



Money, Morals, and *Mansfield Park*: The West Indies Revisited

JUNE STURROCK

June Sturrock is the editor of the Broadview Texts *Mansfield Park* and has presented papers at several AGMs. Her numerous publications focus mostly on nineteenth-century writing. A lifelong member of JASNA, she is an Emeritus Professor of English at Simon Fraser University.

A very young, timid, but highly-principled and religious girl from a large and humble family is taken into a rich, upper-class household, whose money comes mainly from large estates in the West Indies. In this cold and formal family, she is neglected, snubbed, and often made to feel like a vulgar and uneducated outsider, especially by the beautiful but passive lady of the house, by a self-possessed daughter of the house—and most of all by a spiteful, hostile, and mercenary aunt. One of the two sons shows her great kindness, but all the same, she suffers greatly through a number of trials, and is often unwell. She is brought into direct rivalry for the affections of her beloved with a richer, livelier, and better-born young woman. Eventually, after a series of family disasters, her strict adherence to her own ethical code places her as the moral center of her household, a household that is made more humane by her central role in it.

THIS PLOT-OUTLINE WILL SEEM VERY FAMILIAR to readers of *Persuasions*. However, it is a summary not of *Mansfield Park*, but of *Heartsease*, a novel published in 1854 by Charlotte Mary Yonge, the best-selling (and Austen-loving) author of *The Heir of Redclyffe*. I do not intend to dwell on *Heartsease* at any length here. My one purpose in mentioning this novel is to draw attention to the terms of my title—money, morals, the West Indies. Yonge's pious mid-nineteenth-century rewriting of *Mansfield Park* elaborates on these subjects in a telling fashion. It sends Anglican missionaries off to the misman-

aged West Indian properties belonging to its version of the Bertram family, and involves at least half-a-dozen other instances of gross financial mismanagement or corruption, as well as a series of both proposed and actual mercenary marriages (Dunlap 1). Evidently an astute, if biased, reader of this period saw both Austen's West Indian references, and the related and insistent concern with false attitudes towards money, as significant moral aspects of *Mansfield Park*. Victorian readers and writers, that is, were prepared to view Austen's fiction in terms of the morality of material and economic issues. After Yonge, however, these concerns were largely ignored by Austen's readers for the next century or so. Not until the later twentieth century, and especially after the publication of Edward Said's "Jane Austen and Empire" in 1989, was the West Indian question seen as being of much significance. For me, as apparently for Charlotte Yonge, the Antiguan connection in *Mansfield Park* relates closely to Austen's insistence on attitudes towards money in this novel. Like a good neo-Victorian, I will discuss these concerns in relation to that other important M-word—morals.



I do not write for such dull Elves
As have not a great deal of Ingenuity themselves.
(*Letters* 29 January 1813)¹

Nor does she: we, her readers, need whatever wits we have about us. Austen's *Mansfield Park* indicates, without statement or comment, that Sir Thomas Bertram is a slave-owner; Patricia Rozema's *Mansfield Park*, with its mournful music, slave-ships, and horrendous etchings purloined from William Blake, insists loudly on the dark significance of this fact. Rozema, like Blake, has a good reason for her insistence. A (Miramax) film-maker in 1999, such as Rozema, addresses a multi-national audience unlikely to be especially well-informed about British involvement in slavery. An illustrator and engraver working in the early 1790s, such as Blake, addresses a British readership torn over the question of slavery.² Blake, moreover, was engaged with (or against) a text—Stedman's *Five Years' Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*—that was, at best, ambivalent on the subject. Austen is working in a different and more supple medium. She is also working after the British abolition of the slave trade and addressing an audience sensitized by decades of abolitionist propaganda. More significantly, she has a different aesthetic, choosing to write with a peculiar subtlety that demands all the "Ingenuity" of

those dullish elves, her twenty-first century readers. Her art is one of implication, precision, and economy.

As Said points out, Austen's references to Antigua are minimal. We learn that Sir Thomas has property on one of the Leeward Islands (5). We gather that it is not prospering (24, 30) and then that its poor returns demand his presence (32)—a prolonged presence (38). We hear that he returns, thin, tired and weather-beaten, anxious to talk about his experiences (178), that Fanny asks him about the slave trade, and that his answer to this question—whatever it may have been—ends the conversation (198). And that's it. These references communicate nothing at all about Sir Thomas's behavior in Antigua or his opinions and observations about slavery there: he may have been either for the slave trade or against it.

In another text these may well have been crucial questions. Here the Antiguan allusions function quite differently. In terms of plot, Sir Thomas, the controlling parent, must absent himself from home for a period long enough to allow his family to entangle themselves with Crawfords, Rushworths and Mr. Yates; problems with an Antiguan estate provide a perfectly convincing rationale for such an absence. The colony, like the rest of the British West Indies, was in decline at the period at which *Mansfield Park* is set. "Bankruptcy is universal," wrote Governor Lavington from Antigua in 1805. The British parliament set up three committees studying the economic "distress" of West Indian planters between 1807 and 1808 (Ragatz 309). Again, in terms of the moral positioning of the character of Sir Thomas, Austen chooses Antigua with some care, as the West Indian island on which slaves stood the best chance of comparatively humane treatment. In the years after liberation, it would be the only one in the Antilles "to eventually extend freedom to its slaves without an initial apprenticeship period" (Ragatz 66-67). William Wilberforce in 1791, as John Wiltshire notes, comments on the comparative well-being of the slaves of Antigua, attributing it to the work of Moravian and Methodist missionaries ("Decolonising *Mansfield Park*" 312). Earlier, Janet Schaw, in her West Indian journal, had written of Antigua as "strikingly superior to those of the other [British West Indian] possessions with respect to the privilege accorded" the Africans (92), attributing this superiority not to missionary work but to the comparative rarity of absentee landlords on the island.

Sir Thomas, though, is an absentee landlord. Evidently, Austen's references to Antigua, though sparse, have rich and complex implications. Sir Thomas is a slave-owner, a category common enough amongst English gen-

tlemen, but known through the propaganda campaigns as being capable either of comparatively humane behavior or of “Savage Murder,” as Hannah More put it in 1795 (“The Sorrows of Yamba” 498). While I agree with Wiltshire that “an income from the West Indies would be a normal or unremarkable part of a gentleman’s estate” (“Decolonising *Mansfield Park*” 305) Austen’s more sensitive readers would have been aware of its unsavory connotations. All the same, Sir Thomas owns slaves on an island known for its comparatively merciful treatment of Africans, while being one of those absentee landlords whose inattention can foster abuses. These few references indicate, with splendid Austenian economy, the crucial contradictions and complexities of Sir Thomas’s character, which are apparent in all his interactions with other people, and more especially in those interactions in which money or material advantage is concerned. Sir Thomas may never be entirely motivated by “the sordid lust for gold” that More, and many others, associates with slave-owners (*Slavery* 127), but that “lust” affects in some degree virtually every action he takes.

The very first information Austen provides about Sir Thomas, apart from his rank and his wealth, communicates the mixed motives that habitually impel him. The narrative voice comments, in relation to his willingness to help his in-laws, the Prices, “Sir Thomas had interest, which, from principle as well as pride, from a general wish of doing right, and a desire of seeing all that were connected with him in situations of respectability, he would have been glad to exert . . .” (3-4). Principle and pride, the wish to do right and the wish for enhanced respectability: Sir Thomas, then, like most of us, is motivated by a combination of moral standards and worldly interest. This uneasy combination drives his actions throughout the novel. For instance, he conscientiously offers to release his daughter Maria from her engagement to the clownish Mr. Rushworth. When she refuses this offer, however, he is quickly satisfied:

too glad to be satisfied perhaps to urge the matter quite so far as his judgment might have dictated to others . . . [,] happy to escape the embarrassing evils of such a rupture, the wonder, the reflections, the reproach that must attend it, happy to secure a marriage which would bring him such an addition of respectability and influence . . . (201)

He acts, that is, largely out of concern for material and social advantage. As he comes to realize later, out of painful experience, in Maria’s marriage he has “sacrificed the right to the expedient, and been governed by motives of

selfishness and worldly wisdom” (461). These same motives—expediency, selfishness, worldly wisdom—are again at work when he tries to bully Fanny into accepting Henry Crawford: he expects his niece to act as he has acted, not out of affection or principle, but out of consideration of “[t]he advantage or disadvantage of [her] family” (318).

From the first page of this novel onwards, Austen represents most of her characters as activated, like Sir Thomas, by a complex of motives, amongst which material gain often dominates. She also represents them as able, again like Sir Thomas, to veil their materialism in the language of duty. As a wealthy and independent male, Sir Thomas is free to view material gain discreetly, in terms of “respectability and influence,” rather than direct financial advantage. Other characters, especially women, lacking the freedom inherent in Sir Thomas’s position, must take a more direct view of monetary considerations. The more obvious instances of this form of materialism relate to sex and marriage. As Edward Copeland, discussing *Mansfield Park* observes, unsentimentally, “the heartbeat of romance lies in a good income” (“Money” 133). Maria Bertram’s ruinous marriage is based on a perverted sense of duty: “Being now in her twenty-first year, Maria Bertram was beginning to think matrimony a duty; and as a marriage with Mr. Rushworth would give her the enjoyment of a larger income than her father’s, . . . by the same rule of moral obligation, her evident duty was to marry Mr. Rushworth if she could” (38–39). The evident irony of the narrative voice here makes it impossible to assess how far the language of “duty” and “moral obligation” is intended to approximate to Maria’s thought, and how far it reflects more generally on the codes of conduct in relation to marriage that were common among the gentry, pseudo-gentry, and the middle-classes. Maria and Maria’s society are equally condemned by such a commentary.

Elsewhere, Austen puts similar language directly into the mouths of her characters. Maria Bertram might well have gathered her moral standards from that most proper source, her own mother. Lady Bertram, giving Maria’s cousin Fanny the one “rule of conduct” she will ever receive from her aunt, is quite clear on the morality of marriage: “[Y]ou must be aware, Fanny, that it is every young woman’s duty to accept such a very unexceptionable offer as this” (333). Marry for money. Mary Crawford, though she is quite clearly to a huge degree Lady Bertram’s intellectual superior, significantly echoes her words: “It is every body’s duty to do as well for themselves [in marriage] as they can” (289), she says: “every body should marry *as soon as they can do it to advantage*” (43, my emphasis). Maria, in engaging herself to a man who, with-

out his twelve thousand a year, “would be a very stupid fellow,” according to Edmund (40), “has done no more than what every young woman would do,” according to Miss Crawford (108). Mary’s confusion of the monetary, the moral, and the sexual resounds throughout the novel, both through her own voice and through that of other characters.

Perhaps the most blatant example of this frank and unquestioning acceptance of the monetary basis of sexual life in the upper and middle classes is Mary Crawford’s comment on the Bertram/Rushworth marriage. Maria, giving her first party of the London season in “one of the best houses in Wimpole Street,” is expected to feel “that she has got her pennyworth for her penny” (394). This expression, which Miss Crawford herself acknowledges to be a “vulgar phrase,” makes brutally plain the shamefully commercial nature of the transactions between the Rushworths: he has bought her, and she has bought him, or at least his position, with her body, her “penny”: Wimpole Street and its resplendent parties are merely her “pennyworth” (395). “[E]very thing is to be got with money”: Mary speaks of this as “the true London maxim” (58), and she has inevitably absorbed the values of her culture and her education.

Mary Crawford, as well as being pretty and lively, is evidently highly intelligent, as her conversation shows. She is also capable of sympathy: she shows in her kindnesses to Fanny “the really good feelings by which she was almost purely governed” (147). But Austen represents Mary Crawford’s moral confusion over money—a culturally-conditioned confusion—as dulling both her innate intelligence and her capacity for sympathy. Mary makes a typical comment on the unhappy marriage of her friend, Mrs. Fraser: “She could not do otherwise than accept him, for he was rich, and she had nothing” (361). Miss Crawford here seems quite oblivious of the fact that she is talking to Fanny Price, who, having less than nothing, has, all the same, just refused Mary’s rich brother. A more distasteful example of this growing blindness to other people and their sensibilities is Mary’s letter to Fanny enquiring about Tom Bertram’s illness. She assumes that Fanny’s feelings towards Tom’s danger must be identical with her own, and she exhorts Fanny not to trouble “to be ashamed of either my feelings or your own” (434), believing Fanny must be as content to see her eldest cousin dead and Edmund the heir in his place as Miss Crawford herself would be.

Mary Crawford, in fact, generalizes so much from her own standards—unsurprisingly, since they are those of most her acquaintance—that she assumes that these standards are, or should be, universal. When Edmund

Bertram asks her—or states—“You intend to be very rich,” her immediate, if half-playful, response is, “To be sure. Do not you? —Do not we all?” (213). And she soon follows this asseveration by jeering at Edmund’s declared intention of aspiring merely to “[h]onesty . . . in the middle state of worldly circumstances” (214). Austen represents Mary Crawford as being as acquisitive in her own way as Mrs. Norris—whom, being perceptive, Miss Crawford seems to dislike—is in hers. In fact, Mrs. Norris, with her “infatuating principle” (8) of unnecessary thrift and her keen eye for the main chance, which tends to light on such trifles as cream cheeses, recipes, plants, pheasants’ eggs, scraps of green baize, and basins of soup, can be regarded as a sort of rather surprising parody of Miss Crawford. Mary’s envious eye, however, is cast on larger goals—not on such perquisites as free meals and carriage rides, but on the impressive fortunes of Mr. Rushworth and Tom Bertram (161, 434).

This comparison may perhaps seem rather far-fetched, though it is one of many possible parallels, given that virtually every character in *Mansfield Park* is represented in terms of his or her diseased relationship with money. Tom Bertram is the wastrel heir so often found in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction, “with all the liberal dispositions of an eldest son, who feels born only for expense and enjoyment” (17). His sisters already show their bent towards materialism in childhood. On Fanny’s first day at Mansfield Park they “make her a generous present of some of their least valued toys” and then take up “whatever might be the favourite holiday sport of the moment, making artificial flowers or wasting gold paper” (14). To use the critical terms of Edward Copeland, Austen represents them as budding consumers. A fine display of the various kinds of attitudes towards money arises from the subject of the improvements at Sotherton. Maria, calmly assuming the right to spend Rushworth’s money, tells him his best friend would be the notoriously expensive Humphry Repton. Mrs. Norris, who likes to spend anyone’s money except her own, agrees, telling Rushworth that he need not worry if Repton’s rates were doubled (53). Edmund would like to oversee his own improvements while Mary would gladly pay to avoid the trouble (56–57). And so on.

All this characteristic chatter seems harmless enough, but the fact is that the novel’s catastrophes are occasioned by these false attitudes towards money. Maria’s adultery and eventual imprisonment with Mrs. Norris are a natural consequence of marrying for money. Sir Thomas’s unhappiness is a result of having encouraged this marriage while knowing Maria’s motives perfectly well. Rushworth suffers humiliation because he has bought what should not have been for sale: “His punishment followed his conduct, as did a

deeper punishment, the deeper guilt of his wife" (464). Henry Crawford's loss of happiness also comes about as a result of his attitudes towards his financial life. He treats his estate at Everingham as merely a producer of money and game, until he is prompted to consider changing his ways by his understanding of Fanny's values: "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" and have ended up happily married to Fanny (467). His decision to choose immediate pleasure rather than his responsibilities results in his loss of "his best, most estimable and endeared acquaintance," as well as "the woman whom he had rationally, as well as passionately loved" (469).

Apart from Edmund Bertram, the only characters Austen represents as being free from venality are the younger Prices. In a novel, that is, in which, as John Wiltshire says, nearly every character is extremely wealthy ("*Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, *Persuasion*" 59), only the few characters who know something of poverty see money as connected with work and responsibility rather than with sex, luxury, influence, and indulgence. Perhaps this contrast between rich and poor argues that there is some truth in the assertion made by a character in one of Iris Murdoch's novels: "it is only poor people who don't want money, they lack the concept" (483). Austen, of course, accounts for it differently. The young Prices have some rather uncomfortable privileges: "the advantages of early hardship and discipline, and the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure" (473).

I will end by returning to the West Indies. I have argued that Sir Thomas's position as owner of an Antiguan property relates to one of the novel's on-going moral concerns, the damage done by false attitudes towards money and by the failure to question societal norms in regard to money.³ In arguing in this deliberately old-fashioned way, perhaps I might be regarded as being engaged in what John Wiltshire calls "decolonising" the novel, in that my attention is directed firmly, as Said says Austen's is, towards England, towards English relationships and English failures. Sir Thomas's position as an Antiguan land owner is symptomatic of his attitudes towards the acquisition and retention of wealth. However, I agree with Robert Irvine's claim: "*Mansfield Park* provides us with a way of thinking about the interpenetration of global economic relations with everyday life. A postcolonial approach to this text could remind us of our ongoing implication in those relations" (140). Reading *Mansfield Park* can not only remind us of our implication in these relations but also direct our attention towards the habitual cupidity on which such relations are based.

NOTES

1. She is, of course, playfully misquoting Scott (*Marmion* 6.38).
2. These illustrations to Stedman were published in 1796, but Blake had been working on them for some years.
3. Edward Copeland's rather different—or differently expressed—position, that this novel is about “disastrous consumer decisions,” is based on much the same evidence (*Women Writing* 102).

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