

MARY CRAWFORD AND THE COMIC HEROINE

MICHAEL TATHAM

You may *perhaps* like the heroine as she is almost too good for me.
Letter 1817

The comic part of the character I might be equal to, but not the good, the enthusiastic. . . .
Letter 1815

If there is anything to be said for my suggestion (*New Blackfriars* June 1978) that Jane Austen was unlikely to have been in sympathy with Fanny Price's religious attitude, and in fact probably shared Mary Crawford's cynical view of the Established Church and such overtly Christian institutions as matrimony, it may be wondered why she nevertheless gave Fanny Price and her clerical cousin, Edmund, such central roles in the novel. Obviously, there can be no definitive answer, but the problem becomes less intractable if we give sufficient weight to Jane Austen's extremely lively sense of humour. There was nothing she enjoyed so much—especially of course in the affectionate intimacy of her correspondence with Cassandra—as laughing at her neighbours and the world, and it was above all this spirit of comedy that informed virtually all her writing prior to *Persuasion*. If *Mansfield Park* wears its humour with a difference then no doubt it was the more amusing to tease and confuse her admirers even when these also happened to be a favourite brother.

Henry is going on with *Mansfield Park*. He admires H. Crawford: I mean properly, as a clever pleasant man. I tell you all the good I can, as I know how much you will enjoy it.

Letter 1814

We know from her other novels that Jane Austen's ideal heroine was someone with whom she could feel rather more than a modicum of sympathy, but who at the same time amused her—a girl whose heart disposed her to love the good, but whose understanding required guidance before it could serve to regulate her behaviour. In one way or another this was Jane Austen's particular theme and there is no reason to suppose that in *Mansfield Park* she was ready to abandon it. That tender yet distancing ejaculation, 'My Fanny', implies just such an attitude of affection—warmth tinged with a hint of patronage and laughter. Of course Miss Price would have been far too good for her and the discrepancy provid-

ed just the opening she required to insert her sense of the ridiculous. It was a stance which denied the reader the assurance of knowing precisely where he stood and obliged him to rely on his own powers of discrimination. Kakuzo Okakura, the Japanese collector and aesthete used to argue that one reason why a masterpiece holds the attention is that it always leaves something unsaid and so compels the beholder to make good the deficiency. In the light of this remark we can perhaps understand why it is that *Mansfield Park* continues to provide critics with material for remarkably divergent readings and why there is never any firm agreement about Jane Austen's intentions or how the creator of Elizabeth Bennett and Mary Crawford can have come to sustain an apparent preference for Fanny Price.

Beneath the highly sophisticated literary technique and the mode of ironic decorum there were also psychological factors, stemming from the vicissitudes of Jane Austen's early life, which seem to have played a considerable part in creating her remarkable ambivalence. No sooner have we allowed for the Tory parsonage, naval brothers, the maternal connexions of Stoneleigh Abbey and the Paragon, Bath, and a guillotined cousin by marriage¹; than we also remember the abrupt removal from Steventon, the loss of income and status consequent upon Mr Austen's death, the awareness of spinsterhood in a society which offered no respectable alternative to marriage and the last years in the small bedroom at Chawton. Such a diversity of experiences may well account—at least in part—for Jane Austen's preference for antithetical patterns of character and situation.² And in presenting her world in a man-

¹ The French husband of the first marriage of Henry Austen's first wife! (The Comtesse de Feuillide).

² This fundamental ambiguity has been noticed by virtually every writer who has considered either Jane Austen or her work. The following selection I hope does something to illustrate this contention.

The contradictions lie deep in her temperament. On the whole the balance of evidence suggests that Jane Austen was poised (as in everything else) between two religious viewpoints. . . . Professor Wright, recognising the fundamental contradictions in her work tries to elevate them into 'a conception of the total personality' . . . for me this is an injustice done to her continuous serious moral concern for solution, for some resting point between the two extremes of her nature. (Angus Wilson).

Her moral affirmations are always qualified by critical and ironic reservations. (Jane Nardin).

The split between formal commitment and imaginative allegiance. (Robert Wright). Secular spirituality. . . . Typically in Jane Austen's novel the archaic ethos is in love with the consciousness that seeks to subvert it. (Lionel Trilling).

Her Toryism carries more weight than her radicalism. (Marilyn Butler).

Duty is the key word in *Mansfield Park*—its force as a moral absolute of Christianity is slyly questioned in the sententious invocation of Sir Thomas and Edmund Bertram. (B. C. Southam).

Society is, for Jane Austen, both the horizon of our possibilities and the arena where we destroy each other. . . . The mixture of negation and affirmation is the most consistent feature of *Mansfield Park*. (Avron Fleishman).

ner which enabled her readers to fortify their particular preferences Miss Austen could both amuse herself at their expense and protect herself from the hatred which they were only too happy to bestow on any unprotected Miss Bates.

If there is antithesis and irony there is also balance—that brilliant capacity to hold in tension the permanently unresolved and conflicting claims of a free and intelligent heart and the prudence of a clear understanding of the economic realities of middle-class society. And it is because both claims had their very lively importance and form an organic connexion—albeit superficially changed—with the problems of our own day, but above all because Jane Austen avoided conveniently simple solutions, that it is possible to read her work in a political and polemical spirit. In an age as insecure as our own it is easy to sympathise with a conservative reading of *Mansfield Park* and all that is implied by the symbolic treatment of the day at Sotherton and the improvement of the estate, or by the apparent rejection of modish intellectual foreign theatricals. Yet against this there is always the awareness of decadence—of the estate betrayed from within—an awareness of the tyranny of money in determining whether a woman shall be a Lady Bertram or a Mrs Price and, most explosive of all, the issue of marital choice. In this decision is contained not merely the continuity of society, but the integrity of the individual without which no useful society can be preserved. Jane Austen never leaves us in doubt in any of her books that failure to make the right choice is morally disastrous. In *Mansfield Park* the price of this failure is paid as well by Sir Thomas and Mrs Price as by Maria Bertram and Mr Rushworth, but such is the complexity of the irony and ambiguity that we cannot be quite sure that after all Mary and Henry Crawford have not had fortunate escapes. Moreover, it says much for the ingenuity and integrity of Jane Austen's work that there is almost never a total distinction between heart and head—it is a conflict which here finds charming expression in Mary Crawford—for once the heart is moved there is still always time for prudential considerations. It says much for the quality of Jane Austen's balance that however seriously her heroines incline towards respectable incomes and social approval they remain capable of renouncing wealth and mocking ironically at their rational preference for a fine park (such as Pemberley) or for falling in love with the elder son. In practice, if not entirely in principle, Mary Crawford and Fanny Price both subscribe to sentiments expressed in a letter of Jane Austen's and feelingly echoed by Elizabeth Bennett, 'anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without affection.'

If we attempt to trace something of the antithetical structure of *Mansfield Park* we find that the pattern is not simply a division which contrasts Mary Crawford and everything associated with

her, with Fanny Price and the assorted values of stability and retirement, but a duality which runs through the centre of Fanny's character. Everyone has recognised in Fanny the timid, frail, romantic sensibility—the well-meaning and often pathetic creature who wins through to victory by sheer passive obstinacy and seems to pre-figure countless Victorian idealisations. A good many people have found this figure difficult to reconcile with the smug and humourless young woman who is largely devoid of tenderness or pity for all but a handful of her fellow mortals. Curiously, the picture has seldom been extended to the humour and absurdity which inform practically everything about her.³ The conventional reading of her character—whether or not we approve—clearly favours a strictly conservative stance in which Fanny's intuitive high-principled behaviour accords with the defence of the established church, ('a most sensible novel' was the clerical verdict) the family and the estate. Even those critics who normally regard Jane Austen in a somewhat different light usually concede that *Mansfield Park* is a special case and that here the author felt she must defer to the conventional expectations of a conservative society. Marvin Mudrick laments that we have a heroine who demands our sympathy on her own terms and whose judgments are vindicated in every particular. He can find no ironic distancing but only a work of the most 'uncompromising moral purpose' and regrets that while irony is the most notable omission we are left at the end with a situation in which Jane Austen's wit has been entirely subjugated by her will.

If this is true it is a sad predicament. Fanny, it seems must be taken extremely seriously and is no more to be laughed at than Mr Darcy. But what a remarkable position—that of all Jane Austen's palpably naive and immature heroines Fanny alone should not be considered a fit subject for mirth, and should at the same time be so congenitally incapable of laughing at herself. It is difficult to believe that we are considering a novel by the woman who wrote of one heroine that she was 'almost too good' for her. And such a tediously moralistic reading invariably demands that Mary Crawford must be manoeuvred into position as anti-heroine and saddled with all the inconveniences of wit and worldly wisdom. If Fanny is to be preserved from laughter Mary Crawford must be censured for frivolity. The scheme offers one or two disadvantages in the shape of Mary's good nature, vivacity and charm—her incredible similarity to Elizabeth Bennett and the Miss Austen of the letters—but can usually be set in motion by establishing Mary as the representative of the corrupt sophistication of smart London society, that milieu of advanced thinking and subversive cont-

³ There is something highly ridiculous in the quantity of exclamation marks which pepper Fanny's utterances.

inental influences. In such a scheme Mary is established in the full panoply of wickedness and only defeated by the combination of Fanny's heroic fortitude and the timely assistance of typically unprincipled and purposeless activity on the part of Mary's brother. In a recent assessment Marilyn Butler argues that 'Mary Crawford has been instructed . . . in a wholly sceptical modern philosophy. Her doctrine includes the notion that there are no values but material ones and that the gratification of the self is the only conceivable goal'.⁴ Lionel Trilling finds that, 'although on first reading . . . Mary Crawford's speeches are all delightful, they diminish in charm as we read the novel a second time', and he goes on to claim that what disturbs us is, 'the peculiarly modern bad quality . . . insincerity.'⁵ More recently, in *Sincerity and Authority*, he extends this criticism:

In the outcome her wit is seen to be by no means an energy of the Spirit pressing forward to new and freer and more developed modes of being. Actually its tendency is regressive—its depreciation of *Mansfield Park* is not an effort of liberation but an acquiescence in bondage, a cynical commitment to the way of the world, to the Metropolitan society which Rousseau had denounced as the enemy of all true being.⁶

Most comprehensive in his disparagement is Denis Donoghue who lists no fewer than ten counts against Mary.⁷ One assertion is that she changes her mind in favour of marrying Edmund when she thinks his brother unlikely to live to inherit the estate. It is remarkable that a character can be so comprehensively misunderstood and something of the general confusion can be illustrated by noticing Jane Nardin's entirely different misapprehension.

But though Mary considers marrying the poor man whom she loves as well as one of so unstable a character can love, the idea of giving up the excitement of London, ambition, and flirtation, and the employments which they provide for lively talents, proves too much for her.⁸

(Elsewhere, she is more perceptive when she remarks that Fanny's jealous resentment led her to be consistently unkind to Mary.) Avrom Fleishman, whose study *A Reading of Mansfield Park* is invariably illuminating, notices that 'nothing in the novel, finally serves to negate the judgment of Mary which the author passes in her own voice—when she speaks of "the really good feelings by

4 *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*. Marilyn Butler. Oxford 1975. p. 222.

5 Lionel Trilling. *Mansfield Park*. Essays edited by Ian Watt. p. 133.

6 *Sincerity and Authority*. Lionel Trilling. p. 78.

7 Denis Donoghue. *A View of Mansfield Park*. Southam's Critical Essays. p. 46.

8 *Those Elegant Decorums*. Jane Nardin. p. 97.

which she was almost wholly governed".⁹ It is an evaluation which must be set beside the other—perhaps less authoritative pronouncement about Fanny at the time of her arrival at Mansfield—that she possessed an 'affectionate heart' and was, even in her cousins' questionable opinion, 'good-natured enough'.

Too little has been made of Mary Crawford's other relationships at Mansfield—especially that with her half-sister—and too much of the residual London connexions. We find that Mary gets on extremely well with Mrs Grant and that this sister is consistently presented as an intelligent, patient and kindly woman. There is nothing here of worldliness or superficiality—only the sympathetic attention to others which prompts Mrs Grant to soothe Mrs Norris's injured feelings on the occasion when the discussion about the Moor Park apricot has ruffled them. More decisively, the terms in which we last hear of the sisters living together can scarcely be made to carry any suggestion of disapproval.

Mrs Grant, with a temper to love and be loved, must have gone with some regret, from the scenes and people she had been used to; but the same happiness of disposition must in any place and any society, secure her a great deal to enjoy, and she had again a home to offer Mary; and Mary had had enough of her own friends, enough of vanity, ambition, love and disappointment in the course of the last half year, to be in need of the true kindness of her sister's heart, and the rational tranquillity of her ways.

Of Mary's relationship with her Crawford relations little need be said except that she had left the Admiral's house, following her aunt's death—because he chose to bring his mistress to live there and later urged her brother to escape from 'the contagion' before it damaged his relationship with Fanny Price. In her attitude to the improvements at Sotherton she is rationally against the attendant inconvenience—amusingly so—but has no dislike of the idea in principle.¹⁰ In this respect she appears to differ little from Edmund who would prefer to achieve alterations 'progressively'—or indeed Elizabeth Bennett who admires Darcy's tastefully improved Pemberley estate. Whatever hint of threat there may be in this, or her preference for modern furniture—and it was, after all, a particularly fine period for cabinet-making—is cancelled by a decisive interjection of the author's voice which covers a great deal more than this particular issue—'impartiality would not have denied to Miss Crawford's nature, that participation of the general nature of woman, which would lead her to adopt the opinions of the man she loved and respected as her own.'

There remains the important and apparently controversial mat-

⁹ *A Reading of Mansfield Park*. Avron Fleishman. p. 49.

¹⁰ *The Improvement of the Estate*. Duckworth. pp. 40-42.

ter of whether Mary attempts to 'dupe' Edmund or governs her own conduct by the cynically moralistic comments which enliven her views on matrimony.¹¹ On the one side we are told, 'Matrimony was her object, provided she could marry well,' and that she believed that everybody should marry as soon as they could do it to advantage—while on the other, and in fairly close juxtaposition, Mary remarks, in conversation with her sister—

"Everybody is taken in at some period or other".

"Not always in marriage, dear Mary."

"In marriage especially. With all respect to such of the present company as chance to be married, my dear Mrs Grant, there is not one in a hundred of either sex, who is not taken in when they marry. Look where I will, I see that it is so; and I feel that it *must* be so, when I consider that it is, of all transactions, the one in which people expect most from others, and are least honest themselves."

In practice she very quickly decides that despite his lack of prospects as a younger brother and despite her intention to prefer the heir 'she knew it was her way,' she *actually* prefers Edmund.¹²

... he began to be agreeable to her. She felt it to be so, though she had not foreseen and could hardly understand it; for he was not pleasant by any common rule, he talked no nonsense, he paid no compliments, his opinions were unbending, his attentions tranquil and simple.

This preference sustains—albeit with difficulty—the shock of discovering that he intends to take orders and the realization that by calling and inclination he is never likely to make a successful career even in the church. In the course of her own uneasy—because exceptionally honest—relationship with Edmund she is quite remarkably kind to Fanny, and all this well before there is any question of assisting Henry. Here too, in welcoming his courtship of Fanny—who by any standards is a poor prospect financially—Mary demonstrates an entirely disinterested and unmercenary affection, since all this occurs long before Edmund's prospects of inheritance are remotely in question. Perhaps Mary's genuine regard and good sense are nowhere seen more effectively than in the brief description of Edmund meeting her in the village street as he returns from the extended absence caused by his ordination.

Her reception of him was of a sort which he could not have

¹¹ 'Edmund is always duped by Mary' Marilyn Butler. p. 236.

¹² A less worldly attitude than that of any of the Bertram family. Marvin Mudrick is one of the few critics who consistently does justice to Mary. 'We observe Mary is impatient with dullness, evil and pomposity, but good-tempered, affectionate, intelligent, kind. After fixing upon a future baronet she is capable of falling in love with a man whose possible fortune is very modest. She is far more alert than Edmund to the insults offered Fanny by the Bertram household. *Triumph of Gentility*. p. 93.

hoped for, had he expected to see her. Coming as he did from such a purport fulfilled as had taken him away, he would have expected anything rather than a look of satisfaction and words of simple pleasant meaning.

Of the final episodes which concern Mary little can be added to R. F. Brissenden and Marvin Mudrick's opinion that pressures of the plot distorted her character—¹³

. . . as a working novelist with a plan, she must subdue Mary to the boundaries of that plan . . . and Fanny fits smoothly: but Mary keeps escaping. By mere force of personality in fact Mary Crawford threatens to overthrow the plan. Scepticism, sexual freedom, abundant personal vitality—all of these qualities laugh at system.¹⁴

In Marvin Mudrick's contribution to *Bicentenary Essays* (edited by John Halperin), *Jane Austen's Drawing-room* he argues that one of Miss Austen's gravest disadvantages was her ambivalent attitude to sexuality—or rather—the difficulty she finds in approving it in *Mansfield Park*. He recalls George Moore's discovery that Miss Austen's spinsterhood allowed her to discuss intimate relationships in the context of the drawing-room but that Mary Crawford was too explicit and 'the author can't approve'. A curiously convoluted business and scarcely made any less obscure by Brian Southan's suggestion that Jane Austen was so disturbed by the power of sexuality that she found it necessary to smear the Crawfords with the taint of corruption. Certainly it would not be difficult to see the episode in which Edmund finally turns from Mary's arms as remarkably similar to that other example of moral perversion when Angel Clare rejects the appeal of Tessa's innocent beauty.¹⁵ On the whole, however, I am inclined to think it was far less any sub-conscious fear of sex—the letters are remarkably lively—and much more a matter of the exigencies of the plot which forced Jane Austen to remove Mary to a safe distance. It has seldom been appreciated that she survives her rejection by Edmund very creditably and that as far as circumstances per-

¹³ R. F. Brissenden. *Freedom and the Family*. Bicentenary Essays edited by John Halperin. C.U.P. p. 171.

¹⁴ Marvin Mudrick. *The Triumph of Gentility*. p. 93.

¹⁵ Generosity of spirit and an element of sexual generosity are also associated in Joseph Andrews. The equation is probably very much older.

mitted Miss Austen made what reparation she could.¹⁶

Edmund's position as a well-meaning, good-natured young man with an extremely limited understanding of feminine sensibilities and a remarkably uninformed grasp of the realities of the Anglican church, is a great deal less controversial. As a contributor to the ironic and comic aspects of the novel he is at his best in his constant affirmation that Fanny is both a comfort and a sister—an attitude which culminates in his tepid and happily unseen courting of Fanny. He is never actually presented as a practising clergyman and although he speaks of his duties in a more elevated manner than Mr Collins it is difficult not to feel that his calling has been influenced by prudential considerations. His qualified opposition to the theatricals is sensible enough since he is aware both of his father's disposition in such matters and the unsatisfactory basis of his sister's engagement to Mr Rushworth. (Although even this realization is a little tardy).¹⁷

Yet in almost everything Edmund's good qualities are vitiated by a mixture of obtuseness and vacillation. He cannot quite decide whether to propose to Mary in person or by letter—he actually discusses his difficulty with Fanny—and never begins to comprehend the reasons for Fanny's reticence. It is a wonderfully comic inversion of the situation in *Joseph Andrews* when the hero is upbraided by Parson Adams for indecent haste in seeking to make a bride of his sweetheart.

¹⁶ The question seems to arise whether Jane Austen was chiefly concerned to maintain the supposedly didactic scheme or to develop the plot in such a way as to preserve the vital elements of uncertainty and suspense. To achieve both ends might only be practicable at the expense of logical consistency and there is no question that most readers have found the vindication of principle and the outcome of the plot curiously unsatisfactory. I am inclined to think that towards the end of the book the difficulty of preserving tension became acute. Tony Tanner has pointed out that the book is the story of a girl who triumphs simply by doing nothing. Fanny owes her success to Henry Crawford's sudden burst of irresponsibility. The logic of the story as it develops during the early part of the Portsmouth visit can only be that Fanny will eventually accept Henry, and Edmund will finally rouse himself to propose to Mary. This is obviously dull and too easily predictable. Unhappily the consequences of preserving tension meant that none of the characters could follow the path marked out by natural development. At the same time a narrowly and pedestrian morality was apparently vindicated by the improbable course of events. That there was a degree of improvisation at this point in the book is suggested by the sudden introduction of a new sister.

She could not but think particularly of another sister, a very pretty little girl whom she had left there not much younger when she went into Northamptonshire, who died a few years afterwards. There had been something remarkably amicable about her. Fanny, in those early days had preferred her to Susan;

¹⁷ There are numerous more sophisticated theories involving the Platonic significance of role-playing and the subversive influence of foreign drama on the aristocracy—see especially Tony Tanner and Marilyn Butler. I find myself agreeing with Rachel Trickett's view in: *Jane Austen's Comedy and the Nineteenth Century* in Southam's *Critical Essays*.

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, and became as anxious to marry Fanny, as Fanny herself could desire.

It is the usual custom to lay the greater share of the blame for Mary and Edmund's final breach almost entirely on Mary's shoulders on the understanding that she expresses a completely inadequate sense of moral outrage at her brother's behaviour.¹⁸ Leaving aside the question whether a sister ought not to extenuate a brother's conduct—in so far as any extenuation is at all possible—we are required to believe that despite her 'apparent agitation' and 'serious manner' Mary is to be condemned for frivolously disapproving of the public folly rather than censuring the actual offence. Edmund—in the best Collins tradition—sees the matter as no less than a 'dreadful crime' and assures Mary that now he has discovered the truth of her character it will be easier for him to sacrifice her friendship. Mary attempts to conceal her very reasonable distress and Edmund departs with a few well-chosen words about duty and self-knowledge and 'the lessons of affliction'. At this last moment Mary generously risks humiliation and smiles—'a saucy playful smile, seeming to invite, in order to subdue'. The interpretation is Edmund's. In honest terror he manfully puts her behind him and hurries away. Yet if we consider the actual circumstances more fully it becomes difficult not to feel that Mary's appraisal was as morally respectable as his. There is no question that Maria's marriage was nothing more than a commercial transaction and that such interest as she had felt had always been centred on Henry—that in fact it was the *marriage* rather than the adultery which merited condemnation and that this new development was essentially a question of public appearances and not of morality. There is reason to believe that Jane Austen herself would have seen the situation in these terms, and perhaps have felt that Edmund's moral blindness rendered him as fit to be Fanny Price's husband as he was unfit to partner Miss Crawford. Mr Fleishman has pointed out that Edmund's true state of mind remains obscure, but that his romantic engagement with a woman as lively and sexually attractive as Mary has certainly presented him with an uncomfortable challenge.

When his reluctant courtship is finally blighted, Edmund joins Fanny in excoriating Mary's moral levity, seizing the opportunity to relieve his wounded feelings. Morality is again put at the service of feeling and changes from a defensive to an offen-

¹⁸ See Elizabeth Jenkins and Denis Donoghue. Elizabeth Jenkins thinks that Jane Austen was particularly shocked by adultery. The tone of several of Jane Austen's letters seem to suggest that this is very doubtful.

sive weapon. But clearly Edmund does not much enjoy his righteous indignation, as a substitute for sexual fulfilment—his is a gloomy redemption.¹⁹

And, of course, what he misses is not simply a matter of sexual fulfilment, but the intellectual stimulus of Mary's lively and iconoclastic wit.

Fanny's role as comic heroine is handled with such finesse that many readers are scarcely aware of it and consequently she remains either a dreary failure or else a type of Bronte heroine in a minor key. Jane Austen's ironic perception plays with the discrepancy between Fanny's moralisings and the real promptings of her behaviour. At the same time the comedy comprehends her extraordinary physical debility so that cutting roses is altogether too much for her—clearly there is a resemblance to the inert Aunt Bertram—and Edmund's unwearying failure to recognise in his cousin something other than a devoted 'sister'. It is a comedy of sensibility and a comedy of misfortune—indeed, as Elizabeth Jenkins pertinently remarked, these misfortunes are so keen that Fanny would be a downright nuisance if the comic element were missing. Jane Austen's control is so subtle that frequently the comic moment fuses with the demands of the situation:

"I *should* have thought," said Fanny, after a pause of recollection and exertion," that every woman must have felt the possibility of a man's not being approved, not being loved by some one of her sex, at least, let him be ever so generally agreeable. Let him have all the perfections in the world, I think it ought not to be so set down as certain, that a man must be acceptable to every woman he happens to like himself."

The comedy commences when Fanny tells Edmund that there are plans for her to remove to The White House to stay with her Aunt Norris. In this dire predicament she solemnly lists the reasons why she can never be of importance to anyone and replies to his kindly and rational objections with the effusive: "Oh! cousin, if I am to go away I shall remember your goodness to the last moment of my life." Even the staid Edmund is forced to assure her that from a distance of a few hundred yards across the park he might well hope to be remembered.

Since gratitude is such a recurring theme of the novel much of the irony relates to the discrepancy between what we feel a particular situation demands and what is forthcoming, and to the self-interested manipulation of gratitude in terms of imposing an obligation. There can be no doubt that Jane Austen was as horrified by the failure to respond to kindness of heart as she was appalled by the capacity of a Mrs Norris to destroy every generous instinct associated with the very idea of gratitude. Generally, of course, it is Fanny who is on the receiving end of some reproof for ingratitude.

¹⁹ Avrom Fleishman. p. 53.

itude, but we are uneasily amused to notice that she is not above learning from her tormentor and that gratitude is the subject of one of her earliest strictures on Mary Crawford.

“Oh! yes, she ought not to have spoken of her uncle as she did. I was quite astonished. An uncle with whom she has been living so many years, and who whatever his faults may be, is so very fond of her brother, treating him, they say, quite like a son. I could not have believed it!”

“I thought you would be struck. It was very wrong—very indecorous.”

“And very ungrateful I think.”

It is a conversation which becomes retrospectively more ironic when we recall how later in the novel affection for close relations is not considered a fit pretext for failing to condemn their moral inadequacies. But, more immediately, we cannot fail to contrast Fanny's attack on Mary—so amiably prompted by her cousin—with Mary's response when Fanny herself is attacked by Mrs Norris on precisely the same grounds. Then it was Mary rather than Edmund who at once drew up her chair beside Fanny and was particularly kind to her.

Before the perambulations at Sotherton Fanny indulges in the most charming of Gothic raptures in the disused chapel—an effusion only equalled among Jane Austen's young women by the musings of Catherine Morland.²⁰ Shortly afterwards when Mr Rushworth finds Fanny sitting alone before the locked gate in the wilderness and concludes his disparagement of the Crawfords by remarks that they had done very well without them, the impropriety of such an observation about his guests entirely escapes her, for we find that although a small sigh is her only audible reply, Fanny did ‘not know how to contradict him’.

In a similarly partial fashion Fanny is soon defending the indulgent and bad-tempered Dr Grant with the happy suggestion that he might well be worse if he did not have the benefit of hearing himself preach. The absurdity of Fanny's attitude is neatly underlined by Jane Austen's treatment of the sentence in which Fanny speaks of the reverend gentleman's temper, ‘. . . whatever profession Dr Grant had chosen, he would have taken a—not a good temper into it.’ The mockery underlying this break in the syntax is thrown into greater prominence by the juxtaposition of fresh absurdities. It is scarcely half a page before Fanny enthuses about the night sky.

“Here's harmony!” said she. “Here's repose! Here's what may leave all painting and all music behind, and what poetry only can attempt to describe. Here's what may tranquillize every

²⁰ Bridget Brophy has said that Fanny is the only Jane Austen heroine who is allowed to get away with propounding the Gothick view of history seriously. I wonder.

care, and lift the heart to rapture! When I look out on such a night as this, I feel as if there could be neither wickedness nor sorrow in the world, and there certainly would be less of both if the sublimity of Nature were more attended to, and people were carried more out of themselves by contemplating such a scene”.

Edmund heightens the effect by enquiring rather tactlessly whether she would be afraid to go out on the lawn for some star-gazing. Fanny’s brave assertion that she would not is wasted since her cousin at once forgets the idea and walks off to listen to a glee in which Mary Crawford is singing.

Yet it is in the area of sexual comedy that Fanny’s absurdity is most remarkable and at the same time least noticed. During the ball Fanny so far forgets her distress at Mary Crawford’s earlier indelicacy as to ‘hardly help laughing’ at Tom’s pretended seriousness at finding himself next to Dr Grant—whose wife he has just proclaimed must want a lover. For the joke to be fully apparent we must turn over some fifteen pages to the awful moment when Fanny, finding herself alone, picks up *Lovers Vows* and is so astonished at what she finds ‘so totally improper for home presentation’ that she longs to have her cousins ‘roused as soon as possible by the remonstrance which Edmund would certainly make’. But then we find that no sooner has Fanny recovered from her amazement than—jealousy apart—she is deriving ‘as much innocent enjoyment from the play as any of them’. It has actually become a *pleasure* to her to creep into the theatre, and in no time at all she is happily employed as prompter. So much for impropriety. It is scarcely surprising that she should finally accede to Edmund’s request and accept the part of the cottager’s wife—a fate from which she is fortuitously preserved by the unexpected return of Sir Thomas, and when this happens Fanny’s behaviour is an essential ingredient in the comic enactment which has now moved out in front of the green baize curtain. So great is Fanny’s trepidation that when Sir Thomas looks reprovingly at Edmund she edges her chair behind her aunt’s end of the sofa and safely ‘screened from notice herself, saw all that was passing’. The exaggerated timidity of her performance is at one with Mr Yates ranting himself off the deserted stage; Rushworth’s curious intervention on the question of Mr Crawford’s height, and his too precise affirmation of the Mansfield ideal: “I think we are a great deal better employed, sitting comfortably here among ourselves, and doing nothing”.²¹

Numerous critics have remarked on Fanny’s romantic sensibility and her Cowperesque — Wordsworthian response to nature.²² Her feeling for the shrubbery which with its former ‘rough hedge-

²¹ *The Quiet Thing*. Tony Tanner.

²² Especially perhaps Barbara Hardy.

row along the upper side of the field' seems to recall some memory of Jane Austen's childhood at Steventon, is often contrasted with Mary Crawford's lack of interest, and borrowed witticism that she sees no wonder in the shrubbery equal to seeing herself in it.²³ Those who regard Mary's response as insensitive might ask themselves whether they would find a better way of dealing with Fanny's 'wondering strain' which reaches its climax in the verdant absurdity of: "The evergreen! – How beautiful, how welcome, how wonderful the evergreen!" Jane Austen is, moreover careful to establish the ironic mood by her delicately ridiculous conclusion to the preceding paragraph.

. . . remaining there perhaps till in the midst of some tender ejaculation of Fanny's, on the sweets of so protracted an autumn, they were forced by the sudden swell of a cold gust shaking down the last few yellow leaves about them, to jump up and walk for warmth.

Soon afterwards Fanny, not content with a single declamation, rhapsodises incautiously on the heroic name of Edmund.

"How differently we feel!" cried Fanny. "To me, the sound of Mr Bertram is so cold and nothing—meaning—so entirely without warmth or character!—It just stands for a gentleman and that's all. But there is nobleness in the name of Edmund. It is a name of heroism and renown—of kings, princes, and knights; and seems to breathe the spirit of chivalry and warm affections."

Amusingly, Jane Austen anticipates the more bizarre predilections of Victorian neo-gothic. To a greater or lesser extent this absurdity envelops everything that Fanny touches. Her departure from the ball is a fragment in which Jane Austen evokes Fanny's ludicrous capacity for enjoying life despite herself. ' . . . pursued by the ceaseless country-dance, feverish with hopes and fears, soup and negus, sorefooted and fatigued, restless and agitated, yet feeling in spite of everything, that a ball was indeed delightful'. The same mocking indulgence informs Jane Austen's treatment of Fanny's off-hand retort to Mary Crawford's enquiry about the Miss Owens—evidently seen as rivals—and her inability to believe that Henry Crawford is serious about her, or that his sister—and the pompous syntax is the vital clue—'would be forwarding anything of a serious nature in such a quarter?' There is considerable humour even when Fanny is seen in a predicament which on other grounds appeals to our sympathy, as on the occasion when she responds to Sir Thomas' all too pertinent questioning with a guilty silence. 'He saw her lips formed in to a *no*, though the sound was inarticulate, but her face was like scarlet. That, however, in so modest a girl

²³ ' . . . 'tho my preference for men and women always inclines me to attend more to the company than the sight'. Letter.

might be very compatible with innocence'. Here, of course, it was not.

It is in the Portsmouth episode, however, that the comic importance of Fanny's role is most completely established. In part this is a matter of the systematic reversal of all her fond expectations and delusions, and even, briefly of her jealous dislikes. Mary Crawford's letter causes just such 'another strange revolution of mind! She was really glad to receive the letter when it did come'. But the comedy extends far beyond the stripping away of treasured misapprehensions and embraces Fanny's deepest values. At the same time the shock of disillusionment leads her into almost equally erroneous imaginings about Mansfield, where whatever else could be said for it, it was *never* true that 'everybody's feelings were consulted.' She has apparently already forgotten her early words to Edmund on the occasion of her mooted removal to The White House; her unamiable aunt; and the harping on ingratitude which Sir Thomas permits himself.

At the same time—and the two elements are obviously closely associated—Jane Austen continues to provide Fanny with a comic-ironic role of the kind she has sustained so pleasantly at Mansfield. In this connexion perhaps Mr Amis's remarks that Fanny is 'a monster of complacency and pride' and 'ashamed of her own home in Portsmouth, where there is much 'error' and she finds 'everybody underbred,' and how relieved she is when the 'horrible evil' of Henry lunching there is averted,' are wide of the mark.²⁴ Since neither her father nor her mother show the slightest interest in her—they are chiefly interested in their sons—we feel that Fanny is entitled to a measure of self-pity and resentment. But within this closely observed domestic interior Jane Austen turns the potential tragedy to farce. Henry's dreaded arrival brings out the best in both her parents—of Mr Price she sees that, 'His manners now, though not polished, were more than passable; they were grateful, animated, manly; his expressions were those of an attached father, and a sensible man,' and this reappraisal extends sharply and retrospectively to encompass Mansfield itself, where—Fanny conjectures—on observing her mother's indifference to the calamities at the Park, Lady Bertram would herself have thought little about it if 'Three or four Prices' had been 'swept away' and might even 'have caught from Mrs Norris's lips the cant of its being a very happy thing and a great blessing to their poor dear sister Price to have them so well provided for.'

Fanny's pretensions also come in for a good deal of mirth—it is pleasant to recall the same rooms at Chawton, where *Mansfield Park* was written, when Fanny on entering the Portsmouth parlour has the idiotic conviction 'of its being only a passage-room to

²⁴ *What Became of Jane Austen*. Kingsley Amis. Essays edited by Ian Watt. p. 144.

something better.' When Tom is thought to be on the verge of death Fanny's 'tender heart' makes her feel that 'she could not spare him' and her lofty principles give her some anxiety on the score of his reception in the hereafter. Notwithstanding such very rational perturbations a short while later we find that she is convinced that 'instant annihilation' would be the greatest blessing to everyone related to Mrs Rushworth. The comic mood comprehends not only Edmund's greeting, "My Fanny—my only sister—my only comfort now", but Fanny's very real ability to feel happy despite the acute suffering of everyone she cares about. And finally, of course, there is the ultimate farcical business of Edmund courting her by way of lamenting Mary Crawford. It is noticeable that while Jane Austen was generally reticent about the later stages of her heroines' romances, on this occasion she employs terms which carry decided echoes of Charlotte Lucas and Mr Collins.

His happiness in knowing himself to have been so long the beloved of such a heart, must have been great enough to warrant any strength of language in which he could clothe it to her or to himself; it must have been a delightful happiness!

Or, as she herself remarks:

'Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery'.