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Marriage as a Dubious Goal in *Mansfield Park*

Jane Austen's 1814 novel *Mansfield Park* begins and ends with the topic of marriage. In this regard it seems to fit into the genre of the courtship novel, a form, popular in the eighteenth century, in which the plot is driven by the heroine's difficulties in attracting an offer from the proper suitor. According to Katherine Sobba Green, the courtship novel "detailed a young woman's entrance into society, the problems arising from that situation, her courtship, and finally her choice (almost always fortunate) among suitors" (2). Often the heroine and her eventual husband are kept apart initially by misunderstanding, by the hero's misguided attraction to another, by financial obstacles, or by family objections.¹ The overcoming of these problems, with the marriage of the newly united couple, forms the happy ending anticipated by readers. Sometimes, as in a Shakespearean comedy, there are multiple marriages happily celebrated; this is the case, for example, in Austen's own *Pride and Prejudice*.

Despite the fact that *Mansfield Park* ends with the marriage of the heroine, Fanny Price, to the man whom she has set her heart on, her cousin Edmund Bertram, the novel expresses a strong degree of ambivalence toward the pursuit and achievement of marriage, especially for

¹ See Green, especially 1-7, and also Hinnant, for further description and discussion of the courtship novel. Green considers *Mansfield Park* a courtship novel, including it in a list of such novels in the period 1740-1820 (163-64).

women. For Fanny, marriage may be a matter of the heart, but for other characters in the novel, marriage—or the desire for marriage—is precipitated by, among other things, vanity, financial considerations, boredom, the desire to “disoblige” one’s family (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 5) or simply to escape from it, and social and parental pressure to form a suitable match. And, although readers are meant to understand that Fanny’s desire for Edmund is based not on financial ambition but on her “fond attachment” to him (75), the narrator makes sure that we are also aware of the poverty that Fanny has escaped by being adopted into her uncle’s household as a child. When Fanny angers her uncle, Sir Thomas Bertram, by refusing an offer of marriage from the wealthy Henry Crawford, he sends her back to visit her struggling family in Portsmouth. It is plain to the reader, and seemingly to Fanny as well, that she faces a difficult, dreary, and perhaps dangerous life without either an advantageous match or the continued protection and support of her uncle, neither of which, at this moment in the plot, she can take for granted.

If marriage can have the effect of saving a woman from economic hardship, it also can have the opposite effect. The novel’s note of warning about marriage is sounded in the first few sentences, with the comparative history of the three Ward sisters of Huntingdon (Fanny Price’s two aunts and her mother), beginning about “thirty years ago,” when the eldest sister, Maria, although possessing an income of “only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet’s lady, with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income” (5). From the beginning, readers learn the factors influencing the marriage market for the daughters of respectable country families in late-eighteenth-century England. A

woman was expected to bring a dowry to a marriage—and the higher the better. As Elizabeth Bergen Brophy explains, “Depending on the circumstances dowries ranged from vast fortunes and estates—especially if the bride were the sole heir of the family—to a few hundred pounds (or less), enough to help the young couple stock a farm or set up as tradespeople” (99).

Maria Ward’s £7,000 is, perhaps, not a vast fortune (her own uncle, “the lawyer,” comments that she is about “three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim” to the marriage [Austen, *Mansfield Park* 5]), but it certainly represents a level of wealth well beyond that possessed by Jane Austen’s family. Austen’s family belonged to a class that the historian David Spring has called the “pseudo-gentry” (qtd. in Copeland 132): “a group of upper professional families living in the country—clergymen or barristers, for example, or officers in the army and navy” (Copeland 132). Young women in Jane Austen’s immediate circle could command nowhere near Maria Ward’s £7,000, as one of Austen’s letters makes clear. Writing to her sister, Cassandra, about a young woman they know who is about to be married, Austen remarks, “Miss Lodge has only 800£ of her own, & it is not supposed that her Father can give her much, therefore the good offices of the Neighbourhood will be highly acceptable” (“To Cassandra Austen” 27). Even Miss Lodge’s £800 was beyond the reach of either Jane or Cassandra Austen; their father was a clergyman who could not afford to provide dowries for his two daughters (Tomalin 80, 119). With the situation of the Austen sisters in mind, the statement of Maria Ward’s uncle on the smallness of Maria’s fortune sounds ironic.

Maria Ward has something besides money, though: she has luck and, as we are given to understand, beauty. Money, luck, and beauty, then, seem to be the factors determining whether a gentleman’s daughter will make a marriage that will improve her own station in life and bring

credit to her family. We can deduce that the future Lady Bertram was beautiful as a young woman from the information that some of the family's "acquaintance" consider the two younger sisters "quite as handsome as Miss Maria" (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 5). We also know Lady Bertram takes great stock in her beauty because she feels affronted that Mrs. Grant, the wife of the new parson who comes to live at Mansfield Park when Fanny is fifteen, has managed to secure a good match without the benefit of being "handsome" (31). Further, rather narcissistically, Lady Bertram takes credit for how lovely Fanny looks at her first ball: not only does she remark that she, Lady Bertram, has been thoughtful enough to send her own maidservant to help Fanny dress (unfortunately too late to do anything for her), but, speaking to Fanny with "extraordinary animation . . . she added 'Humph—We certainly are a handsome family'" (251, 307).

If the two younger Ward sisters are (at least according to some) as beautiful as their eldest sister, they seem not to possess the same luck as she. The middle sister, the future Aunt Norris, marries a clergyman who has a connection to her brother-in-law, and the two come to live at the parsonage on the grounds of Mansfield Park. The narrator comments, "Mr. and Mrs. Norris began their career of conjugal felicity with very little less than a thousand a year" (5). The overt point of the sentence is that, with a thousand a year to live on, Mrs. Norris, who prides herself on managing money, did not do so badly after all, even if her match is not as brilliant as her elder sister's. The reference to "conjugal felicity," however, can only be meant ironically here: as the novel's story unfolds, we learn that Mrs. Norris's personality is one that banishes all felicity from those around her. She is intrusive, meddling, stingy, self-aggrandizing, and unkind to the niece whom she campaigned to bring to Mansfield Park. Although we do not hear

any further mention of Mr. Norris until he dies, we can hardly imagine that the marriage of these two was a happy one.

Frances Ward, the third Ward sister and the future Mrs. Price, makes the worst match of all. Marrying, as the narrator tells us, “to disoblige her family,” she chooses a “Lieutenant of Marines, without education, fortune, or connections” (5). This choice leads directly to the life of poverty and squalor that leads her, eleven years later, to ask for help from her wealthier sisters, from whom she has been estranged since her marriage: “A large and still increasing family, an husband disabled for active service, but not the less equal to company and good liquor, and a very small income to supply their wants, made her eager to regain the friends she had so carelessly sacrificed” (6). When her eldest daughter, Fanny Price, who benefited from the help Mrs. Price sought from her sisters, returns to Portsmouth for a visit after almost a decade at Mansfield Park, she is shocked by the conditions of her family’s home: it is noisy, small, dirty, and ill-ordered, with children running about unsupervised, an overwhelmed mother, and a drunken and inattentive father. All of this, the narrator makes clear, is the result of Mrs. Price’s “imprudent marriage” (362).

With the history of the three Ward sisters, then, Jane Austen demonstrates the devastating effect a bad choice in marriage can have on a woman’s life during an era when women had very few economic options other than marriage. Mrs. Price’s marriage not only dooms her to a life of hardship and difficulty, but it lowers her social standing, and it also creates a distance between her and her sisters that is never overcome, even after there is communication between the families once again. As the narrator remarks, reporting on Mrs. Price’s lack of any real sorrow over the news of her nephew Tom’s dangerous illness, “So long divided, and so differently

situated, the ties of blood were little more than nothing” (397).

Readers can sympathize with Fanny Price in her quest to marry for love, as the heroine of a courtship novel should. Fanny rejects Henry Crawford’s offer of marriage because she neither loves nor respects him. Her uncle’s astounded and enraged reaction to her refusal grieves her not only because his anger is terrifying to her but because she feels that, as a “good man,” her uncle should understand and feel “how wretched, and how unpardonable, how hopeless and how wicked it was, to marry without affection” (299). Fanny will eventually be rewarded for her steadfastness and moral virtue; she will get to marry the man that she does respect and love, and she will be more than satisfied to share with him the modest income of a clergyman.

With the story of Fanny’s cousin Maria (Lady Bertram’s eldest daughter and namesake), however, Austen gives us a critique of marriage pursued for the wrong reasons. Maria does not recoil from the idea of marrying without affection (at least where money and status are to be gained). There is never any suggestion of Maria’s having either affection or respect for her fiancé, Mr. Rushworth, who is by all accounts an unimpressive man, described as “inferior” (185), lacking “more than common sense,” and “heavy” (37).² Rather, Maria is attracted to Mr. Rushworth’s ability to provide her “the enjoyment of a larger income than her father’s, as well as . . . the house in town, which was now become a prime object” (37).

Maria’s intention of marrying the dull Mr. Rushworth weakens only after she has been exposed to the attentions of Henry Crawford, who is everything that Mr. Rushworth is not: lively, charming, good with words, flattering, and knowledgeable of the world. But Henry is also

² Here, *heavy* does not mean overweight, as we might think, but probably “ponderous and slow in intellectual processes; wanting in facility, vivacity, or lightness” (“Heavy,” def. A.V.18).

given to toying with women's affections. After arriving in Mansfield with his sister, the equally charming and duplicitous Mary Crawford, he flirts with both Maria and her sister Julia, pitting them against one another. He pushes furthest with Maria, to the point where she thinks he is about to propose to her.

When, instead of proposing to Maria, Henry Crawford disappears from the neighborhood, Maria accepts her fate. Even after her father, struck by Rushworth's deficiencies and Maria's obvious indifference toward him, offers her the chance to break off her engagement, Maria assures her father she is perfectly happy. Her only desire now is to be free of her father's control, and to take refuge from her disappointed feelings in the splendor of being Mrs. Rushworth, living a life of "fortune and consequence" (188). In case we have any doubt about Maria's motives for marriage, the narrator, with breathtaking irony, tells us the following:

In all the important preparations of the mind she was complete; being prepared for matrimony by an hatred of home, restraint, and tranquility; by the misery of disappointed affection and contempt of the man she was to marry. The rest might wait. The preparation of new carriages and furniture might wait for London and spring, when her own taste could have fairer play. (188)

If Maria's motives for marriage are suspect and her feelings toward her spouse do not bode well for their union, most of those around her are either willfully blind to these things or incapable of seeing them. The narrator is particularly scathing toward Aunt Norris, who, with her obsession with money, had been the one to encourage her niece's engagement to the wealthy young man: "no one would have supposed from her confident triumph, that she had ever heard of conjugal infelicity in her life, or could have the smallest insight into the disposition of the niece

who had been brought up under her eye” (189). The mention of conjugal infelicity brings us back to the ironic reference to Mr. and Mrs. Norris’s “career of conjugal felicity” in the opening pages of the novel. Irony—in this case, a statement that says one thing but implies the opposite—is a technique that Austen uses throughout the novel. Surely the narrator is reminding us here that Mrs. Norris knows very well what conjugal infelicity is, having in all probability experienced it herself, and that her shepherding of her niece into a marriage such as this one is all the more reprehensible.

Whether or not Mrs. Norris has heard of conjugal infelicity, her creator, Jane Austen, undoubtedly had. The source of the ambivalence toward marriage expressed in the novel may very well be stories she had heard of the marriages of friends and relatives. When Austen was only sixteen, she wrote a story based on the experience of her father’s sister, Philadelphia Hancock, who at twenty-one, with no marriage offers at home, left England for India in search of a husband. Claire Tomalin, author of a biography of Austen, notes that it was common practice at this time for young Englishwomen of genteel birth but limited means to seek husbands among the Englishmen populating England’s colonial territories, since in England “prospective husbands looked for money as well as charm” (17), which was not necessarily the case in the territories. Philadelphia’s daughter Eliza, ten years older than Jane Austen, had told her of Philadelphia’s history, and, according to Tomalin, “Jane was so struck by this part of her aunt’s story that she incorporated it into her writing that summer” (80). In Austen’s story, entitled “Catherine, or the Bower,” an orphaned young woman with no prospect of a “Maintenance” other than to “accept the offer of one of her cousins to equip her for the East Indies” travels to India, although “infinitely against her inclinations” (qtd. in Tomalin 80). The story continues,

“Her personal Attractions had gained her a husband as soon as she had arrived at Bengal, and she had now been married nearly a twelvemonth. Splendidly, yet unhappily married. United to a Man of double her own age, whose disposition was not amiable, and whose manners were unpleasing, though his Character was respectable” (qtd. in Tomalin 81). The story makes it clear that by age sixteen Jane Austen was aware both of the existence of conjugal infelicity and of the economic pressures that could lead a young woman to exchange herself for a “Maintenance.” Much later, when she is almost thirty-three, Austen will write to her sister, Cassandra, of one of their friends, also thirty-three, who is about to marry a clergyman of sixty, “Tomorrow we must think of poor Catherine” (qtd. in Tomalin 204). Tomalin notes, “She [Austen] was learning to see that spinsterhood, a condition which had for so long looked fearful, could be a form of freedom” (204). Austen did in fact ultimately remain unmarried.

In *Mansfield Park*, the plot propels the heroine, Fanny Price, toward marriage, even though the novel gives us glimpses of conjugal infelicity. Indeed, marriage is not always the most beneficial outcome for a woman in Jane Austen’s time. Even when “infelicity” in marriage was not the problem, the prospect of constant childbearing could make marriage a dangerous choice for women. At around the time that Austen wrote to Cassandra of the impending marriage of “poor Catherine,” Jane and Cassandra’s sister-in-law Elizabeth Knight had just died, at the age of thirty-five, following the birth of her eleventh child (Tomalin 205). The Knights were extremely wealthy, but money could not protect a woman from the toll on her body and the physical dangers of continuous childbearing during an era when birth control options were not plentiful. In fact, as Tomalin notes, in the late eighteenth century “[s]eparate bedrooms was the usual form of birth control . . .” (7), but this method clearly was not always used.

In seeking marriage to Mr. Rushworth, Maria Bertram is not driven by the fear of poverty, in the way that Jane Austen's friend Catherine most likely was. Nor is she marrying a wealthy man whom she also happens to love, as Austen's sister-in-law Elizabeth Knight did (Tomalin 205). Maria is driven by the desire for more money than she already has and by vanity (she will not let Crawford, who has played with her feelings, see that he has wounded her). Her marriage cracks when Crawford, drawn by his own vanity and curiosity, reappears in her married life and begins a flirtation with her, even after declaring his love for Fanny and his intentions to behave honorably. Maria and Crawford run off together, causing profound turmoil and distress in the lives of all that are connected to them. The narrator describes the result as follows: "Mr. Rushworth had no difficulty in procuring a divorce; and so ended a marriage contracted under such circumstances as to make any better end, the effect of good luck, not to be reckoned on. She had despised him, and loved another—and he had been very much aware that it was so" (431). Just as in the account of the marriage of Maria Rushworth's mother, Lady Bertram, "good luck" is invoked here. Here, though, the narrator makes it clear that the "luck" of making a splendid match means nothing if it is not accompanied by mutual affection and respect.

The unraveling of Maria Rushworth's marriage is what eventually allows Fanny Price to marry her beloved Edmund. Edmund, for much of the book, has been infatuated with Henry Crawford's sister, Mary, despite her shockingly indifferent, even mocking, attitude toward many of the things he holds dear, including his chosen profession as a clergyman. When Mary makes light of the adulterous behavior of his sister and her brother, though, it is too much for Edmund. As he tells Fanny later, "My eyes are opened" (423).

Fanny and Edmund unite then, finally, but they do so against a backdrop of family

distress and disarray. Maria, deserted by Henry Crawford, is banished from her father's home as a fallen woman, while a younger daughter, Julia, has made a hasty and questionable marriage. Tom, the eldest son and heir, is slowly recovering from a deathly illness brought on in part by his excessive lifestyle. This somber series of events seems to overrule any sense of celebration that readers might feel over Fanny and Edmund's happy ending. And, as critics have noted, the narrator tells us of the couple's coming together in an oddly offhand manner: "I purposely abstain from dates on this occasion. . . . I only entreat every body to believe that exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier, Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford" (436). As Claudia Johnson notes, the tone of this passage "obliges us to consider their [Fanny and Edmund's] alliance as a perfunctorily opted anticlimax the narrator washes her hands of, rather than a properly wished-for and well-deserved union towards which the parties have been moving all along" (473).

One of the unspoken rules of the courtship novel is that there is only one right suitor for the heroine, only one man with whom she could possibly be happy. This idea is called into question in *Mansfield Park*, however. Not only does the narrator tell us of Fanny and Edmund's coming together in the oddly offhand way that Johnson remarks above, but she also indicates that things might have gone otherwise, that if Henry Crawford had not made his fatal blunder with Maria, Edmund might finally have married Henry's sister, Mary Crawford, and that Fanny and Henry might have then come together: "Would he [Henry] 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" (434). The narrator implies, further, that these alternative pairings, especially that of Henry and Fanny, might have been reasonably

successful; in losing her, we are told, Henry begins to understand that he has “lost the woman whom he had rationally, as well as passionately loved” (435). Had he come to an understanding of these feelings earlier and honored them, we are encouraged to believe, the heroine might have responded with “esteem and tenderness” (433). Conjugal felicity for the two, in other words, would have been a distinct possibility, despite the fact that this is not the match that the story seems to have been leading us toward.

In *Mansfield Park*, then, despite the seeming adherence to the conventions of the courtship novel, among which are the ideas that marriage is the culminating joy of a woman’s life, that there is only one possible partner for the exemplary heroine, and that romantic love is the basis for matrimony, we are given a view of marriage that is highly ambivalent. Austen gives a vivid portrait of the factors that can influence the young women of her time to choose a husband for reasons other than love: economic pressures, vanity, competitiveness with other women, and the desire to either satisfy or rebel against one’s family. She does this in a novel that richly combines comic and dark strands, and through the voice of a narrator who is compassionate and ironic by turns.

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