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Unsexing Austen:
A Response to Leona Toker*

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Leona Toker uses Thorstein Veblen's analysis of the leisure class to account for the economic and social dynamics within *Mansfield Park*. In so doing, Toker introduces a new term, "invidious sexuality," to bridge the gap between Veblen's theory and Austen's plot. Toker asserts that the most aggressive and assertive characters in the novel, Henry and Mary Crawford, attempt to gain status and esteem by competing "for sexual power, both inside and outside the marriage market" (232). According to Toker, the sexual behavior of Henry and Mary has all the marks of the primitive "predatory culture" (226) that, following Veblen's analysis, has characterized the actions of the privileged classes since the advent of modernity. Work, according to Veblen, has always been regarded as a mark of social and economic inferiority; thus, aristocrats and industrialists have cultivated an image of luxury and leisure, obsessively advertising their excessive wealth through their extravagant consumption of resources and their conspicuous avoidance of labor. Henry and Mary attempt to secure their superiority in an analogous way: they obsessively show off their excessive ability to attract the attentions and affections of the opposite sex to display their superior standing in the competition for mates that, in *Mansfield Park*, occupies almost all the characters.

In Henry's case, attracting women appears to be an end in itself, a performance of his expertise in the arts of flirtation at which others—Mr. Rushworth, for example—are pathetically inept. Mary, however, mobilizes her "conspicuous sexual charisma" in order to pursue a

*Reference: Leona Toker, "Conspicuous Leisure and Invidious Sexuality in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*," *Connotations* 11.2-3 (2001/2002): 222-40.

more orthodox Veblerian aim (226). According to Toker, Mary wishes not only to showcase her comparatively superior attractions, but also to use those attractions to gain a politically and monetarily "advantageous" marriage. This kind of mercenary marriage is the one for which Mary becomes "the main and most unabashed spokesperson" in the novel, as she disregards the motives of love and companionship that drive Fanny and Edmund (231). Her aim to maximize her "sexual power" (232) thus coincides with her aims to gain the three assets that Veblen argues the leisure class most covets: increased status, increased regard, and increased wealth.

Toker makes it seem as if Mary has fully subordinated her sexual desire as well as any hopes for romance, affection, and emotional attachment to her quest for economic and social gain (230-31). The term "invidious sexuality," which Toker uses to describe the way Mary "extend[s] invidious emulation to the war of all against all in marriage matters," works to construct Mary's sexuality as merely a tool for accumulating status (232). This construction of sexuality derives from Veblen's theoretical framework, which Toker uses to analyze *Mansfield Park*. Veblen devotes a substantial amount of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* to the relation between the sexes, but within his *Theory*, Veblen asserts that the institution of marriage serves only one end: to help men increase their displays of conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption. Wives, according to Veblen, are like servants and courtiers in that "being fed and countenanced by their patron they [become] indices of his rank and vicarious consumers of his superfluous wealth" (Veblen 77). Likewise, modern housewives direct their efforts "under the guidance of traditions that have been shaped by the law of conspicuously wasteful expenditure of time and substance" (Veblen 82). Veblen's analysis of marriage as an instrument of economic display and social status-making retains its bite as an account of gender relations both in the past and today, but it leaves little room for sexual desire as a primary impetus that drives those relations. In adopting Veblen's social theories, Toker thus also repeats Veblen's inability to see men and women's sexual relations in any

terms other than the "invidious emulation" that takes the form of the constant, mercenary striving for social status.

Many characters within *Mansfield Park*, and many within Jane Austen's whole corpus, indeed conceive of sexual relations as solely a vehicle for financial and social gain. In addition to Mary Crawford, Toker also points to Maria Bertram, who "eventually falls a victim to marriage in the service of Mammon" (231), and Sir Thomas Bertram, who although he married for love himself, pays constant and close attention to the economic and social implications of his dependents' romantic choices. Veblen's ideas about status competition explain the behavior of characters in other Austen novels as well; Toker mentions Lucy Steele, in *Sense and Sensibility*, who disregards her engagement to Edward Ferrars to make a more advantageous match with his brother Robert. Charlotte Lucas, William Collins, and Lady de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice* likewise participate in the marriage market as if status and wealth, not love, affection, or sex, were the only things at stake. The famous first sentence of that novel testifies to the relevance of Veblen's work for scholars of Austen, and Toker's article thoughtfully models how Veblen's analysis of the privileges and ambitions of the leisure class can be used to bring to the fore the status-consciousness and competitiveness that underlies the typical Austenian marriage plot.

Yet as the first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* also shows, Austen's novels do not concern themselves only with the pursuit of "good fortune"; they also concern themselves with the sexual desire that usually lies at the heart of what makes a man "want" a wife. Toker and Veblen imagine desire in only one way, as desire for power and distinction, a view that many characters in Austen's novels also put forth. But despite the fact that the relations between Mary and Edmund, Fanny and Edmund, and Maria and Henry in *Mansfield Park* remain steeped in conventionality, manners, and ideology, those relations are also replete with sexual desire. Mary certainly finds Edmund to be desirable for reasons that have nothing to do with the aims of predatory culture: "Without his being a man of the world or

an elder brother, without any of the arts of flattery or the gaieties of small talk, he began to be agreeable to her. She felt it to be so, though she had not foreseen and could hardly understand it" (Austen 56). Schooled in judging a man solely in terms of whether he is a wealthy "elder brother" and a socially adept "man of the world," Mary's "felt" attraction to Edmund at this point remains illegible to her; it is an affect she can "hardly understand." Her desire for Edmund can neither be explained nor read in the worldly terms of status competition in which Mary usually comprehends her motivations and on which Toker focuses exclusively. Instead, her desire can only be registered in terms of an emotional drive that must be "felt" but cannot be immediately understood rationally.

Mary seems to continue to try to focus solely on her predatory aims as she goes on vigilantly trying to prevent herself from avowing her attraction to Edmund. Mary knows that her attachment to him cannot be aligned with her mercenary motives. She reacts to this knowledge, however, by attempting to guide her behavior by her motives, not her attachment. Her rational, mercenary impulses seem to express themselves most forcefully when Edmund's older brother, Tom, appears as if he is about to die from an illness. "Poor young man!" Mary writes in a letter to Fanny, "If he is to die, there will be *two* poor young men less in the world; and with a fearless face and bold voice would I say to any one, that wealth and consequence could fall into no hands more deserving of them" (Austen 358). Mary goes on to fantasize about Tom's death and Edmund's consequent elevation in rank and wealth, asking Fanny "whether 'Sir Edmund' would not do more good with all the Bertram property, than any other possible 'Sir'" (Austen 358).

Mary's fantasies here appear to prove Toker's point about the dominance within Mary's character of predatory impulses: Mary wishes Tom to die so that she can then marry a wealthy, entitled Edmund. Yet Mary's fantasies constitute the opposite of the rational, status-minded calculations that, according to Veblen, dominate in predatory culture. Her quasi-murderous desire in fact reveals the

almost insurmountable contradiction she feels between her predatory impulses and her affections. If she did not desire Edmund in his own right, she could easily give him up to focus on a wealthier eligible mate, yet cannot rid herself of her strong erotic attachment to Edmund. Instead, she can only hope that Tom dies so that her erotic desire and her calculations no longer have to stand in opposition to one another. The very inappropriateness and extremity of the quasi-murderous wish, moreover, signifies the irrational nature of this non-predatory affection. She possesses impulses that exceed the calculated and controlled motives by which Austen's characters so frequently conduct themselves, desires that, following Freud, constitute erotic drives possessing anarchic qualities and irrepressible strength.

With Elizabeth Bennet and her love for Darcy, Austen represents feminine sexuality in a way that shows a woman's potentially excessive erotic desires and her more mundane needs for income and status as, at least, mutually reinforcing drives if not completely and complexly entangled ones. Yet as the case of Mary suggests, sexual desire—the desire not just for money, but also for a particular erotic object—might stand as a central component for an understanding of the behavior of at least this one of Austen's characters. Toker compiles a list of the reactions Austen elicits, including phantasmatic nostalgia for ideological stability, aesthetic appreciation of her style and technique, simple antiquarian interest, and resentment towards her obsession with the concerns of the mannered leisure class. There are several reactions Toker leaves out, including recent critics' investment in the subversive or even revolutionary aspects of Austen's fiction, but the most obvious is also the most telling in terms of the blind spots in Toker's analysis: the reader's desire for a *romantic* narrative, one that shows characters flirting, attracting one another, refusing overtures and then acquiescing to them. According to Joseph Litvak, Austen's narratives create pleasures that exceed the satisfactions one gains from witnessing the main characters settling into a socially and economically acceptable marriage:

> Novels such as *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma* obviously have to conduct their heroines (and their readers) toward the triumphant genital heterosexuality enshrined in the institution of marriage, but, as critics have shown, the very plotting of that development through a progression of proto-Freudian "phases" at least affords their heroines (and their readers) variously perversely "pregenital" and/or nonprocreative excitations. (Litvak 24)

Austen's novels, through their marriage plots, represent and satirize the mercenary motives within a certain segment of the English upper class, but at the same time show the limitations of those motives by providing a variety of "excitations" of an altogether different nature.

In showing the attraction of the sexes in Austen's narratives as to some extent independent of the operations of predatory culture that Toker lays out, I do not mean to assert that sexuality, in Austen's novels, in other texts or in culture in general, stands outside the social and economic ideologies within which it articulates itself. Instead, I am resisting the particular theoretical construct Toker uses to analyze *Mansfield Park*, for it posits a social field in which only one drive exists: the drive to gain and conspicuously display one's advantages over others in terms of wealth, status, and regard. I am suggesting that interpreting Austen's work necessitates a more wide-ranging approach, or at least one that can account for the centrality of both the erotic and socioeconomic drives that motivate her narratives. Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* articulates one such an approach. In her book, Armstrong argues that throughout its history, the English novel has used the figure of the desirable female to help construct a dominant middle-class identity and consolidate the middle-class's power.[1] While Veblen implies that erotic relations serve mainly as screens for optimizing individuals' social and economic power, Armstrong, following Michel Foucault, analyzes sexual desire as a primary human drive, albeit one that has always already been co-opted and directed by power. For Armstrong, sexuality cannot be analyzed as if it exists independent of ideology, yet sexuality can also not be *reduced* to ideology: it remains an inescapable aspect of human existence, although this very inescapability makes it an effective vehicle for ideology.

For Toker, Mary's aggressive desires signify only her aggressiveness within a predatory culture that pushes individuals constantly toward competitive and "invidious" behavior. Armstrong's conceptual framework, however, allows for a more complex interpretation of Mary's sexuality. Mary's conflicting erotic pulls—toward both the truly affectionate and morally upright person of Edmund and the riches and status she would like her husband to augment—indicate the way in which ideology, in Austen, follows the currents of sexual desire. Armstrong asserts that novels tended to promote a particular version of the "desirable female" as a mechanism to instill in readers the sense that middle-class values, such as truthfulness, modesty, economy, and efficiency, which were manifested by the heroines of many English novels, held a superior place in society to the aristocratic traits of display, luxury, and lavishness (Armstrong 3-27). While Armstrong focuses on the way that middle-class ideology used men's erotic attraction to women to help solidify a sense of middle-class identity as distinct from and opposed to a "degenerate" aristocratic culture, the case of Mary Crawford shows that *female* desire also could be made to serve similar purposes. Mary's conflict between her "good" attraction to Edmund as he is and her "bad" desire to make him into a wealthier, more prominent figure reflects the larger structure of the novel, which presents a conflict between the middle-class values embodied by Fanny and Edmund and the aristocratic sensibilities displayed by such characters as Henry, Tom, Yates, and Mary herself, when she is on her worst behavior.

As the love object of both Mary and Fanny, the two main female characters in the novel, Edmund becomes the focus of feminine desire. And the moral and social qualities he represents—qualities of honesty, sincerity, and uprightness, associated with the middle class—become desirable precisely because, embodied within him, they become objectified erotically. Toker argues that the "liberal" companionate love that the novel idealizes in Edmund and Fanny's marriage stands in part as a manifestation of the peaceable pursuits with which, according to Veblen, the industrious, workman-like

elements of society occupy themselves. Toker is thus concerned less with the "love," in any erotic sense, between Edmund and Fanny than with the couple's "attitudes toward labor and leisure" (231), since those attitudes differentiate the couple from the purely mercenary motives that drive the rest of the members of the leisure class in the novel. I certainly agree with Toker that, despite Austen's portrayal of mercenary marriages as problematically deviating from the ideal norm of companionate love, historically, it was Austen's norm that was in fact progressive and transgressive in an era in which the aristocratic political and financial maneuvering still dominated. Yet Toker, finally, sees relationships only according to the either "peaceable" or "invidious" modes of social organization Veblen analyzes; her vision leaves out the fact that the most important relationships in the novel present themselves as *primarily* erotic, no matter how disciplined and moderate that eroticism usually appears, and that social and political ideology must articulate itself, to use the Freudian term, through the medium of the characters' cathexes.

To clarify my point, I think it is useful to contextualize Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* within the literary field of turn-of-the-century American literature. Veblen's depiction of a social world wholly and exclusively consumed with competitive, invidious behavior has perhaps its most powerful literary expression in the novels of Theodore Dreiser, who wrote his first novel, *Sister Carrie*, in 1900, a year after Veblen published his *Theory*. Toker's analysis of Mary Crawford could very well apply to the main character of Dreiser's novel, for Carrie's desires do indeed appear primarily to be for status and money. Carrie views marriage and sex first and foremost as a way of gaining, financially and socially. Like Veblen, Dreiser tends to marginalize the erotic as a primary drive within human society; his later novels, *The Financier* (1912) and *The Titan* (1914) take their titles from the world of corporations and high finance, not the domestic world associated with emotion and love. By contrast, Austen's novels concern themselves principally with those very domestic and romantic relations that, by 1900 in America, had begun to take on a somewhat

subordinate status within the literary field. By taking a theorist from the turn of the twentieth century and applying his ideas to Austen's novels, Toker constructs Austen in the image of a naturalist, distorting the dominant role played by erotic relationships in *Mansfield Park*.

I do not want to play down the fact that issues of economics and social status constitute a major theme in Austen's novels. Of course, economic concerns run throughout Austen's narratives; indeed, almost every novel from the rise of that form is concerned with the twin desires for money as well as sex. Yet it is also true that the roles that these two desires play within novels change between Austen's time and Veblen's. Veblen wrote *The Theory of the Leisure Class* at a moment when capitalism had succeeded in consolidating its power over American culture. Dreiser's novels, like those of, for example, Frank Norris, focused relentlessly on characters' consumption and attempts to amass wealth because those drives had come to dominate individuals' lives in an unprecedented way. While sexual relationships are ever present in these texts, naturalist novels direct themselves to subjects who had come to see themselves primarily engaged in the competitive struggle for economic resources and social status that Veblen analyzes in his *Theory* rather than in a quest for the perfect sexual mate. As the capitalist system took hold through the course of the nineteenth century, forcing people to understand themselves in terms of consumption, competitive advantage, and economic assets, the relative importance of sexuality, as a distinct, independent desire motivating subjects, declined within the texts that circulated within and represented that culture.

Austen wrote her novels in a very different social and economic world. The period of capitalist ascendancy that came to fruition by the end of the nineteenth century was in the process of decisively articulating itself against aristocratic power in the early 1800s. As Armstrong argues, Austen, like many novelists of her time, played a key role in the eventual success of capitalist, middle-class culture by constructing the values inherent to that culture's self-representation as appealing; at the time, these values included honesty, forthright-

ness, frugality, and scrupulous morality. Austen uses the currents of sexual desire in *Mansfield Park*, which eventually flow almost exclusively toward Edmund and Fanny, to make such values desirable. For Austen, in other words, erotic drives stand as the primary desires with which her audience can identify. Her texts direct themselves to an audience that recognizes sexual relationships as entwined with, but finally more cognitively important than, the competition and struggle that, at the time, characterized aristocratic power relations.

William Dean Howells famously saw Veblen's *Theory* as a commentary on contemporary American society that to some extent disguises itself as a more objective analysis of the socioeconomic history of Western civilization.[2] In her article, Toker does not seriously grapple with the possibility that Veblen wrote principally about and in response to the particular economic and social circumstances of turn-of-the-century America, instead taking at face value his argument that conspicuous consumption, conspicuous leisure, and invidious emulation have been the defining aspects of human society since it began. In so doing, she throws valuable light on the logic of status competition within Austen's texts, which does indeed follow closely along the lines Veblen draws. Yet by following Veblen, Toker also mirrors his blind spots, not leaving room in her analysis for the centrality of erotic drives within social relationships. Many texts no doubt exist in which sexuality only serves as a tool for invidious comparison, but no matter how status- and money-obsessed the characters within *Mansfield Park* appear, unlike in the novels of Veblen's contemporaries, sexual desire remains a more central drive than the pursuit of wealth and prominence. *Mansfield Park* is no *Sister Carrie* or *McTeague*; it does not either illustrate or expand on Veblen's thesis as well as those texts by Veblen's fellow naturalists. It is, after all, dominated by a marriage plot, not a plot of economic accumulation.

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NOTES

[1]Armstrong writes: "In demonstrating that the rise of the novel hinged upon a struggle to say what made a woman desirable, then, I will be arguing that much more was at stake. I will consider this redefinition of desire as a decisive step in producing the densely interwoven fabric of common sense and sentimentality that even today ensures the ubiquity of middle-class power" (4-5).

[2]Howells writes that Veblen's theory best explains the "evolution of the American magnate," all but ignoring Veblen's attempt to analyze human society as a whole. For Howells, the narrative of status competition Veblen produces captures a distinctly American phenomenon: "it sums up and includes in itself the whole American story: the relentless will, the tireless force, the vague ideal, the inexorable destiny, the often bewildered acquiescence" (361).

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