Stabler, *Explanatory Notes*, 403). An “accomplished” female would be expected to master this sort of “musical entertainment”.

Mansfield party because she serves their needs and flatters their vanities, while simultaneously gratifying her own. But Trilling points out that Mary's charm "diminish[es]...as we read the novel a second time. We begin to hear something disagreeable in [the Crawfords'] intonation: it is the peculiarly modern bad quality which Jane Austen was the first to represent—insincerity" (428). Mary does not actually wish to compliment Fanny and she does not actually miss Maria and Julia; she merely says these things to insinuate herself into the good graces of Sir Thomas and Mrs. Norris respectively. Her flattery and her social manners, which make the others esteem and value her, are empty—there is no true concern or good will behind it. Instead, she is a "person who cultivates the *style* of sensitivity, virtue, and intelligence" (429). Upon closer examination, readers begin to see that Mary is more charming and valued than Fanny because she performs social manners, the "*style*" of sincerity", more ably and skillfully but lacks the interiority to accompany it that would make her genuine and that Fanny truly possesses. Implicit here is a critique of the Mansfield family's judgement and priorities in finding more value in a Mary Crawford than a Fanny Price and thus, by extension, England and its parallel treatment of intellectual women.

Mary Crawford is intelligent but not intellectual. I will continue Austen's tendency to characterize Mary and Fanny as foils by proposing that they represent two different types of intelligence. Mary displays wit and a superficial, social type of intelligence, a mastery of manners that is categorized by her ability to please and manipulate, whereas Fanny stands for serious intellectuality, shown by her capacity for reflection and engagement with abstract philosophical ideas. For example, in the carriage on the way to Sotherton, since Fanny is

not often invited to join in the conversation of the others...Her own thoughts and reflections were habitually her best companions; and in observing the appearance of the country, the bearings of the roads, the difference of soil, the state of the harvest, the cottages, the cattle, the children, she found entertainment that could

only have been heightened by having Edmund to speak to of what she felt. (*MP* 64)

Her interest in the lives and conditions of others and in everyday subjects such as soil and the harvest is coupled with a sense of imagination that makes these plain country scenes “entertainment”. Excluded from the social space of the carriage—“the conversation of the others”—Fanny’s “thoughts” and “reflections” become her survival strategy, a place of retreat from the social sphere in which she is not welcome and where she can find her own amusement. Austen’s insertion of “habitually” and, indeed, what readers have already witnessed, suggests that Fanny is frequently left out of the conversation to her own thoughts. On the other hand, in the carriage, Mary “saw nature, inanimate nature, with little observation; her attention was all for men and women, her talents for the light and lively” (64). Nature is “inanimate” for Mary but Fanny is able to “animate” it with the power of her mind and imagination. Austen’s description of Mary’s talents as “light” also hints at her superficiality or, at least, that she lacks in proper depth of thought.²⁸ She prefers fickle “men and women” to eternal nature, failing to recognize its intrinsic value. She only cares for what can benefit her and thus neglects any abstract philosophical ideas or public issues of debate. Her thoughts and reflections throughout the novel center on flirtations, love affairs, and advantageous marriage matches. Ironically, readers too may be more interested in the various flirtations, love affairs, the “men and women” of the novel than Fanny’s abstract musings on country roads, rendering Mary the more exciting and relatable character. Furthermore, Fanny is defined by her immobility while Mary cannot sit still: “After sitting a little while, Miss Crawford was up again. ‘I must move,’ said she, ‘resting fatigues me.—I have looked across the ha-ha till I am weary’” (76). Although her hyper-activity could be

²⁸ Austen employs this word in a criticism of *Pride and Prejudice* which she deemed “too light, too bright, too sparkling, it wants shade” (Le Faye 203). I do not suggest that she is disparaging *PP* but rather I am pointing towards her use of “light” to connote a lack of seriousness or “shade” or depth.

read as a rejection of feminine passivity, it also suggests that either she is not comfortable with her own thoughts or that she does not have any thoughts to provide her with “entertainment” as Fanny’s reflections do. Mary’s constant craving for novelty and stimulation demonstrates her lack of intellectuality.

Another important critique of Mary Crawford and her education that Austen makes, wherein she differs widely from the similarly witty Elizabeth Bennet, is her propensity for worldly values and ambition. Trilling states, “Mary Crawford’s intention is not to deceive the world but to comfort herself; she impersonates the woman she thinks she ought to be” (429). To revise Trilling’s statement slightly, my contention is that Mary Crawford impersonates the woman she was *taught* to be. Mary arrives at Mansfield Park having been educated by her uncle and aunt, the Admiral and Mrs. Crawford, as well as her London society friends. Equipped with a dowry of twenty thousand pounds, Austen announces her intentions right away: “Matrimony was her object, provided she could marry well”, thus preparing readers for her “calculating” to get a husband among the baronet’s family (*MP* 32, 33). Mary has a mercenary view of marriage: “I would have everybody marry if they can do it properly; I do not like to have people throw themselves away; but everybody should marry as soon as they can do it to advantage” (34). A “proper” marriage according to Mary is one that is made to “advantage”. Her views on marriage become clearer as she falls deeper in love with Edmund whom she feels she cannot marry because “A clergyman is nothing” (73). While Mary initially sets out to marry Tom Bertram, the heir of the baronet title, she gradually comes to prefer Edmund; however, his choice of occupation presents a stumbling block to their union. She wishes he would be a lawyer or a soldier or a sailor instead since “Men love to distinguish themselves, and in either of the other lines, distinction may be gained, but not in the church” (73). Mary disdains the quiet, simple life

of a clergyman because she was taught to strive for “distinction” in the world. She desires to impress, either through brilliance in a career such as the law or the Navy or through an elevated title, a large income, and/or immense property. A clergyman is, thus, “nothing” because he will never gain fame or money through his profession.²⁹ She believes that she would be degrading herself to marry a clergyman; she claims it is a situation “she would never stoop to” as it would lower her below her station and deserts (178). She would be going against her previously quoted maxim that everyone should marry as long as they can do it to advantage since she would not benefit financially or class-wise from the match. As well, she fails to recognize any intrinsic value or importance in the job of a clergyman in caring for the “souls” of his parish. If she were to be a clergyman’s wife, she would live with a small income and in a small rectory similar to Austen’s own circumstances as a clergyman’s daughter. Mary does not recognize the personal benefit of marrying for love rather than advantage until the end of the novel:

Mary, though perfectly resolved against ever attaching herself to a younger brother again, was long in finding among the dashing representatives, or idle heir apparents, who were at the command of her beauty, and her 20,000*l.*, any one who could satisfy the better taste she had acquired at Mansfield, whose character and manners could authorise a hope of the domestic happiness she had there learnt to estimate, or put Edmund Bertram sufficiently out of her head. (369)

Thus, as Austen deals out punishments in the conclusion, Mary’s lesson is to “estimate” or value “domestic happiness” in a marriage match rather than simply worldly advantage, to look at a man’s “character and manners” rather than just his title and income. Mary undergoes another education during her time at Mansfield which exposes the faults in her upbringing by the Crawfords and her London society friends who taught her to have too much worldly ambition.

²⁹ Austen similarly represents the clergy in *Sense and Sensibility*’s Edward Ferrars who wishes to have the simple and modest life of a clergyman, despite his mother’s wishes for him “to make a fine figure in the world in some manner or other. [She] wished to interest him in political concerns, to get him into parliament, or to see him connected with some of the great men of the day...But Edward had no turn for great men or barouches. All his wishes centered in domestic comfort and the quiet of private life” (SS 15).

As previously mentioned, Austen herself turned down an advantageous marriage proposal because she could not love the man; therefore, Austen cannot mean for Mary Crawford to be the heroine of *Mansfield Park* though she may be the more interesting female character.

But Mary only acts according to her education which is what Austen attacks, not Mary herself. Mary has been in “a bad school for matrimony” living with her aunt and uncle as she acknowledges that her beloved aunt “had little cause to love the state” (37) and she expresses dissatisfaction with the Grants’ marriage: “I see [Dr. Grant] to be an indolent selfish bon vivant...who will not stir a finger for the convenience of any one and who...if the cook makes a blunder, is out of humour with his excellent wife” (88). Mary has a cynical view of marriage but not unfoundedly so; she has seen only examples of bad marriages in her young life. Austen could perhaps sympathize with Mary’s cynicism as one who avoided a loveless marriage and often represented the misery of badly matched couples in her novels.³⁰ Austen employs Mary to represent society and society’s education unto young women to prepare for nothing except marriage, and to think seriously of nothing except marriage, where they will be treated as a play-thing or servant rather than an equal. As well, like Austen after her father’s death, Mary as a single woman has to rely on her relatives such as her brother and the Grants for a home and thus occupies an unstable and dependent position which makes marriage a necessary route for independence. For this reason, Mary’s punishment by the novel’s conclusion is not severe. She may be “long in finding” a match that suits her mercenary needs but Austen does not state that she does not do so at all. She regrets Edmund but is not condemned forever to unhappiness. Readers perhaps sense some of this ambivalence in their narrator’s handling of Mary Crawford and thus are drawn to her but she is also a purposely attractive character. Readers are drawn to

³⁰ Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas in *PP*, Mr. and Mrs. Palmer in *SS*, and Charles and Mary Musgrove in *Persuasion*, to name a few.

Mary for the same reasons they are drawn to Elizabeth Bennet—for her spirit. In a card game, Mary declares her life strategy along with her style of play: “There, I will stake my last like a woman of spirit. No cold prudence for me. I am not born to sit still and do nothing. If I lose the game, it shall not be from not striving for it” (190). This spirit is admirable but, Austen is sure to point out, misplaced: “The game was her’s, and only did not pay her for what she had given to secure it” (190). In instances such as these, Austen appears ambivalent towards Mary; she sanctions her rebellion from the typical female role (her refusal to “sit still and do nothing”) in other characters like Elizabeth Bennet but stipulates that Mary does not have the understanding or character to accompany it. Her values are misaligned and thus she acts from pride, ambition, and vanity rather than a sense of her own inner worth. Austen tricks readers along with characters in the novel by having Mary imitate the “*style*” of sincerity but it is important that they recognize her miseducation by the end. Mary represents the accomplished form of female intelligence, channelled towards socially acceptable, non-intellectual ends—marriage. In this way, Austen uses both of her main female characters to make her criticism of society’s treatment and education of women and the way in which it places cultural value on the entertaining, superficial Mary Crawford while disregarding the quiet, intellectual Fanny Price.

Mary Crawford and her brother serve another important purpose in regard to Fanny—they become the subject on which Fanny and her family’s judgements begin to diverge. Along with her uninteresting virtue, readers often accuse of being spiritless, “frail, clinging, and seemingly passive...[a heroine] who annoys above all by her shyness” (Auerbach 447). Whereas Mary boldly “stakes her last” in a card game, Fanny is overly obedient and submissive and is always close to tears. She looks upon Edmund’s judgement and Sir Thomas’s authority as absolute. Until the Crawfords’ arrival, Fanny is the creation of Edmund. When Edmund asks

Fanny what she thinks of Mary, he is pleased that she “saw it all as I did”, but, as the narrator points out, “Having formed her mind and gained her affections, he had a good chance of her thinking like him; though at this period, and on this subject, there began now to be some danger of dissimilarity, for he was in a line of admiration of Miss Crawford, which might lead where Fanny could not follow” (*MP* 51). Indeed, Edmund does go where Fanny cannot, leaving her to stand on her own. Fanny is the only person who recognizes Mary Crawford’s insincerity and who realizes that she would not be a good match for Edmund, even without the influence of her jealousy. She is never taken in by Mary’s charm and never desires her friendship, despite Edmund’s encouragement. Most significantly, Fanny must refuse Henry Crawford although everybody advises her to accept him. When Fanny is tested in this way, I argue that virtue is no longer uninteresting, but rather the mode through which the timid Fanny becomes a *tour de force*. It is “Fanny, diffident and meek, who offers this daring defiance. Mary Crawford does not defy the opinions of the world; she exemplifies them” (Devlin 125). Mary’s pleasing qualities, her social prowess and high spirits, are socially acceptable, non-intellectual forms of female intelligence; they are the result of an accomplished education which seeks to increase women’s value on the marriage market. In contrast, Fanny displeases both the characters in the novel and readers because she does not conform to the status quo, either of a marriageable young girl or of a fictional heroine. She ultimately earns the title of heroine because she represents the radical potentiality of the intellectual woman who thinks and acts independently. In order for her refusal to have impact and for Austen to demonstrate this potentiality, however, the qualities that make Fanny unlikable are essential.

In some ways, *Mansfield Park* can be considered an updating of *Paradise Lost* and, indeed, Fanny’s great ‘temptation’ or test comes in the form of Henry Crawford’s proposal. His

offer of marriage forces Fanny to speak her mind, especially when he appeals to Sir Thomas who believes Fanny could and should have no objection to the match: she is “forced by the anxiety of the moment even to tell her uncle that he was wrong” (*MP* 246). The dramatic exchange between Fanny and Sir Thomas is fittingly located in the East Room which is a space that represents education and Fanny’s interiority. There, the two characters come into direct conflict instead of their usual dynamic of submission and authority:

‘Am I to understand,’ said Sir Thomas, after a few moments silence, ‘that you mean to *refuse* Mr. Crawford?’
‘Yes, Sir.’
‘Refuse him?’
‘Yes, Sir.’
‘Refuse Mr. Crawford! Upon what plea? For what reason?’
‘I—I cannot like him, Sir, well enough to marry him.’ (246).

Here, Fanny asserts herself against her uncle, repeating her answer firmly and simply. As well, Fanny offers her personal feelings to Sir Thomas as a legitimate justification for her refusal, following her own inclination instead of her ‘duty’ which would entail accepting Henry for mercenary reasons. Fanny has typically chosen to perform her duty rather than to pursue her own desires but the gravity of the situation forces her into directly opposing and defying her uncle, “even to tell her uncle that he was wrong”. Sir Thomas is so shocked by Fanny’s response that he is “half-inclined to think, Fanny, that you do not quite know your own feelings” (249). From his point of view, there could be no other way to account for her refusal of a man who has “every thing to recommend him...situation in life, fortune, character...more than common agreeableness, with address and conversation pleasing to every body” (249). She *has* spoken her feelings clearly but because they do not conform to what *he* expects or thinks, he unfairly insists she does not know them. Henry appears to be a great match with his “fortune” and “agreeableness” to everybody only because Sir Thomas is unable to look past surface

appearances or his own mercenary motives for desiring the marriage in order to understand Henry's character or to respect Fanny's choice. Indeed, Henry's "agreeableness" and manners "pleasing to everybody" already signals to readers that he is not necessarily a good match for Fanny, having witnessed how these are not always positive qualities. Fanny herself is often considered disagreeable because of her adherence to her moral principles, such as when she refuses to act in *Lover's Vows*. Henry's "agreeableness", rather, is dangerous in his flirtation with Maria and Julia and in that he lacks principles. But Sir Thomas is not as perceptive as Fanny and is blinded by his ambitions; thus, in his opinion, she is "wilful and perverse", "self-willed, obstinate, selfish, and ungrateful" (249-250) for not immediately agreeing to the marriage. Fanny is used to submitting to her uncle and therefore she must summon a "strong effort" to reply through her tears, "If it were possible for me to do otherwise...but I am so perfectly convinced that I could never make him happy, and I should be miserable myself" (250). The annoyingly shy, "frail" and "clinging" Fanny holds her ground against the all-powerful Bertram family patriarch, voicing her opinion firmly, reasonably, and respectfully despite his various implied insults and accusations (Auerbach 447). As Fanny observes, "She had no one to take her part, to counsel, or to speak for her" for Edmund is away and thus *she* must take her own part in asserting her personhood and individuality (*MP* 251). By "being perfectly convinced", she trusts in her own judgement and directly refutes her uncle's claims to the contrary. Although Fanny's virtue may be considered uninteresting, it gives her the strength to assert herself. She is able to find agency through adherence to her moral principles in the face of a powerful patriarchal figure who demands her silence and submission. Fanny's shy and obedient nature renders her defiance all the more powerful and remarkable. Thus, her virtue becomes the vehicle

through which she accesses the agency and strength to refuse both the forbidden fruit of Henry Crawford and Sir Thomas's patronizing insistence that he knows her feelings better than she.

Claudia Johnson argues that in *Mansfield Park*, the "authority figures...all don the drapery of decency" in order to cover up what Johnson calls "the nakedness of coercion" (463). Sir Thomas and others such as Tom Bertram and Mrs. Norris employ "double talk" or give "the 'pretense' of choice" when "they wish to invest their self-will in the sanctity of social form" (462, 463). Their appearance of benevolence "enables [them] to compel others without having to regard themselves as bullies" (463). For example, when Sir Thomas "advis[es]" Fanny to go to bed during her ball, "'Advise' was his word, but it was the advice of absolute power...In thus sending her away, Sir Thomas perhaps might not be thinking merely of her health. It might occur to him, that Mr. Crawford had been sitting by her long enough, or he might mean to recommend her as a wife by shewing her persuadableness" (*MP* 220). Johnson notes that, in this instance, "he employs a discourse of benevolence [that] the narrator proceeds to strip" as Fanny has no choice but to obey since his advice is actually of "absolute power" (Johnson 462). Sir Thomas compels Fanny to do his will, even against her own "inclination" but because it is masked as advice, he does not appear to be a bully (*MP* 220). Furthermore,

Lest we assume that 'absolute power' exercised on behalf of a ward's frail health is permissible, if not indeed desirable, we are obliged to think again as the narrator leads us through a sequence of suppositions which exposes Sir Thomas's motives...Eager to dispose of his niece with unexpected advantage in the marriage market, Sir Thomas stages this drama for Henry Crawford's benefit...[as it] become[s] even more painfully how little Fanny herself has to do with Sir Thomas's act of solicitude. (462)

Not only is he a bully but he is also motivated by self-interest and the same mercenary motives that Austen condemns in Mary Crawford. Arguably, he could be acting out of concern for Fanny's future well-being as Henry's addresses are an avenue out of the "mediocrity of condition

which *seemed* to be [her] lot” (*MP* 244). But readers have already seen him marry his daughter to Mr. Rushworth despite his suspicions of her indifference and his own knowledge of Rushworth’s foolishness, purely for the advantageous alliance,³¹ as well as how compliments to Fanny gratify his own vanity. In commanding Fanny to go to bed, Sir Thomas abuses his authority by displaying her as a desirable ‘product’ in the marriage market because she seemingly possesses all the feminine virtues of docility and passivity that make a good wife. His motives thereby implicate him in the mercenary marriage market in which women are treated as exchangeable goods and which Austen clearly does not condone. Johnson argues that Sir Thomas acts similarly when he accuses Fanny of being “self-willed, obstinate, selfish, and ungrateful” (250) while at the same time claiming that “You cannot suppose me capable of trying to persuade you to marry against your inclinations” (259). On the contrary, Sir Thomas does not care for Fanny’s “inclinations”, as witnessed during the ball scene when he makes her leave for bed; however, he “don[s] the drapery of decency” by giving Fanny the appearance of choice but in reality, no choice (Johnson 461). She is apparently free to refuse Henry but if she does so, she is “self-willed, obstinate, selfish, and ungrateful”. What Sir Thomas’s reaction to Fanny’s refusal reveals is both of their involvement in a patriarchal power structure that seeks to render “women so quiescent and tractable that they sweetly serve in the designs of fathers or guardians without wishing to resist and without noting that they have no choice” (464). Due to these feminine ‘virtues’, Sir Thomas “expects from Fanny...a cheerful readiness to be guided, so that the nakedness of force will never be necessary. Her resistance implies an assumption of self-responsibility that challenges his authority, and he is alarmed” (465). Thus far in the novel,

³¹ In regards to Maria Bertram, Johnson argues that Sir Thomas “dons the drapery of decency” when he asks Maria for her feelings towards Mr. Rushworth but “his offer to call off [the] marriage...is halfhearted at best and disingenuous at worst. Sir Thomas stops well short of the candor that could have brought Maria to think twice” (462). She ultimately suggests that the relief Sir Thomas feels at his daughter’s assurance of her future happiness with Rushworth comes from how advantageous of an alliance it is for him.

Fanny has fallen in line with this power dynamic and not trusted to her own judgement, for which many readers criticize her, but now she suddenly resists and holds her ground, effectively revealing that Sir Thomas's rule is one of "force", what Johnson fittingly labels as "ugly facts about power" (463). While Mrs. Norris blatantly instructs Fanny "not to be putting yourself forward, and talking and giving your opinion" when dining at the Grants, Sir Thomas has been silently and subconsciously teaching his female relations the same lesson in that they must never have an opinion of their own with which to defy him. In this way, Austen inserts not only a critique of power and women's treatment by patriarchal figures but also another critique of female education that echoes Wollstonecraft's—they are taught to be "quiescent" and "tractable" and essentially ignorant of their oppression rather than self-responsible, discerning human beings capable of holding their own opinions and making their own decisions. Of course English women are not given a space in public discourses where they can express their opinions, since they are taught and expected not to have any. Through Fanny and Sir Thomas's exchange, Austen exposes the power dynamic at work and ultimately asks women readers to recognize and challenge patriarchal power and to remain true to one's own principles.

Fanny earns the role of heroine because she represents an intellectual, principled type of female intelligence that is capable of thinking for herself. Johnson describes how "even Fanny rankles" at the contradictory expectations placed on women's behaviour. When Edmund tells Fanny of Mrs. Grant and Mary's surprise at her rejection of Henry, she exclaims, "In my situation, it would have been the extreme of vanity to be forming expectations on Mr. Crawford...How then was I to be—to be in love with him the moment he said he was with me? How was I to have an attachment at his service, as soon as it was asked for?" (*MP* 277). Johnson identifies these expectations as another impossible standard: "First they are required not to desire

at all, and next they are enjoined to feel desire on proper command” (466). As soon as Sir Thomas has approved the match, he can see no reason why Fanny would continue to refuse Henry’s offer because he expects her to adhere to his inclinations. As the heroine, Fanny recognizes and criticizes the impossibility of the restrictions placed on women, particularly in regards to their education into the marriage market. They are taught either to be ignorant and subservient so that men can easily assert power over them like Lady Bertram, or to display themselves as desirable goods on the marriage market in order to improve their station and/or achieve independence, akin to Mary Crawford. Both models are acceptable forms of feminine behaviour. Either way, this education effectively moulds them into ideal slaves. Sir Thomas particularly expects “cheerful readiness” from Fanny whom he believed was “peculiarly free from...independence of spirit” and who, because of her lower class status, may never again get “such an opportunity of being settled in life, eligibly, honourably, nobly” (*MP* 249). Thus, it serves Austen’s purposes to make Fanny shy, quiet, and an outsider, the “lowest and last” (173)—all of these qualities that make her unlikable—because it renders her the more likely to obey Sir Thomas and to accept Henry. Fanny’s unique position as a lower-class, female outsider in the Bertram household, as well as Edmund’s guidance, her book reading, and her natural disposition, however, allows her to acquire a different sort of education and so she exists in the margins of these two prescribed, contradictory feminine models. Fanny is able to call attention to the impossible standards placed on her sex because she has her own opinions, her own feelings, and her own principles; most importantly, she also believes that they matter. She is neither a complete submissive nor a shiny object for display; instead, Austen creates a new model of femininity and feminine intelligence—the intellectual woman.

Fanny's temptation by Henry Crawford and her power struggle with Sir Thomas ultimately demonstrates the potentiality of the female intellectual. Other of Austen's heroines achieve a moral education, but *Mansfield Park* instead depicts a marginalized woman who, already morally, spiritually, and intellectually educated, must learn to take responsibility for herself in her patriarchal, class-based society rather than "trust[ing] that guardians will think for and of her, only to discover instead that they are too full of their own, invariably wrongheaded, plans to think much about her at all" (Johnson 464). While Fanny has depended on Sir Thomas (and Edmund) to look after her, his attempt to bully her into marrying Henry Crawford shows that not only does he not care about her feelings or know what is best for her, but that his values are in disarray. As Johnson states, "The only character in *Mansfield Park* whose hands remain clean has to think for herself and to defy the figureheads of social and religious authority in order to remain guiltless" (466). Fanny knows Henry's true character better than Sir Thomas does, having observed his earlier behaviour towards her cousins and therefore she is in a better position to judge. It becomes increasingly clear that Fanny is more capable than Sir Thomas and even Edmund to both readers and, eventually, the other characters, validating the contribution of intellectual women. Austen orchestrates Henry's betrayal at the end of the novel because not only is it consistent with his character but Fanny must be right. Fanny's refusal is vindicated by his actions. They reveal that her judgement should have been trusted all along and that she merits the position of authority held by her male relatives. As Fanny advises Henry, "We have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be" (*MP* 324). She learns to trust her own judgement and conscience to "guide" her, rather than deferring to male authority figures. Like Wollstonecraft, Austen suggests that educated women are capable of important contributions in conjunction with and independently of marriage and family. For

instance, when Fanny unexpectedly finds herself in “an office of authority” at her home in Portsmouth, readers witness the just ways in which she uses her power (311). She begins to educate Susan whom she recognizes as possessing a “natural light of the mind” and she settles Susan and Betsey’s ongoing fight about the silver knife by buying Betsey a new one and restoring the old one to Susan, its rightful owner. Here, a woman with an intellectual education is capable of using her power to restore balance and justice rather than to bully her inferiors into submission. By doing this, Austen calls for women to take control of their own lives which may sometimes require them to critique and defy entrenched power structures. Perhaps Austen’s purposes in *Mansfield Park* stem from her own vulnerability and dispossession after her father’s death. She employs the similarly marginalized Fanny as a tool to prove how even the “lowest and last” (173) can exert some measure of agency and control by means of her virtue. If women are educated to be their own best guide, then they can be responsible for their own fates.

The Ending: *Mansfield Park*’s Conclusions

Famous for her happy endings, Austen declares in the final chapter of *Mansfield Park*, “Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest” (362). The narrator’s voice is strongest in this chapter as she “restores” happiness to the worthy and doles out punishments to the guilty in the form of re-educations. Henry Crawford suffers by forfeiting Fanny, whom “must have been his reward... Would he have deserved more” and is forced to live with regret and self-reproach (367). Mary Crawford’s fate has already been discussed. The disgraced Maria Rushworth is exiled from Mansfield with Mrs. Norris where “their tempers became their mutual punishment” (365). Sir Thomas “was the longest to suffer” as the guiltiest party among them (362). While Henry, Mary, and Maria do wrong only because

they act according to what they have been taught, Sir Thomas is the educator responsible for his children's corruption. His punishment is that he is forced to recognize that he has prioritized manners over morals. He realizes that he was "governed by motives of selfishness and worldly wisdom" in encouraging Maria's marriage to the foolhardy Mr. Rushworth (362). He is anguished by his "conviction of his own errors in the education of his daughters" as he witnesses the ill effects of Mrs. Norris and his own coldness towards them (363). Furthermore,

Something must have been wanting *within*, or time would have worn away much of its ill effect. He feared that principle, active principle, had been wanting, that they had never been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers, by that sense of duty which can alone suffice. They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice. To be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments—the authorised object of their youth—could have had no useful influence that way, no moral effect on the mind. (364)

Here Austen offers a direct recommendation regarding education, closely approximating Wollstonecraft in her criticism of the "authorised object" of current education—"elegance and accomplishments". She delineates "accomplishment" from "principle" and "duty" which, she proposes, should be the true purpose of education. The mind and soul need development. Austen specifies that to know, to be "instructed theoretically" is not enough, one must bring one's lessons into "daily practice", what she labels as "*active principle*" (emphasis added). Sir Thomas realizes that he taught his daughters to act the part of an accomplished young lady rather than to be really "good" (364). Thus, Sir Thomas learns to differentiate between the surface, superficial qualities represented by his daughters and the Crawfords and the deeper, internal principles of Fanny and her siblings that often develop out of "early hardship and discipline and the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure" (372). D.D. Devlin claims that "The reversal of Sir Thomas's values is shown by the approval he now gladly and fully gives to Fanny...[his] full acceptance of Fanny is the final stage in his re-education" (125). This reading

gives Fanny considerable power as an intellectual woman who is responsible for the “re-education” of the head of Mansfield Park. If Mansfield is a microcosm of Britain itself, then Sir Thomas symbolizes the powerful authority figures that uphold hegemonic and oppressive social structures that silence and subjugate women like Fanny. Austen undermines the conventional dynamic as Sir Thomas must trust her judgement, value her contributions, and become more like her to become worthy of his position of power. As Fanny becomes the “daughter that he wanted” and “their mutual attachment became very strong”, readers are assured that Mansfield Park will be in better hands in the years to come (*MP* 371). In this way, Austen uses Sir Thomas’s acceptance of Fanny to both privilege the intellectual woman and play into the expected happy ending of a novel.

Even better for Fanny, Edmund learns “to prefer soft light eyes to sparkling dark ones” while recovering from his disappointment over Mary Crawford (370). The narrator relates, “I only intreat every body to believe that exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier, Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford, and became as anxious to marry Fanny, as Fanny herself could desire” (369). Fanny wins her prince and readers deservedly receive their romantic ending after reading several hundred pages filled with Fanny’s pining for him. Like Sir Thomas, Edmund must learn to be a better judge of character, to no longer be “the dupe of Miss Crawford”, and to recognize Fanny as a desirable and compatible mate. His transfer of affections is explained vaguely but functions like Sir Thomas’s acceptance of Fanny in demonstrating an appreciation for an intellectual woman of principle rather than an accomplished female. Sir Thomas and Edmund, in fact, learn what readers must also learn, particularly those readers who, like Trilling, find Mary Crawford to be an attractive character and Fanny to be an unlikable one. William Deresiewicz, in his book *A Jane Austen Education*, aptly

summarizes her lesson: “Mary got the charm, Fanny got the goodness, and we had to decide which one was better. Austen wasn’t really condemning brightness and energy...she was just showing us that they aren’t the most important things in life” (163). He reinforces his point by quoting a letter Austen wrote to her niece Fanny Knight in the same year *Mansfield Park* was published: “Wisdom is better than Wit” (163). By asking male authoritative figures such as Sir Thomas and Edmund as well as readers to value “Wisdom” over “Wit”, Austen subtly calls for educational reform with a similar message as Wollstonecraft. To speak seriously on serious subjects, to read, to sit and reflect may be uninteresting but women can do more than please and amuse. Instead, Austen offers them as intellectual beings that have the potential to contribute to and shape the modern world. Edmund’s choice of Fanny also means he chooses a companion instead of a play-thing, presenting a new model of marriage that answers Wollstonecraft’s call to men to change what they value in a wife. When readers choose Fanny too, they have undergone their own Jane Austen education.

The ending to *Mansfield Park* has elicited contradictory responses from critics. In her study of sibling love and incest, Glenda A. Hudson takes the positive view and argues that the novel “conclude[s] optimistically with the expulsion or removal of menacing intruders and with the preservation and revivification of the home and family” (35)—specifically, Mansfield is “undefiled by the morally incorrigible Crawfords” (49). Fanny and Edmund’s union “blends spiritual, mental, and physical affinities...[it] enriches and improves the family at Mansfield and, in Austen’s opinion, it should gain the reader’s approbation” (47). Hudson places the idealized alliance of Fanny and Edmund at the head of a new generation that will ensure and sustain Mansfield’s continuance. The main problem with her argument, however, is that it situates the Crawfords as “menacing intruders” who bring corruption from the outside into the sanctity of

Mansfield Park. She fails to recognize the immorality and injustice already present within the household that is merely exposed by the Crawfords' arrival, such as the misrule of Sir Thomas, the tyranny of Mrs. Norris, or the recklessness of Tom Bertram. Mansfield cannot "remain" "immaculate and inviolable" or "undefiled" (49) because it was never so in the first place. E.J. Clery is more convincing in her reading of Fanny as the harbinger of "moral regeneration". Her "wartime ethos of self-sacrifice and fortitude through her family's association with the service in the navy" saves the dissipated, luxurious lifestyle of the Bertram family through Sir Thomas's eventual acceptance of her (336, 339). Fessenbecker's argument about pedagogical relationships forming the ideal basis for conjugal love also supports Hudson's reading of Fanny and Edmund's union. Like Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, Fanny and Edmund only come together once both have granted each other role of pedagogue (760). Fanny has always been the faithful student of Edmund but he too recognizes her "mental superiority", her potential as a teacher as he transfers his affections to her, essentially acknowledging that she can contribute to the running of Mansfield (*MP* 370). As per Fessenbecker's argument, this reversal equalizes the power relations between them, which would elevate Fanny to the status of equal among the Bertram family rather than the "lowest and last". To apply this interpretation to the end of *Mansfield Park* is to read it in a positive, restorative light as Fanny's integration into the community at Mansfield where she will be valued and allowed to contribute. On a grander scale, it suggests that Austen finds hope for the intellectual woman's position in public discourses and that, at least in her fiction, their acceptance will mean better management of and a brighter future for Britain. Through this marriage of "intelligent love" (Fessenbecker 748) and validation of intellectuality over manners, regardless of gender or class, Britain can progress "immaculate and inviolate" despite challenges and threats of revolution (Hudson 49). The positive interpretation of the

novel's ending suggests that not only does Fanny find a place within Mansfield but that it becomes a fruitful and thriving environment for her, the intellectual woman.

Other critics, however, such as Auerbach, Johnson, and Joseph Lew take the opposite view and find Austen's conclusion to be unsatisfying. Auerbach acknowledges that Fanny is victorious in "moving from outside in to guiding spirit of the humbled Bertram family", but it is a "somewhat predatory victory" (449-50). For her, Fanny is only

embraced as a last resource when Sir Thomas's natural children disgrace themselves in turn...Never in the canon is the happy ending so reliant upon the wounds and disappointments of others; though we leave Fanny ministering avidly to these wounds, they will never heal. The love she wins from her adoptive family is not a free tribute to her beauty, her character, or her judgement, but the last tender impulse of a stricken household. (452)

Auerbach also finds fault with Edmund, whom she argues as Fanny's "proper husband and sober soulmate" should "redress the balance", but instead "Edmund's love is so restrained as to be imperceptible" (452). In contrast to *Emma*'s Mr. Knightley who struggles with his "great passion" and jealousy, Edmund experiences no such struggle and expresses no jealousy over Henry Crawford's courtship of Fanny (452). Austen's "clipped, perfunctory summary" of their union "seems deliberately designed to banish love from our thoughts" (452-453). Johnson similarly finds that the satisfaction promised in a happy ending is compromised because such an ending which "ensconces Fanny there, indispensable at last, and still adulating now enervated figures whose discernment has been radically impeached, sustains rather than settles the problems the foregoing material has uncovered" (474). Joseph Lew, also identifies Mansfield Park as a microcosm of Great Britain, in order to suggest that it is "tainted" by the "moral effects of slaveowning and absenteeism [which] come close to destroying the circle at Mansfield" (510). The ending of the novel "leaves us not in the fairytale-like atmosphere of *Emma* or *Pride and Prejudice* but in one resembling the world and family [Austen] knew"—that is to say, imperfect

(510). Edmund is also implicated in Mansfield's corruption in that he holds plural livings (510). Lew approaches the novel specifically through the context of slavery, but like Johnson, points towards the continuance of the social problems and corruption that are represented by Sir Thomas and his family. Rather than transforming the "enervated figures" of Sir Thomas and Edmund, Fanny's integration into their circle implies her acceptance of and complicity in the very power structures that have silenced and subjugated her throughout the novel. All three of these critics also undermine Edmund as worthy of Fanny's hand, instead suggesting that he is as unfit as his father. By writing a realistic, rather bleak ending rather than a fairy tale-like 'happily ever after', Austen resists the typical romantic pay-off that the novel typically demands and that is characteristic of romantic comedy. *Pride and Prejudice* might be "too light & bright & sparkling", but *Mansfield Park*'s conclusions do not resolve the prominent social problems that threaten Britain from the inside and thus ultimately leave readers with a vague, disquieting sense that all is not right.

The negative interpretations are convincing in their identification of Mansfield Park as a corrupt institution, rather than viewing the Crawfords as immoral contagions. I am inclined to this side of the argument as, like Johnson, I find Fanny's happy ending to be unsatisfying. There is something rotten in Mansfield Park. While Fanny may become the center of the Bertram family, they recognize the worth of the intellectual woman seemingly because they have no other choice. Sir Thomas never acknowledges Fanny's superior judgement in her refusal of Henry Crawford. His withdrawal into the family unit by clinging to Fanny suggests a sense of stasis or stagnancy rather than the gesture to the future typical of romantic comedies. As well, I agree with Auerbach and Lew in questioning whether Edmund is truly worthy of Fanny. In the closing chapters, Austen makes him an object of ridicule which undermines his position as 'hero' or

“proper husband and sober soulmate”. Austen appears to be trying to find a happy ending for Fanny and, in so doing, to reconcile carving out a space for the intellectual woman with a happy ending to her novel. I am not proposing that she fails entirely in this endeavour within the plot of her novel but rather that her conclusions are unconvincing and unsatisfactory when attempting to translate them into real life and especially when viewed in comparison with Austen’s own family unit and environment.

Despite the valuable lessons that he learns, Sir Thomas is still wanting. He is an “enervated figure” as Johnson states, effectively cowed into his acceptance of Fanny by the devastation of his family. He may accept her but he never acknowledges his error in judgement about Henry Crawford or repents for his manipulation of Fanny. While he recognizes that he has poorly educated his daughters and forced Maria into a loveless marriage, he too attempted this very act with Fanny. He wished, practically commanded, her to marry a man she did not love purely for the advantage and disregarded her judgement of Henry’s character which is ultimately vindicated by his adulterous elopement. The narrator never relates whether Sir Thomas recognizes his errors in this instance. He expresses regret at Edmund’s loss of Mary Crawford, whom he views as “in every thing but this despicable brother, would have been so eligible a connection” (355). Although the narrator is sure to add that “Sir Thomas [was] not in the secret of Miss Crawford’s character. Had he been privy to her conversation with his son, he would not have wished her to belong to him, though her twenty thousand pounds had been forty” (355-56). Once again, Sir Thomas desires Edmund’s marriage with Mary only for the eligibility of the connection, namely her twenty thousand pounds and does not see or care that they are not at all suited for each other. He never learns Mary’s true character and therefore never sees how he has misjudged her. His continued inability to properly read the others around him creates doubt that

he will improve much in the future. Rather than sharpening his faculties and continuing forward in his position as a powerful baronet, his solution seems to be to retreat within his small, desiccated family unit and escape the outside world. While his character does develop, he does not seem to act on his newfound knowledge. Instead, Fanny functions as the moral bedrock on which the feeble Sir Thomas can rely in order to ignore the corruption of the wider world, rather than an equal in going forward. By the end of *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas's re-education is half-hearted at best and ultimately stagnant.

Finally, Austen herself, through her characteristically subtle irony, expresses doubt over Sir Thomas's transformation. The narrator describes,

Fanny was indeed the daughter that he wanted. His charitable kindness had been rearing a prime comfort for himself. His liberality had a rich repayment, and the general goodness of his intentions by her, deserved it. He might not have made her childhood happier; but it had been an error of judgement only which had given him the appearance of harshness, and deprived him of her early love...In [Susan's] usefulness, in Fanny's excellence, in William's continued good conduct...doing credit to his countenance and aid, Sir Thomas saw repeated, and for ever repeated reason to rejoice in what he had done for them all. (MP 371-72)

A slight ironic tone comes through in Austen's vocabulary, particularly when describing Sir Thomas's "charitable kindness", his "liberality", "what he had done for them all". Readers have not come to expect "charitable kindness" and "liberality" from Sir Thomas or the others in the Bertram family and, indeed, they have not always shown either in firstly, their intentions in taking Fanny in as a child and secondly, their treatment of Fanny as a young woman. Modern readers especially may find it hard to forget Sir Thomas's assertion in the first chapter that Fanny is always to "remember that she is not a *Miss Bertram*" (9). Austen is right in her attempt to rehabilitate Sir Thomas by pointing out that he had a "general goodness" in his intentions. Her tone shifts here; instead of irony, she treats Sir Thomas mercifully and apologetically. His tyrannical behaviour, however, has occurred too frequently to believe it was "an error of

judgement only” that made him “appear” harsh. He really *is* harsh when he accuses Fanny of being selfish and ungrateful if she chooses not to marry Henry and when he exiles her to Portsmouth. If we are convinced by Johnson’s argument, that Sir Thomas only “dons the drapery of decency” becomes evident. He takes in a ward in order to help her achieve a better life, only to expect total obedience and submission from her and demands she accept a man she does not love but who is rich. He vows to take care of his ward’s frail health and wellbeing, and then sentences her to the dirty air of Portsmouth.³² Allowing her a fire in the East Room is viewed as an “indulgence” by his grateful niece; in reality, it is an act of common decency (252). He only “appears” to be harsh but allows Mrs. Norris’s degrading distinction between Fanny and the Bertram girls as well as her mental, emotional, and sometimes even physical abuse of Fanny.³³ Considering these examples, I am not convinced that Sir Thomas “deserved” this “prime comfort” or “rich repayment”. He delights in Susan, Fanny, and William only so far as they serve him in “usefulness” or in “doing credit” to his family name and reputation. Just like at the ball, compliments to the Price children gratify his vanity and self-importance. Austen may be trying not to be overly subversive or political in her final treatment of Sir Thomas, particularly because she needs a happy ending. She restores rather than overthrows him. She shows that the patriarch and the intellectual woman can work together. Britain does not need a revolution, merely a restructuring that integrates the two figures and comes to place a higher value on an

³² Austen understatedly (and rather comically) remarks half-way through Fanny’s time at Portsmouth, “Sir Thomas, had he known all, might have thought his niece in the most promising way of being starved, both mind and body, into a much juster value for Mr. Crawford...he would probably have feared to push his experiment farther, lest she might die under the cure” (324). Lew argues that “Austen makes clear, the very air of Portsmouth undermines Fanny’s health and could lead to her demise” (507). He draws on “epidemiology and modern statistical studies” that prove urban cities such as London and Paris (and in this case, Portsmouth) were “remarkably unhealthy places” (507).

³³ Fanny suffers from a bad headache after her aunts, Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris, force her to spend the day cutting roses and send her on several errands back and forth from the parsonage to the Park in the heat. Mrs. Norris then scolds her for being lazy and selfish when she sits on the sofa to relax (57-59).

intellectual female education. Overall, Sir Thomas's fate serves Austen's positioning of the intellectual woman and her need for a restorative ending, rather than reflecting his just desserts.

As for Edmund, he begins the novel as a compelling and kind hero, but as the narrative progresses, he becomes less worthy. This change occurs largely because of his role as "the dupe of Miss Crawford" (362). His blindness to her true character often makes him appear foolish and naïve. He begins as Fanny's teacher, but the student comes to be the master, and readers can only hope that Edmund will be guided by Fanny as they progress in their married life. While Edmund's mistaken opinion of Mary may be forgivable (and serves important plot functions), Austen does not redeem him when he learns the truth of her character. After Henry and Maria elope, Fanny wishes to know whether he has given up Mary, but Edmund is too anguished to speak of it at first: "He yielded [to the conviction], but it was with agonies, which did not admit of speech. Long, long would it be ere Miss Crawford's name passed his lips again, or [Fanny] could hope for a renewal of such confidential intercourse" (356). Austen then relates, "*It was* long. They reached Mansfield on Thursday, and it was not till Sunday evening that Edmund began to talk to her on the subject" (356). Once again, Austen's ironic tone comes through as she firstly emphasizes, with repetition, how "Long, long" Edmund feels it will be until he can speak of Mary, and then seems to agree with him in her assertion, "*It was* long". In her signature style, she promptly deflates his notion, telling readers that in reality, only two days pass before he broaches the subject. In seeming to agree with him, Austen subtly reveals Edmund's dramatic sense of his own suffering and portrays him as foolish and changeable. He lacks self-knowledge, which is a quality that Austen mocks consistently throughout her canon. She pokes such gentle fun at Edmund again a little later in the scene:

'I thank you for your patience, Fanny. This has been the greatest relief, and now we will have done.'

And such was Fanny's dependance on his words, that for five minutes she thought they *had* done. Then, however, it all came on again, or something very like it, and nothing less than Lady Bertram's rousing thoroughly up, could really close such a conversation. Till that happened, they continued to talk of Miss Crawford alone, and how she had attached him, and how delightful nature had made her, and how excellent she would have been, had she fallen into good hands earlier" (361).

Just as Edmund promises to be done with the subject and promises never to speak of it again, within a short "five minutes", he takes it up again, canvassing the same, exhausted topics.

Austen uses indirect discourse, taking on his voice when describing their subject matter such as "how she had attached him, and how delightful nature had made her, and how excellent she would have been", points Edmund has lectured on extensively throughout the novel. "They" continued to talk, but that Edmund is doing most of the speaking is clear. Although this fault is small, his changeableness suggests that Fanny cannot "depend" on "his word", questioning their future happiness as a married couple. On a larger scale, these foolish inconsistencies demonstrate that either Edmund is inconstant and melodramatic or that he does not know his own heart—or, perhaps, worryingly, both. Austen closes their conference with Edmund's vow:

[Fanny and Edmund] were also quite agreed in their opinion of the lasting effect, the indelible impression, which such a disappointment must make on his mind. Time would undoubtedly abate somewhat of his sufferings, but still it was a sort of thing which he never could get entirely the better of; and as to his ever meeting with any other woman who could—it was too impossible to be named but with indignation. (361)

Austen again employs indirect discourse to give readers Edmund's feelings as he, not the narrator, believes that his heartbreak will have a "lasting effect" and finds it "impossible" to imagine "meeting with any other woman". Yet, "*Scarcely* had he done regretting Mary Crawford, and observing to Fanny how impossible it was that he should ever meet with such another woman, before it began to strike him whether a very different kind of woman might not do just as well—or a great deal better" (369, emphasis added). Austen specifies that "Scarcely"

any time elapses between the transfer of Edmund's feelings but "purposely abstain[s] from dates on this occasion that every one may be at liberty to fix their own, aware that the cure of unconquerable passions, and the transfer of unchanging attachments, must vary much as to time in different people" (369). Auerbach finds that Austen banishes love from readers' minds here, in this "purposely" and humourously vague statement, and, indeed, there is nothing of love in the thought that another woman "might do just as well—or a great deal better"—the phrasing suggests convenience rather than passion. Austen treats Edmund's change of heart ironically by withholding a timeline and by contradictorily referring to the "cure" and "transfer" of "unconquerable passions" and "unchanging attachments". Clearly, Edmund's feelings are neither "unconquerable" nor "unchanging", which causes readers to wonder how constant he will be to Fanny and how genuine his love is for her. This description suggests an element of performativity to Edmund's love, as he plays the part of the heartbroken lover but his heart follows suit when it becomes more pleasant to care for Fanny instead of Mary. His attachment to Mary no longer seems genuine and his switch to Fanny may not be either. Considering the happy ending, I repeat the question John Hardy poses in *Jane Austen's Heroines*: "Given that the coming together of these two characters is made explicit in these terms, how confident are we invited to be of their future 'happiness'?" (58). I would answer that Austen's irony undermines our confidence in the union. Although it is possible that Edmund has actually loved Fanny all along and hence, his feelings easily change, a life with Fanny promises no more conflict or heartbreak. He rightly "acknowledge[s] Fanny's mental superiority...She was of course only too good for him; but...nobody minds having what is too good for them" (370). Edmund is clearly not Fanny's equal; she is his "superior". This fact makes up my claim that Austen is actively trying to find a happy ending for Fanny as she gets what she wants but not necessarily what she

deserves. Austen gives her the man she loves but he may not be the man who is truly worthy of her or with whom she can move forward or flourish as an intellectual woman. Their union is part of Austen's balancing act—it is necessary for the readers' romantic pay-off but it is communicated in such ambiguous terms that it simultaneously withholds gratification.

Mansfield Park is often considered a Cinderella story,³⁴ but even Austen herself seems uncertain about Fanny's happily ever after. The novel's closing paragraphs desire to assure readers of a fittingly happy ending:

With so much true merit and true love, and no want of fortune or friends, the happiness of the married cousins must appear as secure as earthly happiness can be.—Equally formed for domestic life, and attached to country pleasures, their home was the home of affection and comfort; and to complete the picture of good, the acquisition of Mansfield living by the death of Dr. Grant, occurred just after they had been married long enough to begin to want an increase of income, and feel their distance from the paternal abode an inconvenience. (372)

Fanny is elevated from the poor, ignored niece to a loved and valued daughter and wife. But, along with the previous discussion of Edmund's character, the uncertainty of Austen's language undermines the security of Fanny and Edmund's "earthly happiness". Until this point, the narrator's voice has been certain, claiming to have "the satisfaction of knowing" (362); however, she falters in her knowledge of the couple's happiness, only inferring that it "must appear" to be secure, not that it *is* secure. The description is also a "picture of good", drawing attention to its fictiveness and its status as a representation. It is a *portrayal* of happiness only. As I have shown, readers are invited to question the "true merit" and "true love" of Sir Thomas, Edmund and Mansfield in general. Despite her superior judgement and her many tribulations, Fanny continues to idealize Mansfield and the Bertram family, as Johnson points out. The novel's last lines state, "On that event they removed to Mansfield, and the parsonage there...soon grew as dear to her

³⁴ See essays by Janice C. Simpson and Norma Rowen for this reading and for discussions of fairy tale/folk tale motifs in Austen's works.

heart, and as thoroughly perfect in her eyes, as every thing else, within the view and patronage of Mansfield Park, had long been” (372). Again, Austen is trying to create a happy, idyllic ending for Fanny as she views the flawed and corrupt Mansfield as “dear” and “perfect”. The intellectual woman, whose perception is usually so penetrating, does not recognize the imperfections of Mansfield and does not break free from its bounds. Once again, Fanny gets what she wants—acceptance from the Mansfield family—but not what she deserves. Trilling finds that “Fanny’s loving praise of Mansfield, which makes the novel’s last word, does... encompass ironies. Of these ironies the chief is that Lady Bertram is part of the perfection” (433). These ironies mean that readers can never be truly satisfied by the ending. As Trilling, rather humourously, observes, Mansfield is not perfect and Fanny’s continued belief in its perfection is rather alarming. Austen’s claim that she restores the deserving characters to “tolerable comfort” accurately encompasses the state of Mansfield (362). Readers feel “tolerably” well about Fanny’s fate, but not completely convinced of her triumph. Austen never addresses whether the community at Mansfield becomes a platform or space for female intellectual expression. Hardy argues similarly that “Even in the final pages of the novel, scant allowance is made for Fanny’s presence as a person. Our final impression is that a lack of human responsiveness remains characteristic of Mansfield” (80). Fanny is therefore not integrated into the family at Mansfield but subsumed by its stagnation. Austen’s own family unit can serve as a model for the ideal space for encouraging female intellectuality and that she does not replicate it so suggests that Johnson’s feelings of dissatisfaction with the ending are justified.

As already touched on briefly in this chapter, Austen’s own family unit made up a unique community of intellectuals and fostered a collaborative atmosphere for creativity within the home. Austen’s earliest writings are dedicated to her family and were written, for the most part,

to entertain them, particularly her naval brothers, Frank and Charles, who were far away from home with a hard life at sea (Byrne 54, 59). Her idea that she could be a writer was not an unusual one in the Austen family—her brothers, James and Henry, began at periodical at Oxford called *The Loiterer*, Mrs. Austen wrote verses, James wrote plays for the family to perform, Cassandra drew, and even several of Austen's nieces and nephews began work on novels (67, 20, 136, 60, 291-92). This dynamic environment of rich creativity kindled in Austen and her family a “sheer joy of words” and comedy which is evident predominantly in Austen's juvenilia, but also in her novels (Byrne 59). Fergus writes in her biography that

What is most important about Austen's education at home is that she was surrounded by encouragement and approval. Her writing was valued and appreciated by a family that evidently shared and enriched her sense of the ridiculous...It was not a solitary spinning-out of unsanctioned fantasies and dreams. Austen's juvenilia arise from a deeply-felt sense of security and acceptance, a certainty of being valued and understood, a freedom her family gave her to relax into freaks and fancies, sports and nonsense. (38)

While Fergus is focusing on Austen's juvenilia specifically here, the novels and Austen's desire to be a published and professional writer were also products of this foundation. If Fanny was to be a writer (Patricia Rozema's film adaptation depicts her as one in its fusion of Austen and Fanny's characters), one can imagine that her works *would* be “a solitary spinning-out of unsanctioned fantasies and dreams” because of her isolation from her adoptive family. Olivia Murphy describes a similar sense of solitude and/or retreat in her discussion of Fanny's relationship with her books: “For Fanny books are a rare repository of personal autonomy and privacy, as well as a cipher through which she can safely express (if only to herself) her love for her cousin Edmund” (100). Thus, Fanny's experience with her books is deeply personal and solitary whereas Austen's relationship with books and her own writings is communal and dynamic. Both women use books and/or writing as a mode of expression but Fanny's expression

must remain hidden while Austen is free to express her opinions aloud to her family and circulate her works to them for further dialogue and discussion. Byrne points out that in Austen's early writings, "Because she was writing for herself and her family, she allowed herself a lack of restraint unthinkable in the published novels" (55). Clearly, Austen's family circle did not "restrain" her expression to fit into ideas of what a young lady 'should' be like the Bertrams do; instead, their family is figured as a safe space for expression. Readers may find it hard to imagine the self-absorbed Bertrams (certainly not Mrs. Norris) even taking the time to listen or read a piece written by Fanny. It is almost impossible to imagine them allowing her to write about and mock the societal conventions that uphold their very means of power and existence. Austen's genius was encouraged whereas Fanny's family, with the exception of Edmund, is oppressive and neglectful.

As well, Austen's father, the Reverend George Austen, as the family patriarch can be contrasted with the tyrannical Sir Thomas who expresses horror at any independence of thought in his women-folk. George Austen took pride in his daughter's aspirations to be a writer, spending time and money to help her achieve her goal. Austen had three vellums notebooks into which she copied her juvenilia in fair hand. The second volume was "a gift from my father" (Byrne 53). Inside the notebook is a "note of paternal pride" written by George Austen: "Effusions of Fancy by a Very Young Lady consisting of Tales in a Style entirely new" (53-54). He also purchased a portable writing desk for her nineteenth birthday on which Austen wrote her novels, both at home and when she was travelling (267). He allowed both Jane and Cassandra a "room of their own" where they kept books, their workboxes, Jane's piano, and her writing desk (55). In 1797, George Austen wrote to publishers Cadell and Davies to offer *First Impressions*, the early version of *Pride and Prejudice*. Unlike other fathers of the period, George

Austen actively tried to help his daughter achieve her dreams of publishing (although this particular offer was rejected) despite the fact that women writers were often condemned for publication (Fergus 12). Fergus describes, “George Austen’s fondness seems to have permitted him to enter imaginatively but not possessively into his children’s feelings. The ‘happiness of the child’ is paramount, not parental authority” (31). Sir Thomas, on the other hand, repeatedly displays that his parental authority is more important than the ‘happiness of the child’ and only cares for his children’s behaviour because it reflects on him. In comparing the two families, the Austens can clearly function as an example of a microcosmic community where female intellectuality and expression is fostered and welcomed. The depleted, solitary, disgraced Mansfield family never quite becomes this ideal space where women can contribute to serious public discourses or a platform where their intellectuality is channelled for this purpose. Robert L. Mack quotes the philosopher R.G. Collingwood to explain Austen’s unique environment: “Genius...is not produced *in vacuo*; on the contrary, it never arises except in social surroundings so exquisitely fitted to produce it that its voice seems almost the impersonal voice of these surroundings themselves” (33). Austen’s talent was created by and thrived in her family home and community. Mack’s point, along with Fergus’s, is that Austen’s genius was sustained by the environment around her; it was nurtured and encouraged. The tainted “social surroundings” of Mansfield and continued unworthiness of Sir Thomas and Edmund, in contrast, suggests that Fanny does not find such a space for her talents to be cultivated. Thus, such a supposedly happy ending is dissatisfying as, while Austen attempts to find a solution for Fanny, readers are left with the pervading sense of ““vague disquiet”” that something is still rotten in Mansfield Park (Fergus quoting Carolyn G. Heilbrun 165). Margaret Anne Doody perhaps best articulates

readers' last response: "In the last lines the imagined 'perfection' of Mansfield and its parsonage must content us, even though we know we are being fobbed off with a lie" (179).

The Novel

While Austen does not propose a solution for Fanny, her own solution is the medium of the novel. Cowper contributes to public debates about the nature and purpose of education through a poem, Wollstonecraft does so through a political tract that addresses and refutes others' arguments while forwarding her own and Austen writes a novel that fictionalizes the ill effects of the current system of education while in order to demonstrate the potential of the intellectual woman. Austen was a stout defender of the novel as a form and most famously takes up its defense in *Northanger Abbey*. She calls it the medium "in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language" (*Northanger Abbey* 60). Novel reading was a great favourite in the Austen family. Jane once described them as "great Novel-readers and not ashamed of being so" (Byrne 78). But Austen had her own firm ideas about what a novel should be. Firstly, she believed that fiction should be entertaining. In her novels, she is famous for her "characteristic irony" (Trilling 423). She makes readers laugh with her ironic tone, her foolish characters, and her adept observations of manners. Modern readers often criticize Austen for always ending her novels with marriage (sometimes even double weddings), but as Fergus explains, "Austen has chosen comedy as her form. Comedy demands marriage" (82). Austen's choice of comedy stems from her earliest inclinations to pick up the pen. As previously discussed, Austen began writing at a young age for the amusement of her family. She often made them laugh by reading her

works out loud³⁵ or sending them via letter to her brothers at sea (Byrne 56). In her earliest writings, Austen's delight in anything ridiculous is on full display. Even in her early teens, she was "a supreme social satirist" and wrote mostly "lampoons, burlesques, or parodies", the point of which is to copy "or caricature the style or spirit of serious works so as to excite laughter, often by ludicrous exaggeration" (56). Her target is often novels of sentiment and sensibility which she finds to be ridiculous because they are so untrue to real life. Since Austen intended to make her readers laugh, she "deliberately avoided overt religious instruction", despite being "deeply religious herself" (Fergus 36) and she "disliked vehemently" conservative and didactic writers like Jane West and Hannah More (Byrne 87, 203). Austen's works are "essentially heroine-centred novels of courtship, not conduct books disguised as novels... They are coming-of-age novels... The heroine is not taught a lesson: she learns from her own mistakes" (88). Thus, for Austen, the novel should amuse and tell a story; it should not preach a sermon. Writers whose plots were actually thinly veiled lessons in proper behaviour were neither clever nor worthy for Austen. Wollstonecraft may be fully in her right to write a tract as a philosopher, but an author's job is not to lecture. Instead, Austen focuses on the flaws and follies of her characters, the inconsistencies of the human character that are bound to make readers laugh, if not for their recognizability than for their ridiculousness.

Another important aspect of Austen's conception of the novel is realism. She believed fiction should depict life as it really was and people as they really are, rather than idealized portraits. As Fergus points out, through her youthful parodies, Austen develops "her sense of what fiction should be", particularly in opposition to what she read in the popular novels of her time (53). By mocking the typical conventions of literature, "she was staking out her essentially

³⁵ Austen continued this practice when *Pride and Prejudice* was published, reading it aloud to her women friends at home, and even voiced dissatisfaction with her mother for not properly expressing the dialogue (283).

realistic territory” (51). She “laugh[ed] at conventional notions of women”, which added to her comedy, but she also subjected female characters to two tests: “first, that of reality (do women act this way?), and second, that of reason (should they act this way?)” (52). Austen wanted to show realistic women, not society’s ideal standard of feminine behaviour or the overly emotional, fainting women of sentimental novels. She preferred the anti-heroines of Fanny Burney—“characters who were neither wholly good nor wholly evil, but true to life” (Byrne 81). Austen responds with similarly realistic heroines and subject matter in her own novels. Austen’s advice to her niece, Anna, who was writing a novel, is frequently quoted by critics and biographers as it reveals her commitment to realism. She advises her to keep her characters and plot “natural” and even crossed out scenes she thought were unrealistic (291). She instructed Anna not to change settings to Ireland because she did not know the manners and customs there and thus would be out of her depth as well as to be sure she fully develops her characters before introducing new ones (Fergus 150). Instead, for the young Anna, “3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on”, because it a subject with which she is familiar (2). Unlike the Gothic novels of the day, Austen believed an author should write about scenarios and settings in which they felt comfortable because it ensured that their depictions would be realistic since they were drawn from real life experience and observation. Austen’s use of realism in her own works led to Sir Walter Scott’s famous praise of her as the first novelist to depict “the current of ordinary life...[she presents to readers] a correct and striking representation of that which is daily taking place around him...The subjects are not often elegant, and certainly never grand; but they are finished up to nature and with a precision which delights the reader” (Byrne quoting Scott 9). In this way, Austen reforms her contemporary’s notions about novels by pursuing her own style,

proving that common, ordinary life and fully human characters can be subjects for the novel rather than sentiment or terror.

Finally, Austen brings these two elements of comedy and realism together to write novels of sense, rather than sensibility. Although perhaps spoken mostly in jest, Austen's remark to Cassandra that *Pride and Prejudice* is "rather too light & bright & sparkling; it wants shade...it wants to be stretched out here & there with a long Chapter—of sense" (Le Faye 203) tells us about her ideas of the novel. Its purpose is to both take on the "shade" of our world and to instill "sense" into its readers. This is not to say she believed that a few pages of sermon should be inserted throughout the plot, as she jokingly suggested to her nephew, James Edward, but they should not be all "light & bright & sparkling" either (Byrne 292). Certainly, novels should entertain; however, incorporating realism into the comedy means that they can also contain some seriousness of purpose as they can be used to make social commentary in a funny and amusing way. In a similar way as poetry which lashes out at vice and folly, the novel can contribute to serious public discourses. Mary Poovey writes in her essay on what she calls Austen's "nonreferential aesthetic", which will be discussed in more detail shortly, that Austen "did not want literary writing to be a political engine, nor did she want simply to provide escapist fantasies for her readers...The aesthetic she developed...constituted an engagement with the social situation that her readers could experience but not find distressing" (260). Her novels do not recommend a course of action but they do show the consequences of a particular course of action. They may not be vehicles for political messages but they do reveal truths about the political system and social structures. Like Henry Fielding, Austen viewed humour as possessing the potential to serve the important function of "exposing moral and social hypocrisy"; thus, comedy and criticism are not mutually exclusive (Byrne 56). Readers can choose to read

Austen's novels in two ways, as fluffy romantic comedies or as serious social critiques. Both interpretations are legitimate. It would miss the point to suggest they are only one or the other. This unity of humour and critique is at play in *Mansfield Park*, although it is usually considered the least comic of her works. I do not believe that it is absent, but the novel is certainly imbued with all the "shade" she thought her previous work lacked. Perhaps because it was the first novel written in her adulthood, *Mansfield Park* is where Austen most overtly enters into public discourses, thereby transforming typical conceptions of the function of the novel.

Like Cowper before her, Austen invests a discussion about education into her medium of choice, the novel. Cowper is a poet so he chooses to express himself in verse, but Austen is a novelist and therefore fictionalizes her views through what Poovey calls her "nonreferential aesthetic" as well as characterization. Poovey argues that many readers are unaware of the political implications of Austen's texts because her "narrative system" allowed her to "register and to deflect attention away from historical realities, [deemphasize] the capacity of language to refer to actual events, and [stress] instead the medium of representation itself" (252). In other words, Austen is able to both hide and discuss "historical realities" by embedding them subtly in her narrative and then distracting attention away from them. Poovey claims that Austen achieves this by neutralizing references to contentious topics (for example, in *PP*, the militia's presence should invoke the war in France, but their behaviour within the text "discourages readers from referring Austen's passages to real military men"), directing the reader's attention away from certain sub-plots and information, and, finally, by "recasting" and "translating" anxiety-ridden social issues into terms that serve the domestic plot (252-53). Thus, when financial troubles actually threaten the Bennet family, Austen quells fears by transforming "the fiscal jeopardy the Bennet girls face into a romantic threat, which...can be solved within the domestic plot...

Darcy's actions neutralize the threat that a monetary obligation would have posed...by translating debt into a gift of love" (253-54). In this way, while readers have been actively engaging with prominent and potentially unsettling social problems of the day (such as marginalized women like Austen who face poverty and destitution), the romance plot resolves such problems within the narrative. Austen employs a similar narrative system in *Mansfield Park*, although perhaps not as subtly. By having Mansfield symbolize Britain and the family function as a microcosmic space for the hierarchical social structure of England, Austen is able to comment on the marginalization of the intellectual woman and her unfair exclusion from public discourses and power while appearing to focus only on an individual family. Through the Bertrams' abusive treatment of Fanny, Austen reflects on the position of women and the way that intellectual women are devalued. The ending of the novel with the patriarch's apparent acceptance of Fanny is intended to restore the injustice that Austen has exposed; however, as I have argued, readers may not necessarily feel reassured. The romance plot, Fanny's marriage to Edmund, appears to resolve her mistreatment because she gets her happy ending but it does not carve out a space for intellectual women in public discussions, the ongoing issue on which Austen wishes to shed light; rather, it deflects attention away from it. Furthermore, Austen uses characters to make her arguments: "When Austen writes about ideas...she does so by creating memorable characters, not by writing sermons. Her sympathy for abolition may be inferred not only from what she writes in her letters...but also from the pro-slavery associations of two of her most monstrous characters, Mrs. Norris³⁶ and Mrs. Elton [of *Emma*]" (Byrne 7). Just so, Sir Thomas represents aristocratic, patriarchal power and authority. Mary Crawford and Bertram girls exemplify the results of an accomplished education—the acceptable type of female

³⁶ Even in the "monstrous" villain Mrs. Norris, Austen's comedy is present, such as when she "sponges" goodies from Sotherton and when she makes off with the curtain from the theatrical as "she happened to be particularly in want of green baize" (*MP* 84, 153).

intelligence that is curtailed towards manners and marriage. Henry Crawford displays the irresponsibility of aristocrats and the danger his charm presents to wrongly educated women like Maria and Julia. Edmund stands for male lovers who would rather be the dupes of a Miss Crawford than recognize the value of an intellectual woman. Finally, Fanny encompasses Austen's ideal education, one that cultivates in women (and men) the devalued qualities of quietness, stillness, and reflection. She also demonstrates the effects of society's treatment of women with such an education. Fanny is intelligent and possesses sharper judgement than those around her, but she often doubts it or is silenced because of an arbitrary structure of power that places Sir Thomas at the head of the family despite his ineptitude. She is ignored, mistreated, and reviled by her adoptive family. In this way and through the actions and motivations of her characters, Austen integrates a social critique of education and women's exclusion from public spaces into her narrative; however, true to her nonreferential aesthetic, the novel also remains a fictional story of a young girl who stays true to her own heart amidst adversity to eventually marry her true love.

In *Mansfield Park*, Austen counters popular conceptions of the novel by using it as a medium for to contribute her own views to public discourses on education. She reveals that the novel can be entertaining while also having intellectual value and by doing so, asks for a different kind of literacy. *Mansfield Park* is like Fanny herself: serious and intellectually stimulating. There is not a lot of action; it does not engage in 'cheap thrills' or easy gratification like the Crawfords. The reading experience of *Mansfield Park* also mirrors our own engagement with Fanny. As Trilling points out, readers are firstly charmed by the Crawfords and repulsed by Fanny, but upon second reading, the Crawfords' insincerity becomes increasingly apparent and they are struck with Fanny's quiet strength. Similarly, *Mansfield Park* has not been given the

preference but, upon deeper reflection, its merits can be recognized. In this way, Austen requires her readers to be not just intelligent but intellectual novel readers, as Fanny is herself. Like the Bertrams, they too must learn to value a different kind of woman and a different kind of novel. Her ambiguous ending too plays a part in this project—in withholding a typically satisfactory conclusion, she forces readers to question what sort of outcome and what sort of pleasure they expect from a novel. By privileging female intellectualism and reforming female education, Austen also reforms the novel, revealing its own intellectual capabilities and potential social impact. Austen effectively sets the stage for the Victorian novel which, through the social problem novel, adeptly raised public awareness of pressing social issues and was an important platform for women to add their voices to the conversation.

The Jane Austen Education

In 1883, Anne Thackeray Ritchie wrote that Jane Austen “reinvented the experience of novel reading” by making “a simple discovery, that of reality, that of speaking from the heart”, transforming reading into “an encounter with ‘new selves’” (Lynch 162-163). *Mansfield Park* is the result of such a discovery and truly countered the cultural conception of novels as trivial. It develops an argument for a different kind of pleasure than the romantic indulgence of sentimental novels and demands that readers encounter “a new self” through reading.

Considering the similarities between Austen and Fanny, I have suggested that Austen employs her heroine to explore and critique the treatment of female intellectuals in the public sphere, positioning the family as a site of training for future public engagement. In contrast to Mary Crawford who represents the accomplished female, Fanny models an intellectual form of feminine intelligence and interiority, capable of thinking for herself and adhering to her principles. While Austen struggles to find a permanent space for Fanny where she can freely and

productively engage in public discourses, her ultimate solution is the novel itself. In this way, Austen reforms the function of the novel, offering it as an intellectual tool and a serious platform with which to speak and reflect on public issues. She anticipates the Victorian novel in asking readers to contemplate both a different kind of woman and novel reading experience. In order to enjoy Fanny and *Mansfield Park*, readers must give them time and space to speak, learn to listen sensitively and patiently, and not expect to be immediately charmed in order to be more deeply impressed. To change her readers' perspectives is the real Jane Austen education.

Conclusion

In *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen created a heroine and a novel imbued with all the “shade” she thought her previous novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, lacked (Le Faye 203). By doing so, she sought to change perceptions not only of women’s place within public discussion but also of the novel. Like her predecessors, Cowper and Wollstonecraft, Austen turned to the power of the pen to express her views on a ‘hot topic’ of public conversation—education. This thesis has examined the multiple forms that writers employed to engage with public issues. Austen’s favourite poet, William Cowper, used verse as the traditional, masculine mode of generating argumentative discourse about the public school system which he believed was responsible for the corruption of England’s school boys. The legendary Mary Wollstonecraft declared herself a female philosopher by writing a political tract that radically claimed citizenship and equality for women. Yet, Austen’s own reconfiguring of the novel is just as radical because it transforms supposedly a trivial and, in some ways, safe form into dangerous reading material, capable of not only representing female experience, but also of effecting change in cultural consciousness. I hope to have shown with this thesis that domestic fiction is not merely sentimental, escapist ‘fluff’ and that a work does not have to be either entirely political or entirely entertaining—the best, in fact, can be both. As well, despite the pervasive belief in the eighteenth century that women were mentally incapable of serious public contribution, writers such as Wollstonecraft and Austen proved that they were, in reality, integral to shaping the cultural moment. Purposely or not, *Mansfield Park* challenges the ignorance that men rely on to maintain women’s subordination. It asks women to recognize the insincerity and superficiality of a Mary Crawford and to choose instead to be a Fanny Price.

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