

## The Feminine Principle in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*

**C** *LUELESS*, a box-office hit of 1995, was successful enough as a movie to spawn a television series the following year. The show was an unacknowledged tribute to Jane Austen in that the plot is a hip version of *Emma*, considered by many critics to be her greatest novel. Other adaptations of the novel, like the multiple versions of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Persuasion*, keep to the original settings. But one novel in her canon—*Mansfield Park*, the greatest of them all, I would say—will never be successfully adapted for the screen in any setting, contemporary or historical: its portrayal of the complementary roles of men and women would deeply offend modern sensibilities that have been conditioned by current notions of political correctness. Two recent versions—a film in 1999, directed by Patricia Rozema, and a television version in 2007—make the point in that they depart so radically from the novel as to approach parody. In the movie, the character of the heroine, Fanny Price, was altered beyond recognition, effectively destroying one of Jane Austen's subtlest and, be it said, most daring characterizations; on television, the complicated plot was made incomprehensible by being lopped and crammed to fit a time slot of an hour and a half.

*This silhouette, found in the second edition of Mansfield Park and inscribed l'aimable Jane, is presumed to represent Jane Austen.*



The difficulty with filming *Mansfield Park* can be exhibited by examining the casting of a version produced for BBC in 1983, which is far superior to its pitiful successors. The actors and actresses were well chosen and directed, with one significant exception. It is not Fanny, who is as priggish and plain as she should be; nor her stiff and distant uncle, Sir Thomas Bertram; nor the charming and sinister Crawfords; and the officious Mrs. Norris is played to perfection by Anna Massey. The character that is not well realized is Lady Bertram, who is presented as infirm when she should be inert, odd when she should be oblivious, and simpleminded when she should be self-centred. As Lady Bertram is the key to

the meaning of the novel, this misinterpretation was fatal to the effectiveness of the production.

Like all of Jane Austen's novels, *Mansfield Park* is about women, Males keep to the background, foils for her females who are constantly in motion. Lady Bertram's inactivity, therefore, is a clue to what is wrong at Mansfield Park: it is a society in which the feminine principle is lacking. An incident at the beginning of the novel indicates how the masculine and feminine principle should cooperate. When as a child she makes her initial entry into the great house, Fanny is frightened:

Sir Thomas, seeing how much she needed encouragement, tried to be all that was conciliating: but he had to work against a most untoward gravity of deportment—and Lady Bertram, without taking half so much trouble, or speaking one word where he spoke ten, by the mere aid of a good-humoured smile, became immediately the less awful character of the two.

Lady Bertram, for the first and last time, fulfils the woman's role by translating into an effective and real kindness the altruistic principle that had directed Sir Thomas to introduce Fanny into the home of her wealthy relatives. Elsewhere in the novel, however, Lady Bertram is incapable of making the smallest practical decision on her own, drawing upon Sir Thomas in every situation: "I will ask Sir Thomas," she repeats. Jane Austen uses a comic scene to make a serious point:

Lady Bertram soon found herself in the critical situation of being applied to for her own choice between the games, and being required either to draw a card for Whist or not. She hesitated. Luckily Sir Thomas was at hand.

"What shall I do, Sir Thomas? Whist and Speculation; which will amuse me most?"

Sir Thomas, after a moment's thought, recommended Speculation. He was a Whist player himself, and perhaps might feel that it would not much amuse him to have her for a partner.

"Very well," was her ladyship's contented answer.

Sir Thomas turns to Mrs. Norris, his sister-in-law and the most horrific character in Jane Austin, to supply for Lady Bertram's inadequacy. The choice is disastrous, for whatever good might have survived the supine neglect on the part of one sister cannot withstand selfish obtuseness on the part of the other. In Sir Thomas's absence, therefore, there is no effective moral governance at Mansfield

Park, and the younger Bertrams move along the path that leads to the shattering climax of the novel: dissipation, elopement, adultery.

One son, the serious and kindly Edmund, escapes the catastrophe. Like his brother and sisters, he has received the moral principles represented by Sir Thomas, but unlike them he has found a woman who can guide him in their practical application. The surprise of the novel is that Fanny, the timid and ignored interloper, is the agent of Edmond's moral maturing. Her place in the plot is highlighted by Edmund's attraction to the witty, worldly Mary Crawford. Like Lady Bertram, she is unable to fulfil the woman's role, but for the opposite reason. Where Lady Bertram depends totally on Sir Thomas, i.e., on abstract principles, Mary Crawford's unfortunate upbringing and surroundings have left her devoid of any principles at all. She is perceptive and tactful, but she cannot recognize and therefore repudiate moral evil. Early in the book, her reaction to Edmond's decision to seek ordination hints at a moral deformity that will later be apparent. "What is to be done in the church?" she asks. "Men love to distinguish themselves, and in . . . other lines distinction may be gained, but not in the church. A clergyman is nothing." Edmund, blinded by his infatuation, cannot detect her unprincipled worldliness as Fanny does. At the end of the novel, however, when Mary saucily tweaks what she regards as Edmund's moral rigidity, he finally sees her as she really is:

"Hers are not faults of temper. She would not voluntarily give unnecessary pain to any one and though I may deceive myself, I cannot but think that for me, for my feelings, she would—hers are faults of principle, Fanny, of blunted delicacy and a corrupted, vitiated mind."

It cannot, therefore, be Mary Crawford who will provide the missing element at Mansfield Park. The stage is now set for Fanny to take her place as the feminine genius of great house. And Lady Bertram is the unlikely prophetess who recognizes Fanny's importance before anyone else: "It is a comfort that we shall always have *her*," she says. Later, at the crisis of the novel, Lady Bertram actually moves from her sofa to proclaim the significance of Fanny's return to Mansfield Park, then a house in chaos:

Fanny had scarcely passed the solemn-looking servants, when Lady Bertram came from the drawing room to meet her, came with no indolent step; and, falling on her neck, said, "Dear Fanny! now I shall be comfortable."

It is at first, therefore, somewhat surprising that at the end of the novel, Mansfield is still in its state of limbo. But changes have occurred that hold hope for

a better future. Sir Thomas has learned to recognize and to regret the inadequacies of his children's education:

He feared that principle, active principle, had been wanting, that they had never been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers by that sense of duty which can alone suffice. They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice.

The reformation of his elder son and the recommitment of the younger tell the reader that principle will not be lacking in the new generation: the masculine element necessary for a well-ordered society is in place. But what about the feminine? Fanny, it is true, is at hand, having married her cousin Edmund and moved into the parsonage where she presides in the house that has had Mary Crawford as a visitor and Mrs. Norris as mistress; but Fanny, however active and aware, cannot govern from a distance. Furthermore she is timid to the point that her persistent allegiance to principle makes her seem merely mulish and ignorant. Lady Bertram, still occupying her sofa with her ample personage and her attention with her tangled skeins of yarn, is obviously unable to direct the daily practicalities of the household. At her side, however, Jane Austen has placed Fanny's sister Susan, who seems to possess what is needed for the estate to function as it should. It is again the unlikely Lady Bertram who, in her preference for Susan, senses that she can supply even better than Fanny what is lacking: the practical implementation of the regulations that determine domestic well-being:

With quickness in understanding the tempers of those she had to deal with, and no natural timidity to restrain any consequences, [Susan] was soon welcome, and useful to all; and after Fanny's removal, succeeded so naturally to her influence over the hourly comfort of her aunt, as gradually to become, perhaps, the most beloved of the two.

Joan Aiken has written a sequel to the novel entitled (groan) *Mansfield Revisited* (London, 1984). She's no Jane Austen, but her extension of the story is correct in one detail: Susan marries the elder son and heir and so, as the new Lady Bertram and mistress of Mansfield Park, moves formally into the position for which she shows every aptitude.

It is now clear why movie and television producers, in celebrating the genius and contemporaneity of Jane Austen, have shied away from *Mansfield Park*. Who today could take seriously a society that not only required different roles from men and women but outrageously expected the men to formulate the principles of morality and the women to follow them? ❧