

## “The road to happiness”: Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*\*<sup>1</sup>

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At first glance, Jane Austen’s novels seem to be fairly similar: at the end, after many trials and tribulations, the heroine finds the husband who suits her perfectly, according to the plot structure of comedy.<sup>2</sup> The obstacles she meets make her realize what she really wants in life, and she is eventually able to find happiness and fulfilment. But this configuration seems to undergo a characteristic variation in *Mansfield Park* (1814). At its centre, we find a heroine who is very consistent and does not need to change,<sup>3</sup> and who also knows whom she loves and would like to marry from very early on in the novel, namely her cousin Edmund Bertram.<sup>4</sup> But as Edmund falls in love with Mary Crawford, and Henry Crawford with Fanny, an alternative outcome suddenly seems possible despite the fact that, in Jane Austen’s works, it seems generally out of the question that a heroine marry a ‘minor’ character—both in the sense of character constellations within the novel *and* in the sense of moral inferiority. The possibility of Fanny marrying Henry Crawford is, at least for some time, not entirely excluded from the novel: at some point he begins to improve and to develop into a man that might eventually deserve Fanny.<sup>5</sup> *Mansfield Park* therefore offers a plot structure that is seemingly paradoxical: it presents a heroine whose obvious constancy is juxtaposed with the suggestion of an alternative outcome that we do not find in any other of Jane Austen’s novels.

The point that Henry might indeed marry Fanny is repeatedly emphasised in the course of the novel and linked to the imagery of find-

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debzirker02023.htm>>.

ing the “road to happiness” (III.17.437).<sup>6</sup> For Henry Crawford, this road would have been to follow his development into a character who deserves to marry the heroine, which would have meant a new way of life. The topic of ‘Roads Not Taken’ in *Mansfield Park* therefore concerns both the options of the characters, with regard to their choices and decisions, and also of the author. In the last chapter, the narrator dwells on Henry Crawford’s lost chance of marrying Fanny Price and paints a sketch of what might have been had Henry not taken the wrong road and eloped with Maria Rushworth, née Bertram. It is quite striking that in this very last chapter, a “way of happiness” (433) is mentioned, referring to Henry Crawford and his departing from this way. Towards the end of the chapter the narrator then comments on Edmund Bertram, who eventually finds himself on the “road to happiness” (437).<sup>7</sup>

As Henry Crawford leaves the path which would have led him towards happiness, the question is asked by critics whether he was ever meant to follow it at all?<sup>8</sup> Did the narrator, and for that matter Jane Austen, never really consider having Fanny agree to marry Henry Crawford—and likewise Edmund Bertram wed Mary Crawford? Does the novel itself offer any other possibility that would, however, be in accordance with the presentation of characters as well as with its overall setup? For the greater part of the action, Fanny thinks that she cannot marry Henry Crawford because she does not really love him and because they are so unlike each other. But then Henry Crawford starts to behave differently and becomes a more likeable character, and the narrator even comments on the possibility of a marriage between Henry and Fanny at the end of the novel. Therefore, the decision to have the novel end the way it does seems to be based mainly on the concepts of similarity and dissimilarity of character as well as of the stability of character. Henry has a choice between two ways of living: had he been constant in his improvement, he would have been able to marry the heroine and thus to determine her fate as well. On a narratological level, he is an open character, with traits both good and bad. For a long time in the course of the novel, its

ending is likewise open and depends entirely on his behaviour; but then he takes a turn away from this improvement, and events lead to the ending as we know it. Had he behaved differently, not only the ending would have had to be rewritten but the whole story of the romance between him and Fanny as well as between Edmund and Mary. Fanny, on the other hand, can choose either way; she can marry him or Edmund. It is Henry’s choice of a particular way of life when he elopes with Maria Rushworth, and it is this eventual choice that does not conform to Fanny’s character. Yet the choice as such is there in the novel.

Just before the novel closes, the narrator thus explicitly dwells on Henry Crawford’s lost chance of marrying Fanny Price and paints a sketch of what might have been had Henry Crawford not taken the wrong road:

Henry Crawford, ruined by early independence and bad domestic example, indulged in the freaks of a cold-blooded vanity a little too long. Once it had, by an opening undesigned and unmerited, led him into the way of happiness. Could he have been satisfied with the conquest of one amiable woman’s affection, could he have found sufficient exultation in overcoming the reluctance, in working himself into the esteem and tenderness of Fanny Price, there would have been every probability of success and felicity for him. His affection had already done something. Her influence over him, had already given him some influence over her. Would he have deserved more, there can be no doubt that more would have been obtained; especially when that marriage had taken place, which would have given him the assistance of her conscience in subduing her first inclination, and brought them very often together. Would he have persevered, and uprightly, Fanny must have been his reward—and a reward very voluntarily bestowed—within a reasonable period from Edmund’s marrying Mary. (III.17.433-34)

The narrator explicitly states: “Would he have persevered [...] Fanny must have been his reward,” and thus emphasises that there had been a real chance of Fanny and Henry getting married. What happened? This question can be answered with the help of several key concepts of the novel that are mentioned in the passage: independence, vanity, desert, i.e. merit, and perseverance.

Already the first sentence of this passage tells us a lot about Henry's character: the forces determining his eventual choice are both outward and inward; he is "ruined," but he is also the agent of this ruin as he himself "indulged in the freaks of cold-blooded vanity," which is dubbed as his "selfish vanity" (II.2.180) elsewhere in the novel, "too long." We also learn that basically his "early independence," a "bad domestic example"—referring to his uncle the Admiral who lives with his mistress—and his "cold-blooded vanity" are the reasons for his downfall. This passage recalls an earlier comment on Henry's attitude towards the Bertram sisters: "thoughtless and selfish from prosperity and bad example, he would not look beyond the present moment" (I.12.108). "Prosperity and bad example" are juxtaposed, similarly to the way in which the word "independence" combines the concepts of both money and moral value.<sup>9</sup>

The next sentence starts with the words: "Once it had." "It" refers to Henry Crawford's vanity, and it was this very vanity that, paradoxically, "by an opening undesigned and unmerited, led him into the way of happiness." This passage alludes to his earlier plan to make Fanny fall in love with him: "I cannot be satisfied without Fanny Price, without making a small hole in Fanny Price's heart" (II.6.212). His sister sees through him and recognizes that Fanny's attraction lies mainly in her being "the only girl in company for [him] to notice" (213) now that her two cousins are away, that his interest stems from nothing but his "own idleness and folly" (213). His vanity is at the beginning of his plan, but, he very soon falls seriously in love with her. Henry confides in his sister again, and we therefore can vouch for his sincerity when he says: "I am fairly caught. You know with what idle designs I began—but this is the end of them. I have (I flatter myself) made no inconsiderable progress in her affections; but my own are entirely fixed" (II.12.269). He subsequently proposes to Fanny: what began as an "idle" plan has now become his dearest wish.

This way of happiness, into which he is led by his vanity, is, however, both "undesigned" and "unmerited." He had neither thought

that it would lead to his falling in love, nor did he 'merit' this: "Would he have *deserved* more." Finding the right partner in life seems to evolve around these concepts of merit and desert.<sup>10</sup> A few more passages from the novel will illustrate this.

When Henry tells Mary that he has fallen in love with Fanny, her reaction is: "I approve your choice from my soul, and foresee your happiness as heartily as I wish and desire it. You will have a sweet little wife; all gratitude and devotion. Exactly what you deserve" (II.12.269).<sup>11</sup> Fanny thinks about Mary that "she might love, but she did not deserve Edmund" (III.6.340). In both cases, the one who says "deserve" evinces her personal attitude towards the person in question. When Henry tries to persuade Fanny that she should marry him, he says:

"My conduct shall speak for me—absence, distance, time shall speak for me.—*They* shall prove, that as far as you can be deserved by any body, I do deserve you. You are infinitely my superior in merit; all *that* I know.—You have qualities which I had not before supposed to exist in such a degree in any human creature. You have some touches of the angel in you, beyond what—not merely beyond what one sees, because one never sees any thing like it—but beyond what one fancies might be. But still I am not frightened. It is not by equality of merit that you can be won. That is out of the question. It is he who sees and worships your merit the strongest, who loves you the most devotedly, that has the best right to a return. There I build my confidence. By that right I do and will deserve you." (III.3.318)

Henry repeats the words "merit" and "deserve" several times in this passage and sees the difference in "merit" between himself and Fanny. What he counts on, however, is his love and his devotion; he thinks that his constancy will finally make him deserve her, and we know that he fails by his own standards in the end. What is more: he falls victim to a misconception when he states that "[i]t is not by equality of merit that you can be won." This statement can be read in two ways: either he knows or assumes that he will never be her equal in merit and thereby also misjudges the meaning of this concept for her<sup>12</sup>; or what he says here testifies to his (newly found) modesty. And although one might say that Edmund likewise is not Fanny's equal

when it comes to moral worth, she loves Edmund especially because of his goodness and, according to her own standards and feelings, she has to marry a man who is her equal, not in the sense of money but of character.

When the narrator in the last chapter says, "Would he have deserved more," and when she explicitly states "[c]ould he have been satisfied with the conquest of one amiable woman's affection," we can see that Henry has not been constant and that, led by his vanity, he "worship[ped]" himself more "devotedly" than her; hence, he does not deserve her. True merit and true love are integral parts of the happiness of a married couple, as we can see at the end of the novel: "With so much true merit and true love, and no want of fortune and friends, the happiness of the married cousins must appear as secure as earthly happiness can be" (III.17.439).<sup>13</sup>

What then follows in the narrator's comment in the final chapter is a description of the road Henry has not taken, of where the "way of happiness" might have led him, had he behaved differently. There are a number of sentences starting with "could" and "would," and these modal verbs are repeated several times.<sup>14</sup> They all refer to conditions which might have been but can no longer be fulfilled; the consequence lies in the present time and also has effects on the future: Henry Crawford has foregone the possibility of "success and felicity." The problem is based especially on one of his character traits to which his sister had alluded earlier: he cannot be content with "the conquest of one amiable woman's affection." Fanny's dislike of Henry is actually grounded on this flaw: after the visit at Sotherton, Fanny thinks ill of him, and later, when she talks openly to Edmund about her lack of affection for Henry Crawford, she declares:

"I must say [...] that I cannot approve of his character. I have not thought well of him from the time of the play. I then saw him behaving, as it appeared to me, so very improperly and unfeelingly, I may speak of it now because it is all over—so improperly by poor Mr. Rushworth, not seeming to care how he exposed or hurt him, and paying attentions to my cousin Maria, which—in short, at the time of the play, I received an impression which will

never be got over. [...] I am persuaded that he does not think as he ought, on serious subjects.” (III.4.324-25)

Actually, earlier in the course of events, Edmund himself had recognized the “way to Fanny’s heart. She was not to be won by all that gallantry and wit, and good nature together, could do; or at least, she would not be won by them nearly so soon, without the assistance of sentiment and feeling, and seriousness on serious subjects” (III.3.315). Henry lacks seriousness “on serious subjects” generally and also in his perseverance of trying to win Fanny’s affection: “could he have found sufficient exultation in overcoming the reluctance, in working himself in the esteem and tenderness of Fanny Price.” The loss of this “esteem” is chiefly based on two incidents: the excursion to Sotherton and the theatricals at Mansfield Park during Sir Bertram’s absence.<sup>15</sup>

Sotherton is the place where, within the “wilderness” adjacent to the park, several seductions take place. Firstly, Mary Crawford wants to talk Edmund out of taking orders—and her misjudging his vocation is one of the reasons why, in Fanny’s eyes, she does “not deserve Edmund” (340):

“I am just as much surprised now as I was at first that you should intend to take orders. You really are fit for something better. Come, do change your mind. It is not too late. Go into the law.”

“Go into the law! with as much ease as I was told to go into this wilderness.”

“Now you are going to say something about law being the worst wilderness of the two, but I forestall you; remember I have forestalled you.” (88)

Mary doubts Edmund’s choice of profession and wants him to change his mind. That he then picks up the imagery of the wilderness is reminiscent of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (apart from the Bible), when Christian states at the beginning that he “walked through the wilderness of this world” (11):

“Oh! you do not consider how much we have wound about. We have taken such a very serpentine course; and the wood itself must be half a mile long in a straight line, for we have never seen the end of it yet, since we left the first great path.”

"But if you remember, before we left that first great path, we saw directly to the end of it. We looked down the whole vista, and saw it closed by iron gates, and it could not have been more than a furlong in length."

"Oh! I know nothing of your furlongs, but I am sure it is a very long wood; and that we have been winding in and out ever since we came into it; and therefore when I say that we have walked a mile in it, I must speak within compass." (88-89)

The imagery in this passage is linked to the semantic field of seduction: Mary treads on a "serpentine course" with Edmund and Fanny; she is the seductress, which becomes even more emphasised as the narrator describes her "lawlessness" (88) immediately before this part of the dialogue sets in. They have left the "great path" under her guidance and have seen the "iron gates" that border on the park.<sup>16</sup> Mary literally (and metaphorically) tries to lead Edmund astray from his chosen path. But this is not the only attempted 'seduction' to take place during the outing.

It is the very iron gate that, shortly afterwards, stands in the way of Maria, Mr. Rushworth and Henry Crawford. While Rushworth 'rushes' back to the house to get the key, Henry persuades Maria to step around the gate, ignoring Fanny's pleading to wait for the key<sup>17</sup>:

"But unluckily that iron gate, that ha-ha, give me a feeling of restraint and hardship. I cannot get out, as the starling said." As she spoke, and it was with expression, she walked to the gate; he followed her. "Mr. Rushworth is so long fetching this key!"

"And for the world you would not get out without the key and without Mr. Rushworth's authority and protection, or I think you might with little difficulty pass round the edge of the gate, here, with my assistance; I think it might be done, if you really wished to be more at large, and could allow yourself to think it not prohibited." (93)

The scene prefigures their "final adultery—also a bypassing of the 'iron' codes of society" (Tanner 455). Maria here shows how little she respects her husband-to-be, a behaviour which is even more foregrounded during the theatricals and which culminates in her eventual elopement with her 'seducer.'



The ensuing theatrical project at Mansfield Park brings Henry and Maria even closer together. But the performance of *Lovers’ Vows* is also a first instance of Henry Crawford being confronted with having to make a choice when the roles for the theatricals are being cast.<sup>18</sup> Both Maria and Julia Bertram want to be as close as possible to him and are therefore “determined to play the tragic role of Agatha” (Dingley 306), the mother of Frederick, the role played by Henry Crawford. He eventually tries to persuade Julia to play the comic role of Amelia: “Tragedy may be your choice, but it will certainly appear that comedy chuses [sic] *you*” (I.14.127). It has been suggested that this incident has a pictorial source, namely Sir Joshua Reynolds’s portrait of *Garrick Between Tragedy and Comedy* (1761) with the famous actor drawn between the two genres. This portrayal has been read as “a variant upon the classical theme of the Choice of Hercules, in which the mythic hero makes the morally correct decision between personifications of Virtue and Pleasure” (Dingley 307).<sup>19</sup> Henry Crawford’s manoeuvre to redirect Julia’s choice of role, however, is unsuccessful and results in Julia’s refusal to participate in the theatricals at all.<sup>20</sup>

It is because of his behaviour during the theatricals of *Lovers’ Vows* that Fanny thinks even more ill of him than before. The narrator makes the point that “[s]he did not like him as a man, but must admit him to be the best actor” (I.18.153), and although Fanny admits his great talents in role-playing, it is this very ability of his that she shuns.<sup>21</sup> Fanny watches him on-stage as well as off stage—after all, she is ‘only’ an observer of the events—and becomes more determined in her rejection of Henry Crawford’s behaviour and character.

This begins to change only very much later in the novel, when he first helps her brother William with his long-sought-for promotion (II.13) and during Henry’s visit in Portsmouth. She sees that he makes an effort at improving his character, and she starts to warm towards him. The narrator makes very explicit—both in terms of form and content—that Henry Crawford, after all, really might have been successful in his pursuit of Fanny. The process was mutual, and “[h]is affection had already done something: Her influence over him, had

already given him some influence over her.“ The repetition of “influence” and the parallel syntax indicate that; furthermore, during his visit in Portsmouth she finds it

pleasing to hear him speak so properly [about his performing his duties as a landowner]; here, he had been acting as he ought to do. [...] She was willing to allow he might have more good qualities than she had been wont to suppose. She began to feel the possibility of his turning out well at last. (III.10.41)

He is now no longer an actor, but he is “acting as he ought to do” and no longer “idle” and playing a part.

There is still hope, both for his further improvement and his growing influence over her: A narratorial statement and two chapter endings during his Portsmouth visit make that clear. When Henry and Fanny take a walk after church, the narrator explains:

The loveliness of the day, and of the view, he felt like herself. They often stopt with the same sentiment and taste, leaning against the wall, some minutes, to look and admire; and considering he was not Edmund, Fanny could not but allow that he was sufficiently open to the charms of nature, and very well able to express his admiration. (III.11.380)

They react to the landscape and the “loveliness of the day” in a similar way, and they share “sentiment and taste.” And although Edmund still is (and always will be) Fanny’s standard, she has to allow even Henry Crawford some openness for beauty in nature.

And it is thus that she comes to the conclusion that he has indeed changed:

she was quite persuaded of his being astonishingly more gentle, and regardful of others, than formerly. And if in little things, must it not be so in great? So anxious for her health and comfort, so very feeling as he now expressed himself, and really seemed, might not it be fairly supposed, that he would not much longer persevere in a pursuit so distressing to her? (III.11.384)

Fanny hopes that his improvement will make him stop distressing her, i.e. she hopes that he will no longer court her; still, she realises a change in his character that she would have thought impossible. This

is even more evident at the end of the subsequent chapter when she thinks about having to leave Susan behind on her return to Mansfield:

Were *she* likely to have a home to invite her to, what a blessing it would be!—And had it been possible for her to return Mr. Crawford's regard, the probability of his being very far from objecting to such a measure, would have been the greatest increase of all her own comforts. She thought he was really good-tempered, and could fancy his entering into a plan of that sort most pleasantly. (III.12.389)

Here, she goes so far as to think how he would act if they were married, and before her mind's eye, his action is based on his being "good-tempered." Fanny seems to soften in her judgment of him. It all seems to have depended on Henry's perseverance, and this is made explicit not only here but from the very moment his courtship of Fanny begins.

His lack of seriousness and perseverance make him lose Fanny, who would have been his "reward" (434), his prize, and there is certainly a pun on her name (Price) intended here. Fanny, as Mary Crawford recognizes in a "retrospect of what might have been," "would have fixed him, she would have made him happy for ever" (III.16.423). That the reward would have been "very voluntarily bestowed" is a further indication at "every probability of success" as to his marrying Fanny. "Fanny *must* have been his reward." This is not only Henry's wish (expressed in free indirect discourse), even more so in the case of a marriage between Edmund and Mary Crawford, but can also be read as a statement by the narrator who evidently pronounces a sort of obligation that she herself feels as to her narrative.

This seems to be the right place to discuss a few critical voices who claim that the novel does not "yield any conclusive evidence that Henry Crawford was ever meant to be anything but a villain: on the contrary, it is plain throughout that his final piece of folly is wholly consonant with the character that Jane Austen has drawn of him" (Wright 130). Nina Auerbach questions Henry's seriousness in regard to his love for Fanny: "Everything about Henry Crawford, that mobile and consummate actor, calls his sincerity into question. He stages his

love scenes before select audiences, all carefully chosen to put the greatest possible pressure on Fanny, only to humiliate her flamboyantly by his elopement with Maria once she has begun to respond. As Fanny and we know, his passion for her repeats more grandly his pattern of behaviour with her silly cousins, so that only the most sentimentally credulous reader could find this new performance credible" (31).

This borders on a genuine misreading if one considers the novel as a whole. The narrator makes a very explicit statement that the possibility of a union between Henry Crawford and Fanny is not excluded at all. Such a union, however, also depends very much on the behaviour of Maria Bertram, i.e., Mrs. Rushworth when Henry is in London after his Portsmouth visit and on his going there at all:

Had he done as he intended, and as he knew he ought, by going down to Everingham after his return from Portsmouth, he might have been deciding his own happy destiny. But he was pressed to stay for Mrs. Fraser's party; his staying was made of flattering consequence, and he was to meet Mrs. Rushworth there. Curiosity and vanity were both engaged, and the temptation of *immediate pleasure* was too strong for a mind unused to make any sacrifice to right; he resolved to defer his Norfolk journey, resolved that writing should answer the purpose of it, or that its purpose was unimportant—and staid. He saw Mrs. Rushworth, was received by her with a coldness which ought to have been repulsive, and have established apparent indifference between them for ever; but he was mortified, he could not bear to be thrown off by the woman whose smiles had been so wholly at his command; he must exert himself to subdue so proud a display of resentment; it was anger on Fanny's account; he must get the better of it, and make Mrs. Rushworth Maria Bertram again in her treatment of himself. (III.17.434; my emphasis)

The paragraph pursues the mode of the conditional and also of obligation: "Had he done as he intended, and he knew he ought." He acts against his intention and his better knowledge and is, we can conclude, led mainly by his vanity again; unfortunately, he forgets his improved self. The passage also refers back to the preceding part in mentioning his "happy destiny." He neglects his duty because the prospect of "immediate pleasure" is stronger than his perseverance—once again this alludes to the earlier passage: "thoughtless and selfish

from prosperity and bad example, he would not look beyond the *present moment*" (I.12.108; my emphasis). He is being tempted but the decision to be tempted and to follow his whim is his entirely: he does not act and react as he "ought to." Yet, all the time, he does have a choice, and the road not taken is the one that would have secured his happiness.<sup>22</sup> That this is due to a weakness of character becomes particularly evident when the narrator emphasises that "the temptation [...] was too strong for a mind unused to make any sacrifice to right." His self-love destroys everything.

In Portsmouth he had talked to Fanny about taking better care of his Norfolk estate, but when in London he first "resolved to defer his Norfolk journey," which is followed by the resolution that writing will do: the words "resolved" and "purpose" are both repeated twice in this sentence. He neglects his duty in declaring a purpose "unimportant" which was so important to Fanny; she had "thought he *would* go without delay" (III.12.387). The character who throughout the narrative has been represented as the master of "improvement" is not able to improve himself constantly.

Instead of leaving, he stays; we find a repetition of "stay" in this passage: "he was pressed to stay," "his staying was made of flattering consequence," and he "staid." As with the use of the word "improvement" this implicates another case of irony: although Henry Crawford stays, he is anything but 'staid' when he wavers from Fanny.<sup>23</sup>

A different purpose now replaces the one of travelling to Everingham: it is actually his sister who persuaded him to stay, as we learn from a letter by Mary to Fanny. When Fanny reflects on the content of this letter, she thinks: "That Miss Crawford should endeavour to secure a meeting between him and Mrs. Rushworth, was all in her worst line of conduct, and grossly unkind and ill-judged; but she hoped *he* would not be actuated by any such degrading curiosity" (III.12.387). Fanny still hopes for his better conduct from her experiencing his change during his visit in Portsmouth. However, he stays to meet Maria out of his very "curiosity and vanity [which] were both

engaged." He not only wants to know how she reacts when she sees him, but also wants his vanity satisfied. This, however, does not succeed, which is another reason for his downfall: his actual reaction when they meet is juxtaposed with how he should, "ought to," have reacted; her "coldness" should have resulted in his "indifference."<sup>24</sup> But his vanity gets the upper hand, which is emphasised by the repetition of "he": "*he* was mortified, *he* could not bear to be thrown off by the woman whose smiles had been so wholly at *his* command; *he* must exert himself to subdue so proud a display of resentment."

We can see that the use of "must" here is different from the one we encountered earlier: it is now not the narrator who feels an obligation but Henry himself in this clause of free indirect discourse. The narrative focalisation has shifted to him, and we participate in his thoughts and feelings. This emphasises the strength of his vanity as he feels that "he must exert himself [...] [and] get the better of it"<sup>25</sup>; he feels obliged, forced to do something about this coldness and wants to transform the cold Mrs. Rushworth back into the infatuated Maria Bertram again—and the mentioning of her maiden name indicates that he ignores her being married (which he does also later, in their elopement); at the same time, this mirrors his own turning backwards to his earlier, un-improved self.<sup>26</sup> Finally he is successful: "He was entangled by his own vanity, with as little excuse of love as possible, and without the smallest inconstancy of mind towards her cousin" (434), and nevertheless he understands that Fanny must never know of this. But

he went off with her at last, because he could not help it, regretting Fanny, even at the moment, but regretting her infinitely more, when all the bustle of the intrigue was over, and a very few months had taught him, by the force of contrast, to place a yet higher value on the sweetness of her temper, the purity of her mind, the excellence of her principles. [...] we may fairly consider a man of sense, like Henry Crawford, to be providing for himself no small portion of vexation and regret—vexation that must rise sometimes to self-reproach, and regret to wretchedness—in having so requited hospitality, so injured family peace, so forfeited his best, most estimable and endeared acquaintance, and so lost the woman whom he had rationally, as well as passionately loved. (435)

“Regret” is the first and foremost emotion he now feels, regret and vexation.<sup>27</sup> He realises that he truly loved Fanny, whereas he treated Maria “with as little excuse of love as possible.” And he also realises that the outcome of his behaviour is entirely his own fault. The “force of contrast” represents a juxtaposition of what he has and what he ought to have chosen.

This “force of contrast” is another guiding principle in the novel. Henry at last recognizes the “sweetness of her [Fanny’s] temper, the purity of her mind, the excellence of her principles.” Maria, on the other hand, follows only selfish motives, which can also be seen in her marrying Rushworth although she knows that she cannot love him. She follows her vanity, her pride and mercenary considerations—and this is actually a “road not taken” by Maria, namely when her father suggests that she break off the engagement with Rushworth (II.3.186)<sup>28</sup>:

her mind became cool enough to seek all the comfort that pride and self-revenge could give. Henry Crawford had destroyed her happiness, but he should not know that he had done it; he should not destroy her credit, her appearance, her prosperity too. He should not have to think of her as pining in the retirement of Mansfield for *him*, rejecting Sotherton and London, independence and splendour for *his* sake. Independence was more needful than ever; the want of it at Mansfield more sensibly felt. She was less and less able to endure the restraint which her father imposed. The liberty which his absence had given was now become absolutely necessary. She must escape from him and Mansfield as soon as possible, and find consolation in fortune and consequence, bustle and the world, for a wounded spirit. (187-88)

Maria seeks “comfort” in “pride and self-revenge”: she eventually marries Rushworth out of sheer spite, to ‘punish’ Henry Crawford, not seeing that, in consenting to a marriage that is not based on love and mutual respect, she punishes herself as she becomes utterly unhappy and eventually leaves her husband.

This passage also makes evident that Maria acts upon her vanity. She belongs to a whole group of characters who share this trait,<sup>29</sup> and this is one of the aspects that make Fanny and Henry so very unlike

each other. When Fanny talks to Edmund about her refusal of Henry Crawford, she states that “it would have been the extreme of vanity to be forming expectations on Mr. Crawford” (III.4.327)<sup>30</sup>: she thinks herself beneath him as to her social standing and probably also her whole appearance, knowing that he found her cousin Maria, who is so very different from herself, attractive. Fanny thus rejects the very notion of being vain,<sup>31</sup> while others indulge in their vanity.

She is everything that Henry Crawford is not—which he recognizes, and which makes her all the more attractive to him. During her conversation with Edmund, Fanny mentions this very dissimilarity as one of the reasons for her refusal (and we note that this is previous to Henry’s Portsmouth visit):

“We are so totally unlike,” said Fanny, avoiding a direct answer [to his remark that she “must be sorry for [her] indifference”], “we are so very, very different in all our inclinations and ways, that I consider it as quite impossible we should ever be tolerably happy together, even if I could like him. There never were two people more dissimilar. We have not one taste in common. We should be miserable.” (III.4.323)

Because of this dissimilarity in “inclinations and ways” she thinks happiness is impossible between them. But Edmund thinks quite the contrary—and he has to, considering his own infatuation with Mary Crawford:

“You are mistaken, Fanny. The dissimilarity is not so strong. You are quite enough alike. You have tastes in common. You have moral and literary tastes in common. You have both warm hearts and benevolent feelings; and Fanny, who that heard him read, and saw you listen to Shakespeare the other night, will think you unfitted as companions? You forget yourself: there is a decided difference in your tempers, I allow. He is lively, you are serious; but so much the better; his spirits will support yours. It is your disposition to be easily dejected, and to fancy difficulties greater than they are. His cheerfulness will counteract this. He sees difficulties no where; and his pleasantness and gaiety will be a constant support to you. Your being so far unlike, Fanny, does not in the smallest degree make against the probability of your happiness together: do not imagine it. I am myself convinced that it is rather a favourable circumstance. I am perfectly persuaded that the tempers had better be unlike; I mean unlike in the flow of the spirits, in the



manners, in the inclination for much or little company, in the propensity to talk or to be silent, to be grave or to be gay. Some opposition here is, I am thoroughly convinced, friendly to matrimonial happiness. I exclude extremes of course; and a very close resemblance in all those points would be the likeliest way to produce an extreme. A counteraction, gentle and continual, is the best safeguard of manners and conduct." (III.4.323)

Fanny feels "Miss Crawford's power [...] returning" in this speech. She does not seem to believe in the power of counteraction but more in the likeness of disposition to secure happiness. What Edmund here presents as a virtue, she regards as a vice.

It is only in the final chapter that Edmund changes his opinion; eventually the unhappy account of Henry Crawford's 'Road Not Taken' is followed by Edmund's choice of the "road of happiness":

Having once set out, and felt that he had done so, on this road to happiness, there was nothing on the side of prudence to stop him or make his progress slow; no doubts of her deserving, no fears from opposition of taste, no need of drawing new hopes of happiness from dissimilarity of temper. Her mind, disposition, opinions, and habits wanted no half concealment, no self deception on the present, no reliance on future improvement. (III.17.437)

After his disappointment in Mary Crawford, who could not understand his moral evaluation of her brother's elopement, Edmund has learnt to appreciate similarity in judgment and disposition and reverses his earlier opinion. After his final conversation and quarrel with Mary, she calls him back: "I resisted [...]. I have since—sometimes—for a moment—regretted that I did not go back; but I know I was right" (III.16.426). He chooses not to go back as he recognizes that he has been "deceived" (426) in her and that he "had never understood her before" (425). It is this lack of understanding as well as the "force of contrast" that make him recognize Fanny's value and redirect him towards her. He chooses the "road to happiness" and marries her after a short detour which seems to have been necessary to make him recognize the right way.<sup>32</sup>

Yet, another outcome would have been possible. To have Henry Crawford marry Fanny (and Edmund Mary Crawford) is a road the author might have taken. But she chooses a different road and has the

cousins marry, although, at the beginning of the novel, this love relationship was out of the question. As soon as the possibility of Fanny moving to Mansfield Park is mentioned, Sir Thomas thinks “of his own four children—of his two sons—of cousins in love, &c” (I.1.7). His objections, however, are done away with by Mrs. Norris.<sup>33</sup> That eventually “there were no difficulties [...], no drawback of poverty or parent” (III.17.437) draws the reader’s attention to the comedy ending of the novel:

It was a match which Sir Thomas’s wishes had even forestalled. Sick of ambitious and mercenary connections, prizing more and more the sterling good of principle and temper, and chiefly anxious to bind by the strongest securities all that remained to him of domestic felicity, he had pondered with genuine satisfaction on the more than possibility of the two young friends finding their mutual consolation in each other for all that had occurred of disappointment to either [...]. (III.17.437-38)

Sir Thomas has learned to “prize” the right things: Fanny is this ‘Price’ of “principle and temper” that represents the security of “domestic felicity” to everyone around her. Everybody is “restored [...] to tolerable comfort,”<sup>34</sup> and it turns out that Fanny Price, the heroine, is simply not determined to marry a minor character—minor in terms of moral value, however, not necessarily in terms of character constellation. Although she does at some point begin to consider marriage to a man she does not love spontaneously but has some qualities that make him appear more agreeable, such as money and intellect as well as his love for her, she turns out to be different from Charlotte Lucas or Jane Fairfax, who will spend the rest of her life being the paragon for her husband, Frank Churchill.<sup>35</sup> She is to have a partner in life who is her equal and whom she can marry for love, and for love only.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 10th International *Connotations* Symposium “Roads Not Taken” in Freudenstadt (August 2-6, 2009). I would like to thank Matthias Bauer, Inge Leimberg and Burkhard Niederhoff as well as the participants of the symposium for their critical and helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Černý 81: “Die Beobachtung, daß Jane Austen am Ende ihrer Romane die Protagonisten belohnt oder beschenkt, ist vorwiegend als Moment der komödienthaften Handlungsstruktur betrachtet worden” (81).—One might say that *Mansfield Park* also follows the pattern of fairy tales: the dependent and poor relative marries the rich son of the family (cf. Nabokov 9-10; Tanner 442).

<sup>3</sup>This stability has often been a point of criticism, especially regarding Fanny Price; see, e.g., Auerbach and Wright.—“Die Hindernisse, die in Unkenntnis, Eitelkeit, Egozentrik liegen, werden schließlich überwunden, so dass der geläuterte Charakter am Ende zu sich selbst findet, nachdem er sich im Spiegel des anderen überhaupt erst richtig erkannt hat” (Černý 81). Černý mainly refers to the character of Anne Elliot who does not change in the course of the novel (see n4); this, however, is a trait that she shares with Fanny Price. Fanny is the moral centrepiece and “touchstone” (Banfield 21) in the novel—everybody around her needs “improvement,” one of the central concepts of *Mansfield Park*.

<sup>4</sup>Another case in point is Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* (first published in 1818), who is also unwavering, consistent in her affections, and who does not regret her decision not to marry Captain Wentworth earlier in her life. She then also decides against marrying Mr. Elliot because he does not deserve her and who eventually turns out to be a bad character. From the beginning, she is somehow ‘meant to’ marry Captain Wentworth and, despite her stability in character, has to undergo some trials and tribulations to achieve that end. It is particularly in this respect that she differs from Fanny Price.

<sup>5</sup>I therefore hesitate to agree with Inge Leimberg, who writes that Fanny cannot marry Henry Crawford *because* he is a minor character (and not a romantic hero like Edmund): “Fanny Price, als Heldin [ist] eben nicht dazu ausersehen, Mr. Crawford zu heiraten” (“Diktat der Wirklichkeit” 319). In my opinion, Henry does indeed have the potential to become a romantic hero but foregoes this opportunity through his wrong choices, as will be pointed out below.

<sup>6</sup>All quotations refer to the Penguin classics edition of the novel.

<sup>7</sup>The overall destination of the characters seems to be “happiness,” which is mentioned 46 times in the course of the novel, mainly in the context of courtship and marriage.

<sup>8</sup>For critics who deem the marriage between Fanny Price and Henry Crawford impossible see, e.g., Leimberg, “Diktat der Wirklichkeit” 319; Auerbach 31; Banfield 16. Those who argue in favour of their marriage include Wright 130; Nabokov 49; Kaye-Smith and Stern 49; Cecil 19. See also below.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Leimberg who elaborates on this notion of the term “independence” as a fitting image for the overlap of morals and economy: “Jane Austen [...] gebraucht

auch gern den Ausdruck 'independence,' der gleichzeitig mit dem pekuniären auch einen sozialen und moralischen Wert bezeichnet [...] und der insofern eine passende Chiffre darstellt für Überschneidungen auf den Gebieten von Moral, Sozietät und Ökonomie, von Liebe und Geld" ("Humble Independence" 395).

<sup>10</sup>Both terms, "merit" and "desert," are ambiguous. See *OED* "desert" *n.*<sup>1</sup>: "Deserving: the becoming worthy of recompense, i.e. of reward or punishment, according to the good or ill of character or conduct; worthiness of recompense, merit or demerit"; "merit, *n.*": "I. †2. The condition or fact of deserving reward or punishment"; "II. †5. That which is deserved or has been earned, whether good or evil; due reward or punishment." These denotations of merit are now obsolete but were still common in the eighteenth century. The effect of this ambiguity is that these terms may receive a profoundly ironic note, depending on who uses them, as shall become obvious below.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. also Edmund's comment: "He has chosen his partner, indeed, with rare felicity. He will make you happy, Fanny, I know he will; but you will make him every thing" (III.4.325).

<sup>12</sup>Fanny never mentions the concept of "merit," probably because of its religious connotations; but she refers to 'desert' when she thinks that Mary does "not deserve Edmund."

<sup>13</sup>In this comment, the narrator draws a clear distinction between "true merit" and illusory deserts; on the ambiguity of these terms see n10.

<sup>14</sup>"Could" is repeated twice; "would" five times. Perkins speaks of "precautionary modal devices" (n.p.).

<sup>15</sup>Although, as Wright points out, she "disapproves of him from the very beginning [...]: she sees him flirt overtly with Maria Bertram, whose engagement to James Rushworth is a matter of common knowledge" (127), her dislike is confirmed and hardened by these incidents.

<sup>16</sup>When Christian sets out on his pilgrimage, he also comes to the wicket-gate and has to pass through it; he is warned by Good Will of the "turnings [...]or windings" and the "crooked" ways (27); and he is almost led astray by By-ends (87-90). Černý points to a further analogy, namely with *Paradise Lost* (92-93), especially IV.131-37: "So on he fares, and to the border comes, / Of Eden, where delicious Paradise, / Now nearer, Crowns with her enclosure green, / As with a rural mound the champain head / Of a steep wilderness, whose hairie sides / With thicket overgrown, grotesque and wilde, / Access deni'd"; see also II.943 and IX.942, and the mention of "serpent error" in VII.302..

<sup>17</sup>Černý refers to the allegorical readings of this scene by A. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate* (25) and to Tanner's "Introduction" (455-56).

<sup>18</sup>See Burlin and Dingley.

<sup>19</sup>Dingley goes on: "However, [...] Garrick is not, unlike his antique prototype, choosing between the two women, for although 'his head is turned toward Tragedy, his smile shows that his thoughts are on Comedy.' And such equivocation is fully appropriate, for Garrick's greatness as an actor consists very largely in his

ability to play both comic and tragic roles with equal virtuosity” (307). See also Burlin for other examples of the topos in contemporary fiction and for her reading of *Mansfield Park* in this context: “The novel’s hero, Edmund Bertram, is Hercules choosing between the heroine, Fanny Price, the goddess of Virtue, and her rival, Mary Crawford, the goddess of Pleasure or Vice. The villain or cad, Henry Crawford, a superb actor who can perform Garrick’s best roles, is Reynolds’s Hercules, choosing between Fanny’s two cousins, Julia Bertram as Comedy and Maria Bertram as Tragedy. But he is also Shaftesbury’s Hercules, choosing between Virtue (Fanny) and Vice (Maria)” (Burlin 73). Burlin here refers to Shaftesbury’s *A Notion of the Historical Draught or Tablature of the Judgment of Hercules, according to Prodicus, Lib. II* (London, 1718).—For another depiction of the topos see, e.g., Paolo Veronese’s *The Choice between Virtue and Vice* (The Frick Collection, New York).

<sup>20</sup>Julia thus becomes one of the “roads not taken” by Henry Crawford, although this choice would have been the fulfilment of her aunt Norris’s wishes.

<sup>21</sup>“The point is [...] that these talents [in role-playing] stray out of the theatre and into real life: off stage he is ‘at treacherous play’ with the feelings of Julia and Maria” (Tanner 457).

<sup>22</sup>Hilary P. Dannenberg comments on this as a “counterfactual path” in *Mansfield Park* and “maps the one actual and two virtual courses of events created by embedded counterfactual speculations in the closing chapters [...]. In the actual course of events, Edmund eventually marries Fanny; in a counterfactual constructed by Mary Crawford, Fanny accepts Henry’s proposal of marriage, which in turn leads to the marriage of Edmund and Mary; in a counterfactual constructed by the narrator herself, the deviation from actuality comes later [in III.17] and centers on Henry’s not remaining in London to flirt and then elope with Mrs. Rushworth” (68). See also her ‘map’ of “actual and counterfactual paths of time in Austen’s *Mansfield Park*” (69; fig. 4).

<sup>23</sup>Another reading might be that he stays what he has always been and does *not* improve.

<sup>24</sup>Henry Crawford is eventually seduced by Mrs. Rushworth’s “coldness which ought to have been repulsive” mainly *because* it is directed against him; she is not cold because she loves her husband but for the reason that Henry wounded her spirit.

<sup>25</sup>This statement also contains some irony as to the notion of getting “better” and of improvement.

<sup>26</sup>See, e.g., Cecil’s commentary on Henry’s character: “Henry Crawford comes to life as a sympathetic character; and under the pressure of his personality the plot takes a turn, of which the only logical conclusion is his marriage with the heroine, Fanny. [...] In the last three chapters she [Jane Austen] violently wrenches the story back into its original course: but only at the cost of making Henry act in a manner wholly inconsistent with the rest of the character” (19).

<sup>27</sup>This notion of “regret” is one of the major differences between *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*: whereas Henry regrets his choice, such a pang is not felt by Anne Elliot because she knows that, at the time, hers was the right decision. When she

reflects her past choice of not marrying Wentworth, she tells him: "I have been thinking over the past, and trying impartially to judge of the right and wrong, I mean with regard to myself; and I must believe that I was right, much as I suffered from it, that I was perfectly right in being guided by the friend whom you will love better than you do now. [...] I was right in submitting to her, and that if I had done otherwise, I should have suffered more in continuing the engagement that I did even in giving it up, because I should have suffered in my conscience" (248). The road chosen by Anne is the right one because she followed her conscience as a guiding instance; cf. Černý 84-85. See also Niederhoff's essay "Unlived Lives in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and Tom Stoppard's *The Invention of Love*" in this volume (185n5).

<sup>28</sup>"Sir Thomas resolved to speak seriously to her. Advantageous as would be the alliance, and long standing and public as was the engagement, her happiness must not be sacrificed to it. [...] With solemn kindness Sir Thomas addressed her; told her his fears, inquired into her wishes, entreated her to be open and sincere, and assured her that every inconvenience should be braved, and the connection entirely given up, if she felt herself unhappy in the prospect of it. He would act for her and release her. Maria had a moment's struggle as she listened, and only a moment's: when her father ceased, she was able to give her answer immediately, decidedly, and with no apparent agitation. She thanked him for his great attention, his paternal kindness, but he was quite mistaken in supposing she had the smallest desire of breaking through her engagement, or was sensible of any change of opinion or inclination since her forming it. She had the highest esteem for Mr. Rushworth's character and disposition, and could not have a doubt of her happiness with him" (186-87). Again, everything turns around "happiness."

<sup>29</sup>It is attributed to Mary Crawford—Mary's "selfishness and vanity" (III.14); "Mary had enough of vanity, ambition, love, and disappointment" (III.17)—and Maria Bertram—"Their [the sisters'] vanity was in such good order" (I.4); Maria's "vanity and pride" when they approach Sotherton (I.8)—twice in the course of events, and to Henry Crawford eight times, cf. I.12; II.2, III.2 (twice), III.14; III.15; III.17 (twice).—This passage also illustrates the damaging influence of "independence" on characters.

<sup>30</sup>Fanny's quiet assertion of her right of refusal when she is pressurized to marry the man whom she dislikes is presented as a rebellion not against the *order* of her social environment but against its *disorder*: the rural gentry is implicitly criticized when it seems to be giving up its ideal of companionate marriage for the sake of socio-economic alliances or marriages of conveniences" (Toker 95).

<sup>31</sup>Likewise Edmund's "vanity was not of a strength to fight long against reason" (III.16.426). His reason is important; cf. Shaftesbury's notion of the importance of reason when it comes to making the right choice (7).—Austen here plays on the ambiguity of the word "vanity"; cf. *OED* "vanity" 1.a and 3.a.

<sup>32</sup>"Bei Jane Austen ertragen die [...] Vorbildfiguren ihren Lebensweg nicht nur, sondern erkennen vor allem die 'krummen Wege' der Providenz als Bedingung für das gute Ende" (Černý 90).—Interestingly, it is not the heroine who develops

in the course of this novel, but it is Edmund who has to find himself and to learn what he really wants.

<sup>33</sup>"You are thinking of your sons—but do not you know that of all things upon earth *that* is the least likely to happen; brought up, as they would be, always together like brothers and sisters? It is morally impossible. [...] It is, in fact, the only sure way of providing against the connection. Suppose her a pretty girl, and seen by Tom or Edmund for the first time seven years hence, and I dare say there would be mischief. The very idea of her having been suffered to grow up at a distance from us all in poverty and neglect, would be enough to make either of the dear sweet-tempered boys in love with her. But breed her up with them from this time [...], and she will never be more to either than a sister" (I.1.8).

<sup>34</sup>At the very beginning of the last chapter, the narrator formulates her objective: "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" (429).

<sup>35</sup>Cf. Leimberg, "Diktat der Wirklichkeit" 319.

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