

Conspicuous Leisure and Invidious Sexuality in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*

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Twenty-first century readers are as divided on the subject of Jane Austen as their predecessors were for almost two centuries (see Halperin). Some are attracted to her novels out of antiquarian interests or because these novels offer an imaginative escape into a world that produces the (somewhat misleading) impression of cultural stability and order, with the same sets of significance and biographical patterns transmitted from one generation to the next.¹ Others appreciate her novels for their more purely aesthetic achievement—the subtlety of the style and technique, the coherence of character psychology, and the wit of plot construction. Yet still others—including some of those students of literature for whom her novels are a matter of a compulsory syllabus rather than of choice—resent the preoccupation with characters whose only occupation is visiting, parties, promenades, and picnics and whose petty concerns are remote from those of our workaday world.

The latter attitude, irrelevant in mainstream academic research, is not easy to dismiss in teaching practice. Austen's choice of materials can be partly justified by borrowing an argument from Dorothea Krook's discussion of Henry James (1-25): since affluence exempts the characters from the daily problems of making a living, it gives them the leisure to fine-tune those moral, psychological, cultural, and ideological issues for which working people have little space or time. Yet if Jane Austen does, indeed, present the (best?) values of what a century later Thorstein Veblen would call the "leisure class," she does not, I shall argue, do so uncritically.

Mansfield Park, Jane Austen's problem novel, was written in 1813, after a long pause during which Austen did considerably more revising than new composition.² The creative lull of 1807-1812 is usually explained by biographical complications, such as the Austens' move to Bath, the death of the novelist's father, and her move to Chawton. Yet it may also have been due to the internal dynamics of the creative process.³ *Pride and Prejudice*, "light, and bright, and sparkling,"⁴ a peak development of her earlier attitudes and methods may have a scorched-earth effect: it was hardly possible to continue in the same vein. Despite its gallery of critical portraits of the provincial gentry, despite its subscribing to the tradition according to which the course of true love never does run smooth, and despite (or because of) the occasional oppositionality of the characters' conduct, the happy ending of this novel celebrates the perfect synthesis of cultural discipline and individual energy (see Duckworth 132). Pemberley, Elizabeth Bennet's home after her marriage to Darcy, represents the ideal seat of a landed gentleman, with the master treating his estate not merely in terms of ownership but also in terms of "trusteeship" (Duckworth 129). Darcy and his family are, as it were, entrusted with the guardianship and perpetuation of the tradition of culture and rational benevolence that is expected to irradiate upon their environment (and be further promoted by a network of marriages and friendships—by way of a bonus rather than a goal). Less admirable exponents of the same ideal are Sir John Middleton of *Sense and Sensibility*, whose warmth and generosity are cloying since they are not accompanied and restrained by Darcy's intelligence and cultural sophistication. The gentry families of *Mansfield Park* suggest a falling off from the standard, a loss of the values that ennoble the status of the gentry. Treated satirically in the character of John Dashwood of *Sense and Sensibility*, the decline of the country-house ideal is studied earnestly in *Mansfield Park*, taking into account the possibility, and the costs, of its reclamation.⁵

Symbolically, the need for repair is suggested by the generally recognized fact that Mr. Rushworth's Sotherton mansion is in need of

improvements. During an inspection visit stimulated by this project, it is made clear to the characters that the glories of the estate are in the past: the kings will no longer visit; the tenants' homes are "a disgrace" (59); the chapel is in disuse (and becomes a site for a profane flirtation between the future lady of the house and a wayward friend); the abundance of rooms does not dispel the sense of suffocation that makes the characters wish to go outdoors, to "air and liberty" (64). The length of time that it takes Rushworth to fetch the key for the iron gate suggests a touch of entropy: the inept young landlord has failed to ensure a cheerful setting for the visit of his bride's party.⁶

Sotherton, however, is a decoy that channels the motif of deterioration away from the house referred to in the title. In his more affluent young days, Sir Thomas Bertram, Baronet, its master, married for love—the narrative makes this clear by noting that his bride's portion was only seven thousand pounds, which means that it fell three thousand pounds short of the ten-thousand-pound threshold of enhanced eligibility in the "tariff system" (Hammond 71) of the period. By the time his daughters reach the marriageable age, the estate is encumbered, and Sir Thomas has to travel to Antigua to protect his interests there (a convenient narrative device used in many a nineteenth-century novel yet clearly indicative of the fact that the family's welfare is based on slave labor overseas—and that at the period when slave trade is a much debated topical issue). In order to pay his oldest son's debts of honour Sir Thomas has to sell the Mansfield living to Dr. Grant instead of engaging a temporary curate until Edmund, the younger son, can be ordained—and Sir Thomas's reprimand of Tom for thus hurting his brother's interests tends to divert the reader's attention from the bland naturalness of this trade in preferments.⁷ Moreover, despite the sense of a populous neighbourhood (as Northamptonshire and other Southern counties actually were), none of the sons of the neighbouring gentry seem to present any interest for Julia and Maria Bertram: eventually the idea of involving one of them, a Charles Maddox, in the Bertram private theatricals is but barely, and temporarily, tolerated. The presence of the richest neighbour, Mr.

Rushworth, is not an asset either in company or on his own estate. It is little wonder that the dowager Mrs. Rushworth, whom we see dutifully guiding the Mansfield party through the relics of past greatness in her house, leaves for Bath soon after her son's wedding, "there to parade over the wonders of Sotherton in her evening-parties—enjoying them as thoroughly perhaps in the animation of a card-table as she had ever done on the spot" (139).

Another emblem of deterioration may be found in the progressing debility of Lady Bertram. After having borne four perfectly healthy, strong, and good-looking children, this handsome woman retires to her couch, to sit there with Pug, in preference to any activity, including annual trips to London. It is partly owing to her indolent egoism and partly, it seems, to the family's straitened finances, that Sir Thomas gives up his house in town and starts traveling alone to London (to attend sessions of parliament), instead of taking his daughters with him for the social season. Nor does the family ever seem to travel to any of the fashionable health resorts. The sons go off to university and on visits, but the adolescent daughters "can't get out, as the starling said" at exactly the most "interesting time" (25) of their lives when travel, movement, changes of scene are almost a matter of hormonal need. The interests of the children are thus blandly sacrificed to the comfort of the parents: indeed, though the narrator refuses to declare whether it is the "increase or diminution" of Sir Thomas's comfort that arises from his being in town alone (17), the reader is encouraged to regard the former case as the likelier of the two.⁸

The motif of deterioration raises the question of the ideal: has there ever been some golden age of the English gentry, from which the current state of affairs is a falling off? In the second half of the eighteenth century, well after the end of religious upheavals and before the social unrest that would arise with the Industrial Revolution, this class was indeed a prosperous cultural base for some of the best achievements of English arts and letters. A patrician like Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* is supposed to be product of those prosperous times and of the ideal of benevolent upper-class rectitude (cf. Moller).

Darcy, however, has no equivalent in *Mansfield Park*. Edmund Bertram, for one, does not rise to his stature: his version of high-mindedness is largely a response to his underprivileged situation as a spendthrift's younger brother. Sir Thomas, the part-time slaveholder, is, among other things, deficient in intelligence: the impression produced by his self-delusions is, in the eyes of the modern reader, enhanced by his solemn "measured manner" (165) otherwise described as "slowness of speech" (189).

Judging by Austen's presentation of her own time and class, the cultural legacy of the Augustan age in the Regency period must have involved a hesitation between the values of the peaceful domestic Vicar-of-Wakefield ideal and those of a truculent ambitious quest for power and "consequence"⁹—between, that is, what in *A Theory of the Leisure Class* the American economist Thorstein Veblen would call the peaceable and the predatory cultures. Veblen, indeed, reduces the social hierarchy basically to two classes: the leisure class (scions of predatory culture) and the toilers, people who have to maintain themselves by their industry.¹⁰ Austen's characters belong to the former class, and the few working professionals among them (clergymen, a barrister such as John Knightley, or army and navy officers, governesses) are still closely linked to families in which primogeniture usually meant exemption from the need to make a living.

In times of peace the leisure class is characterized by what Veblen calls "invidious emulation," that is, a tendency to compare people "with a view to rating and grading them in respect to relative worth or value—in an aesthetic or moral sense—and so awarding and defining the relative degrees of complacency with which they may legitimately be contemplated by themselves and others" (34).¹¹ According to Veblen, invidious emulation commonly takes the shape of "conspicuous consumption" and "conspicuous leisure." In discussing Jane Austen's corpus, this scheme must be supplemented by conspicuous sexual charisma, or what may be called *invidious sexuality*.

The less demonstrative version of "conspicuous consumption" is behind the regularity with which an English gentleman, who can

pride himself on overcoming multiple hardships abroad, will tend to perceive minor hardships in his own home as indignities. The more demonstrative version is often resorted to by the *nouveaux riches* as well as by frauds and charlatans, such as Tigg with his Anglo-Bengallee Life-Assurance company in Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit* (see Toker) or Becky and Rawdon Crawley, who know how to live well on nothing a year in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. With the exception of Mrs. Elton in *Emma*, an upstart who takes vicarious pride in her brother-in-law's estate and barouche-landau and sneers at the small quantity of lace at Emma's wedding, Austen tends to delineate the former, the less showy version of the phenomenon. In *Persuasion*, despite his debts, Sir Walter cannot stoop to giving up his carriage or his servants while staying in his family mansion; and his daughter Anne, disinclined to invidious emulation of any kind, fails to understand that conspicuous wealth is her father's "spiritual" need¹²: he will not feel the discomfort of living in a much smaller house in Bath because there the relatively cramped quarters are not a "retrenchment" but a general rule. The motif of conspicuous consumption is not ample but still sufficiently symptomatic in *Mansfield Park*. It prominently includes Sir Thomas's sending Fanny to the Grants in his carriage—not because it may rain or because the order of the day is kindness to Fanny but because it does not suit his status to have a niece of his *walk* half a mile to a formal dinner engagement. Maria and Julia Bertram hold Fanny "cheap" on finding that she is not interested in music (musical training belongs to the semiotics of "conspicuous leisure") and has only two sashes (12). It is unthinkable in the Mansfield circle to make do without a necklace at a ball. If Henry Crawford makes his horses, carriage, hunting dogs, and jewelry available to his friends, he is, among other things, enjoying a benevolent version of conspicuous consumption: his friends' consumption of goods is an extension of his own. When Fanny meets her Portsmouth family's lower-middle class friends, she finds the men "coarse," the women "pert" (the latter may mean free from Evangelical self-effacing ways), and everybody "under-bred." The young ladies of this circle reciprocally

cate her dislike by regarding her upper-class manners as a false pretence ("airs") because she exhibits neither the expected signs of upper-class leisure (she does not play the piano-forte) nor the fashionable signs of conspicuous consumption, such as "fine pelisses" (268).

Veblen's theory does not describe all national leisure-class cultures in a uniform way. Among the English gentry, partly owing to Protestant suspiciousness of lavish display, consumption tended to be less conspicuous than the cultural signs of leisure. But then the semiotics of leisure entered into a dialectical tension with the negative view of "idleness," traceable in, for instance, the still current idiom about the devil taking those with idle hands. The resulting confusion is comically caricatured in Rushworth's disparagement of the theatricals: "I am not as fond of acting as I was at first. I think we are a good deal better employed, sitting comfortably here among ourselves, and doing nothing" (128). A more suave expression of a similar paradox is Henry Crawford's elegantly cynical remark that because he does not like "to eat the bread of idleness" (157) he will set himself the challenge of seducing the affections of Fanny Price.

A lady, in particular, needs always to be occupied, though, unlike the "spinsters" of olden times, not in a way that would increase the family's income. The "great deal of carpetwork" and "many yards of fringe" that Lady Bertram, the epitome of leisure, has made, Penelope-like, during her husband's absence are useful, in the first place, for demonstrating how "her own time had been irreproachably spent" (124). Even so, it is Fanny, essentially in her role of an errand-running dependant, who must prepare My Lady's "work" (i.e., needlework) for her, which would mean untangling knotted threads, laying out the materials, and such like. Veblen's remark that the servants' leisure is not their own but an extension of the leisure of their masters¹³ is foreshadowed in Henry Crawford's commendation of the "unpretending gentleness" with which Fanny takes it "as a matter of course that she [is] not to have a moment at her own command" (202). The conduct of a wife of a gentleman is expected to be in many ways analogous to

that of his upper servant. Fanny is trained accordingly while at the service of her aunts.¹⁴

As is well known, the main part of a proper young lady's education in eighteenth- and for the most part nineteenth-century England consisted not in academic or professional training but in the acquisition of "accomplishments," such as spelling, writing a small hand, decorative needlework, drawing, music, dancing, French, and (in the age of imperial expansion) geography. Excellence in drawing and musical performance could be real amenities in the times before photography and canned music, but in the absence of real talent or love of the art, the acquisition of "accomplishments" had little practical value apart from providing a decoy for minor vanity (see Poovey 29) and a way of passing the time¹⁵: the elegant constraint of Mrs. Grant's tambour frame (47) may supplement and attenuate the grimmer symbolism of the iron gate. The recoil of Austen's heroines from the prospect of working as governesses or schoolteachers may have to do as much with this curriculum as with the indignities of falling off from the leisure class. Fanny, whose happiest hours are spent in the East room with her geraniums and her books, seems to endow a selected part of her own "accomplishments" with a genuine spiritual significance, beyond the satisfaction of mastering the semiotics of conspicuous leisure. What Henry Crawford cannot know is that on colder days Fanny cannot command her own leisure because her bedroom and her day chamber (the East room) remain unheated: the by-product of her being treated as "the child of the attic whose wicked stepmother (Aunt Norris) allows her no fire to keep her warm" (Meyersohn 226) is the absence of privacy on cold days—Fanny has to go down to the well heated main drawingroom, and stay there in attendance on her aunts. It is only Henry's own courtship of Fanny that, by heightening her "consequence," will call Sir Thomas's attention to her and induce him to overrule Mrs. Norris's ban on fire in the East room.

Veblen's hypothesis is that the leisure class is an outgrowth of the bellicose *predatory* elements in primeval society, of the aristocracy of greedy merit which, by force or fraud, had made its fortune and won

positions of dominance over the peaceable population who eat their bread in the sweat of their brow (1-21). This poetic anthropology is in tune with the history of the distribution of landed estates among the kings' faithful warriors in the medieval past which Fanny nostalgically romanticizes when disappointed by Sotherton's modern chapel (61). Fanny's ideals of chivalrous generosity are associated with Walter Scott's characters and with romantic figures by the name of "Edmund," which her beloved cousin happens to share with the anti-Jacobine author of *Reflections on the Revolution in France*¹⁶ ("'It is a name of heroism and renown—of kings, princes and knights; and seems to breathe the spirit of chivalry and warm affections,'" 145). The predatory ways of the distinguished ancestors of the older upper-class families occupy her mind as little as the Shakespearian use of the name "Edmund" in *King Lear* (though her own story develops as a cross between Cordelia's disposition to love and be silent and Griselda's patient resignation to mistreatment in expectation of reward). Nor does she recollect that for all the poetic cults of exalted ladies and damsels in distress, marriages in aristocratic circles were a matter of political alliance. Up to the early nineteenth century, the idea of marrying for love, a central novelistic convention, depended for its tolerably realistic implementation, if not on the characters (or masks) of "peaceable" arcadian peasants, then on chaste menials and unranked resident gentry (squires rather than knights). And yet, this idea was well in accord with sincere Christian beliefs: marriages, unlike mercenary calculations, are supposed to be made in heaven. When pursued by Crawford, Fanny expects her uncle, "a good man," to feel "how wretched, and how unpardonable, how hopeless and how wicked it was, to marry without affection" (220). Edmund, lost in his own emotional imbroglio, indignantly protests, "How could you imagine me an advocate for marriage without love?" (235) when, under the influence of his father, he has actually developed a double-standard position.

The ideal of marriage for love is, throughout the history of the novel, contrasted with that of mercenary or political marriages. In

Mansfield Park the latter two are conflated in the notion of an "advantageous" marriage, one that raises one's "consequence." The main and most unabashed spokesperson for this principle in marital choice is Mary Crawford—interestingly, not Maria Bertram, the provincial belle who eventually falls a victim to marriage in the service of Mammon, but this "worldling," whose better feelings conflict with her own maxims. Though quite wealthy herself, Mary desires a marriage that will bring social advancement ("every body should marry as soon as they can do it to advantage"; (32), and considers a clergyman ineligible because, in her economy, "a clergyman is nothing" (66). Her conscious agenda is thus in tune with gentry's politics of power expansion through a network of connections and alliances. Her best friends are women who have contracted loveless marriages and whom Edmund's letter defines in terms of invidious emulation:

I do not like Mrs. Fraser. She is a cold-hearted, vain woman, who has married entirely from convenience, and though evidently unhappy in her marriage, places her disappointment, not to faults of judgement or temper, or disproportion of age, but to her being after all, less affluent than many of her acquaintance, especially than her sister, Lady Stornaway, and is the determined supporter of every thing mercenary and ambitious, provided it be only mercenary and ambitious enough. (285-86)

Fanny and Edmund consider such a philosophy of life corrupt (286, 288). In their eyes, indeed, it is a falling off from a chaste Christian ideal rather than a natural if debased sequel to the predatory goals of the leisure class. What they do not realize is that in the class to which they belong, dynastic marriages have generally been the norm and not the corruption, and that their own ideal of a peaceable companionate marriage is, like that of Elizabeth Bennet or Anne Elliot, a liberal rather than a conservative aspiration. Fanny and Edmund, indeed, seem to strike the golden mean in the scale of the gentry's attitudes to labour and leisure. On one side of their unhurried occupations is Mrs. Norris's unseemly love of trafficking with her neighbours' housekeepers, gardeners, cooks, and coachmen. At the other extreme there is the Crawford siblings' impatience with productive labour and its

signs: Henry wishes to shut out the blacksmith's shop so that it might not be seen from Edmund's Thornton Lacey parsonage (166), and Mary is astonished that, contrary to the "London maxim, that every thing is to be got with money" (43), farmers will not spare a cart for transporting her harp. Though Mary's and Henry's urban sophistication should suggest advanced views and freedom from provincial inhibitions,¹⁷ actually the two display the dated mind-set of the predatory leisure class that rejects the progressive agenda of convergence with the peaceable pursuits of happiness.¹⁸

Yet Mary seems to be prepared to change her expectations when she falls in love with Edmund, though she keeps trying to persuade him to replace his determination to be a minister by more flashy ambitions. When at one point in their relationship she restates her maxim that it is "everybody's duty to do as well for themselves as they can" (198), she does so in the context of her ironic resentment of the Miss Owens in whose brother's house Edmund seems to be spending too long a time. Yet, as this episode suggests, jealousy, an unwelcome intruder in Fanny's inner life, is a legitimate participant in Mary's private psychodrama. One of the reasons why Mary is not redeemed by her love for Edmund is that she is shown extending invidious emulation to the war of all against all in marriage matters. Moreover, we find her thriving on invidious sexuality, that is, on competition for sexual power, both inside and outside the marriage market. Unable to imagine any different attitude in others, she thinks that Henry's having been coveted by many other women (in particular, Maria and Julia) should make his offer attractive to Fanny, who would thus triumph over them. At the end of the novel a similar attitude is ascribed to Maria Bertram: when in the course of her adulterous affair she "live[s] with him to be reproached as the ruin of all his happiness in Fanny," she is given "no better consolation in leaving him, than that she had divided them" (314-15). Invidious sexuality is, clearly, as important a semantic set in *Mansfield Park* as it is in *Pride and Prejudice* and, owing to the character of Lucy Steele, in *Sense and Sensibility*.

Whereas in critical discussions a touch of voyeurism is frequently imputed to Fanny (see, in particular, Auerbach), Mary Crawford is actually the more neurotically afflicted with this vice. When Crawford's courtship of Fanny is no longer a secret to any member of the Bertram clan, Mary seems to savor the opportunity of writing to Fanny about Maria's jealousy: "Shall I tell you how Mrs. Rushworth looked when your name was mentioned? I did not use to think her wanting in self-possession, but she had not quite enough for the demands of yesterday" (267). Mary derives voyeuristic enjoyment not from the love-scenes which Fanny observes during the rehearsals of "Lovers' Vows" but from the scenes of other women's defeat in invidious sexuality.¹⁹ This may be the less obvious of the motives for her interest in Fanny, her inferior at any social game. The causal plotting of the denouement suggests that the same feature actually leads to Mary's own defeat with Edmund. Indeed, she is partly to blame for Maria's elopement with Henry, because it is she who detains Henry in London when he is on his mission to Everingham (with the twofold motive of adjusting property relationships and preparing his world for Fanny). Mary's second letter to Fanny in Portsmouth mentions that Henry "cannot any how be spared till after the 14th, for we have a party that evening. The value of a man like Henry on such an occasion, is what you can have no conception of; so you must take it upon my word, to be inestimable." If the reader and Fanny think that this "value" consists in Henry's social skills and ability to enliven any dull gathering, Mary's next sentence suggests a second reason for his being wanted at the party: "He will see the Rushworths, which I own I am not sorry for—having a little curiosity—and so I think has he" (283). Fanny is always willing to see corruption in Mary; therefore she will not consider the possibility of randomness in the sequence of these sentences; for her, in this case, *post hoc propter hoc*. Yet, for all we know, she may be right to translate the sequence into a sign of Mary's "endeavour to secure a meeting between [Henry] and Mrs. Rushworth." Without calling the little intrigue by its name, Fanny thinks it in Mary's "worst line of conduct, and grossly unkind and ill-judged"

(283). This is the closest she comes to regarding Mary, to whom she owes several minor favors, as "wicked."

It may be noted that in a conversation that Edmund holds with Fanny upon meeting the Crawford siblings, both comment on a flaw in Mary's manners, her harsh remarks, made to all too new acquaintances, about the uncle to whom she owes a debt of gratitude. Manners, according to Veblen, are a sign of conspicuous leisure because a great deal of time has been invested, unproductively, in acquiring them. Yet when ill manners on one occasion contrast with the perfect polish on all the others, when leisure-class flair is evident in sundry other details of character and conduct, a flaw in conventional manners—in Jane Austen at least—stands either for advanced liberal principles or for a moral flaw. Edmund is fearful that Mary's flaunting of emotional independence from her uncle is indicative of the latter; her own sense of her conduct is clearly associated with the former. The ending of the novel, in which Mary is not properly horrified by her brother's and Maria Bertram's affair, is a replay of the same situation—and it confirms Edmund's uneasy suspicions, much as it jars on the sensibilities of modern readers who might wish to applaud Mary's neglect of lip service to conventional pieties. Edmund does not realize that Mary's moral flaw lies not so much in her pragmatic attitude to the scandal but in her cultivation of invidious sexuality, a character trait which the causal connections in the plot present as conducive to Maria's adultery. One way or another, he takes her attitude to the debacle not as vicious in itself but as *symptomatic* of a viciousness which places her outside his ethos.

His decision is also indicative of the utopian element in Jane Austen's social vision. According to the novelistic convention within which Austen worked (and which she partly modified in the case of Charlotte Lucas of *Pride and Prejudice*), marriage without love was the worst sin a heroine can commit. The hero's worst sin (exemplified in Crawford's treatment of the Bertram sisters, in Richardson's rakes before him and Lermontov's after him) is courting a young woman without the intention of marrying her. In the works of some of Jane

Austen's precursors the latter kind of "wickedness" was frequently attributed to aristocratic villains, such as the Noble Lord in Fielding's *Amelia* and his younger counterpart in Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*. By contrast, Jane Austen set her dramas of conjugal choice mainly among the unranked gentry. Like the protagonist of *Emma*, she was notoriously uninterested in members of the populous lower classes except as objects of charity, but she also seems to have shared most of her characters' cautiousness concerning the claims of the peerage (cf. Greene).²⁰ Sir Thomas Bertram, for instance, does not regard the Honourable John Yates, a lord's younger son with reasonably independent means, as a desirable connection.²¹ Sir Thomas himself has the title of a Baronet, only above the Knight. Ideally, people belonging to the stratum ranging from the Bertrams of *Mansfield Park* to the Bennets of *Pride and Prejudice* were in the best position to effect a convergence of the nobler traits of leisure-class culture with the values of the peaceable toiling class, especially since resident land-ownership imposed practical duties and counteracted the restlessness of unlimited leisure.

The idealized conception of the values of the rural gentry involved the cultivation of family pieties and the life of the spirit in which love, in every meaning of the word, would hold pride of place. True, Austen's "sensible" characters, such as Elinor Dashwood of *Sense and Sensibility* and Lady Russell of *Persuasion*, do not believe happiness to be possible, even in a most loving marriage, without financial "competence" (an income of at least £ 500 per annum). Still, opting for worldly interest rather than love in the choice of one's marriage partner is treated as a confusion of a goal and a bonus. Even Charlotte Lucas, whose choice of a marriage of convenience is not wholly condemned in *Pride and Prejudice*, is shown to be sacrificing part of her own potential and identity and deliberately blunting her senses in becoming Mrs. Collins. Indeed, when her husband speaks in a way offensive to her taste, she chooses not to hear it; in order to minimize the time in her husband's company, she chooses to spend her daytime hours in a room without a view which he is not interested in frequent-

ing. Amidst the rural gentry "the ideal of a companionate marriage" had by the end of the eighteenth century replaced the previous policy of "arranged and dynastic marriages" (Waldron 116), still all routinely practiced among the aristocracy. It is in the service of the latter predatory policy that in *Pride and Prejudice* Lady Catherine de Burgh travels all the way to Elizabeth Bennet's house in order to demand that she should not accept Darcy's proposal. The ideal of the companionate marriage was, in fact, much closer to the values of the growing middle class than to those of the Regency upper classers which the somewhat declassée Mary Crawford adopts. For Mary the aristocratic freedom from middle-class moral appearances is a matter of "improvements" introduced by each generation (such as liberation from family prayers in the chapel); for the novelist, however, it seems to be not a sign of progress but, on the contrary, a relic of the atavistic agenda of the upper class with its yet unreclaimed predatory culture.

Robert Polhemus has described Austen's novels as dreams "of individual integrity in which self-interest and morality coincide" (39). Such a reconciliation of virtue and its reward defines, first and foremost, Austen's variety of poetic justice. The utopian element in the world view staged in her novels, a dream best represented by the marriages of Elinor Dashwood and Emma Woodhouse, is one in which the best achievements of leisure-class cultivation are wedded to peaceable commitments and pursuits. Yet it is an open question whether one should grant priority to the fictional conventions used or to the ideology which grants them significance beyond entertainment value. However that may be, Austen's preference for the rural gentry as the social setting of her novels may have been motivated not only by her own place in and superior knowledge of this class but also by its relative preference for the peaceable Christian ideal of loving companionate matrimony which permitted a realistic implementation of a fictional convention too precious to forego.

NOTES

¹Cf. Claudia Johnson's discussion (99-100) of Austen's appeal to the soldiers presented in Rudyard Kipling's story "The Janeites."

²After Austen wrote "Susan," an early study for *Northanger Abbey*, in 1799, her only totally new work up to 1813 was the *The Watsons* (1804), which remained unfinished. In 1810-11 she retouched and published the 1798 *Sense and Sensibility* (the middle version of what had started as "Elinor and Marianne" a few years before) and revised the 1797 "First Impressions" into *Pride and Prejudice*.

³I agree with Kirkham (61-65) that the move to Bath may not have been as unalloyed a trauma as it is often believed. Austen fainted on being appraised of the move; yet this may well have been due to unexpectedness; and Bath itself could offer non-negligible cultural opportunities in addition to providing ample material for observation.

⁴*Letters*, 4 February 1913.

⁵Though *Emma*, Austen's next novel, celebrates the victory of a similar reclamation (see Pickrell on the ways in which the impoverished gentlemen's tendency to marry "new money" is indirectly reflected in *Emma*), her last completed novel, *Persuasion* signals grave doubts concerning the continuing viability of the ideal in the absence of reinforcement from outside the closed system.

⁶I suppress a Freudian comment on the latter issue (as well as on the spikes which threaten Maria's gown): in the Portsmouth episode, it is to highlight the sense of a household's confusion and inefficiency that a key is reported to have been "mislaid" (259) exactly when it is needed for the hasty completion of William Price's packing.

⁷In *Sense and Sensibility* such a procedure is implicitly criticized by making the avaricious John Dashwood its advocate: Dashwood is astonished that Colonel Brandon has just *given* the living in his parish to Edward Ferrars instead of selling it. Sir Thomas does not seem to be aware of the touch of simony in what in his eyes is as standard a procedure as a purchase of a commission in the army or the navy. This suggests that his Evangelical preferences, including those relating to the need for a clergyman's residence in his parish, are motivated not only by genuine religious commitment but also by his tenacity in paternal control.

⁸During the evening party at the Grants', Sir Thomas recommends the game of Speculation to his wife as promising a great amusement—the narrator does not forgo a would be hypothetical comment on his double motive here: quite tellingly, Sir Thomas maneuvers his way out of being her partner at whist (164). The resulting mis-en-scène deployment of the characters makes further room for the maneuvers of Henry Crawford and even of William Price.

⁹"Consequence" is one of the insistently recurrent key words in *Mansfield Park* (see McKenzie), the way the derivatives of "exert" are in *Sense and Sensibility*, the derivatives of "exhibit" in *Pride and Prejudice*, and those of "perfect" in *Emma*.

¹⁰It should be noted that the English traditional view of social hierarchy—upper, middle, and lower classes—the subtleties of which were the daily substance of etiquette in Jane Austen's milieu, is not co-extensive with the Marxist nomenclature of the classes as related to the means and forces of production. Veblen offers a third alternative to the description of social stratification. In modern society his distinction between the leisure class (whatever the sources of its income) and the citizens who have to work in order to make a living is far from being watertight, but Veblen's theory is still illuminating in application to modern consumer culture, in addition to being useful for the analysis of the representation of society in realistic nineteenth-century fiction, whose authors responded to empirical data similar to those observed by Veblen himself.

¹¹Veblen here neglects the Kantian distinction between a person's "worth" and a person's "value" to others (see Kant 63-64).

¹²"Very much squalor and discomfort will be endured before the last trinket or the last pretence of pecuniary decency is put away. There is no class and no country that has yielded so abjectly before the pressure of physical want as to deny themselves all gratification of this higher or spiritual need" (Veblen 85; see also 167-68, 190).

¹³See Veblen 59-60 on "vicarious leisure."

¹⁴"The servant or wife should not only perform certain offices and show a servile disposition, but it is quite as imperative that they should show an acquired facility in the tactics of subservience—a trained conformity to the canons of effectual and conspicuous subservience. Even today it is this aptitude and acquired skill in the formal manifestation of the servile relation that constitutes the chief element of utility in our highly paid servants, as well as one of the chief ornaments of the well-bred housewife [...] trained service has utility, not only as gratifying the master's instinctive liking for good and skilful workmanship and his propensity for conspicuous dominance over those whose lives are subservient to his own, but it has utility also as putting in evidence a much larger consumption of human service than would be shown by the mere present conspicuous leisure performed by an untrained person" (60-61).

¹⁵Jane Austen's metaphor for her fiction as "little bits (two Inches wide) of Ivory" (*Letters*, 16 December 1816, 469) is more than a traditional "modesty topos": it may be read as a deliberate claim to inoffensiveness, such as of the ladies' recognized hobbies (see Gilbert and Gubar 107-09).

¹⁶For noting this connection I am indebted to Gary Kelly's discussion of the episodes of reading aloud in *Mansfield Park* (see Kelly 34).

¹⁷Many modern critics rather enjoy reading Mary's comment on Admirals, "Of *Rears*, and *Vices*, I saw enough. Now, do not be suspecting me of a pun, I entreat" as an "indecent [remark] about homosexuality in the Navy" (Hammond 78).

¹⁸Indeed, as Julia Prewitt Brown has noted (87), "Fanny and Edmund, not the Crawfords, are the children of the future, the Victorians. Mary Crawford in

particular is an eighteenth-century type, with her exuberance, wit, and Johnsonian preference for the city."

¹⁹Cf. Daleski 135 on Mary's and Henry's "predatory" self-indulgence and "need for a constant provision of amusements."

²⁰Austen "shows no love for the great aristocracy (as represented in Darcy's family) or for the very rich (the Rushworths); and pride of rank, whether in an earl's daughter or a baronet, is evidently anathema to her. Jane Austen's attitude to social distinctions in the upper reaches of society has been called that of a "Tory radical": which is accurate provided we recognize that over all in the novels her Toryism carries more weight than her radicalism" (Butler 165).

²¹See Fleishman 51-54 on the use of the words "evil" and "connection" in *Mansfield Park*.

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