

FANNY AND EPI-PHANY: RENEWING THE DRIFTING CHURCH IN *MANSFIELD PARK*

Michael Giffin

To insist that Jane Austen was not a theological writer, as several critics do, is to place a caveat upon literary criticism, and one which tries to prevent us from exploring what would have been obvious to her early readers. For as Marilyn Butler reminds us: "The superb draughtsmanship of *Mansfield Park* makes it easy to forget that they present a set of themes which are entirely commonplace in the period".¹ We cannot subtract theology from those themes without distorting them.

Austen's age was an age of strong theological opinions. She grew up in a theological world. She was serious about her Anglican faith, and her later work was influenced by the Evangelical reform movement of the early nineteenth century.² These influences permeate *Mansfield Park*, a novel which can be read as a statement of the author's theological position, a literary manifesto which speaks of a Church *semper reformanda*, a Church that was always in need of further reform.

In noticing that Fanny Price is one of the most unlovable and unattractive heroines in English fiction, Tony Tanner throws out the challenge:

What, then, was Jane Austen doing in this book? The question is worth asking because if Fanny Price is her least popular heroine, it is arguable that *Mansfield Park* is her most profound novel (indeed, to my mind, it is one of the most profound novels of the nineteenth century).³

Here Mr Tanner is not alone, for this profundity has been noticed by several others, as Douglas Bush suggests:

In recent years *Mansfield Park* has been increasingly considered Jane Austen's most profound work. It has also been called, for example by Mrs Leavis, the first modern novel, an anticipation of George Eliot and Henry James.⁴

So why the dissatisfaction with the character of Fanny?

Perhaps it is because she exists within a novel that is so very obviously serious and didactic, in a manner that is so completely removed from any other Austen novel. Fanny is not an Elizabeth or an Emma. She is a 'let down' for those readers who want her to be something else. Yet, in wanting her to be other than what the author intended, in wanting her to be like the lovable but flawed heroines of the earlier novels, we can easily forget that Fanny is first and foremost a trope in a novel which is all about social reform and spiritual renewal. *Mansfield Park* is about reforming an Estate, and the largest part of this task involved renewing a Church that was, like Edmund Bertram, threatening to give in to worldly temptation, by falling in love with (and nearly marrying) Satan at work in the world.

The first clue which alerted me to the theological nature of *Mansfield Park* was the author's description of Sir Thomas Bertram as an absentee landlord. The second clue came upon realising that it was only the presence of Sir Thomas which kept things from falling apart in his Estate. When he goes and attends to his affairs in Antigua he leaves a fallen humanity to its own devices. So inevitably things fall apart. His youngest son Edmund, representing a Church which has lost much of its moral authority, is powerless to prevent the moral lapse.

It is only the return of a (greatly altered) Sir Thomas which prevents the outward appearance of public scandal. But the inward mischief caused by human sin continues. And because of the nature of free will, the absentee landlord can only establish and maintain the outward structure of the created order. Social transformation must now come from a spiritual renewal within, from a new Epiphany, from a new manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, in the form of Fanny, the pearl of great Price.

Why should Jane Austen describe the novel's focus of absolute authority as an 'absentee landlord'? For it is a description of God, his nature, and his relationship with the world, that belongs to

Deist thought. Deism was a complex marriage between the Enlightenment and Platonic thought. Essentially Deism held that there is a supreme being, but this being does not intervene in natural and historical processes.⁵ Encouraged by a classical Greek paradigm which had already separated matter from spirit, body from soul, and mind from body, Deism drew a further wedge between God and creation by insisting that God was only the creator with no further interest in the world.⁶ He was an absentee landlord.

Austen's theology disputed this, and took the scriptural and orthodox position which rejected the negative aspects of Deist thought. According to the author's logic, in his younger days, through his metaphorical associations with Deism, Sir Thomas failed to live out a more orthodox Theism, and that is why, in the person of his second son, the eighteenth century Church faltered in his Father's image and likeness. When the absentee landlord returns to Mansfield Park, Fanny notices that Sir Thomas's "manner seemed changed", "all that had been awful in his dignity seemed lost in tenderness".⁷ But the change came too late to repair the damage caused years earlier, in his failing to become personally involved in forming his children's disposition.

Once the spiritual inadequacy of the Deist paradigm is established the rest of the novel is devoted to the questions of clerical reform and spiritual renewal. Will Edmund, who represents the drifting Church, marry the girl who represents Christ (Fanny), or will he give in to temptation and marry the harpy, Mary Crawford, the woman who represents Satan at work in the world? In considering this we are invited to wonder what guiding hand God the Father plays in such a theological scenario, given that his involvement in creation is circumscribed by the nature of free will.

Here we need to consider two things. Firstly that the absentee landlord always knew Henry and Mary Crawford represented Satan at work in the world. Secondly that, during his great confrontation with Fanny in the attic of Mansfield Park, Sir Thomas knew she really loved Edmund and wanted her to marry him. For from the moment he returned to Mansfield Park it is obvious that her uncle focussed his hopes upon Fanny. She is the heart of Sir Thomas's urgent scheme for spiritual renewal and clerical reform.

In considering that Sir Thomas was quite aware of the dynamics at play on his return from Antigua, we need to turn to the very middle, to the very centre of the text, where in some Classical novels significant things are revealed. One evening at Mansfield parsonage, during a game of Speculation, played at Sir Thomas's recommendation, the major theological implications of the novel are drawn out in a complex scene. We discover that Henry Crawford (because of a fall!) stumbled upon the church and the parsonage of Thornton Lacey, a family-living designed to go to Edmund once he is ordained. Crawford wants to rent the parsonage and improve it, and so he believes that Edmund might be able to service the parish as a non-resident. His sister Mary conspires in this plan with him, as her asides during the card game reveal. So Henry puts the proposal to Edmund, suggesting that "he [Henry] might find himself continuing, improving, and *perfecting* that friendship and intimacy with the Mansfield Park family which was increasing in value to him every day" (p.254).

Here Satan tempts the Church, in the presence of God, with the two things which Austen felt were wrong: The practice of improvement, and the practice of clergy using absentee livings at the expense of pastoral ministry. These two concerns of improvement and absentee livings have been explored by scholars better than myself, so we will not spend time discussing them here. What is important is that Sir Thomas goes out of his way to make it perfectly clear to Henry Crawford that he is not welcome to occupy Thornton Lacey. We ought not to under-estimated the depth of Sir Thomas's intuitive awareness, for as the author writes:

'I repeat again,' added Sir Thomas, 'that Thornton Lacey is the only house in the neighbourhood in which I should *not* be happy to wait on Mr Crawford as occupier.' (p.255)

This is an obvious threat, and its implications are quite large. For it is quite orthodox to understand Satan as a person allowed by God to test and tempt the world within the limited power that God allows him.⁸ And here we have a perfect example of God dictating what those limits are to Satan.

For Henry Crawford's desire to occupy Thornton Lacey is clearly part of a design to test and tempt the world, part of a

scheme to modernise and improve society by destroying the Church. It is a design reflected in his harpy sister's hope of occupying the parsonage in order to "shut out the church, sink the clergy, and see only respectable, elegant, modernized, and occasional residence of a man of independent fortune" (p.256). Sir Thomas has other ideas and squashes the plan, but because Henry aim is to subvert the spiritual renewal of Mansfield Park, and because he is aware that Fanny is a part of the plan for renewal, so it is precisely at this point that his attention shifts to her.

The proposition that Sir Thomas knew about Crawford's design, and may have even participated in it for his own hidden purposes, is not inconsistent with the scriptural record. For just as Sir Thomas commits Fanny to Crawford, so it was God who committed Job to Satan. And while Satan inflicted terrible suffering upon Job: "In all this did not Job sin with his lips" (2.10). Likewise, Fanny never sinned with her lips.

The temptation of Fanny has important parallels with Christ. For as Matthew reminds us, after his baptism: "Then was Jesus led up of the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (4:1). In Job it is God who commits his servant to Satan, in Matthew it is the Holy Spirit who leads Jesus to his temptation. In such an orthodox scheme there is no reason why Sir Thomas would not commit Fanny to Crawford, that she might be forced to experience the same passion, suffering and abandonment that her Saviour experienced before her. It is quite possible that, in following this path, Fanny will ultimately accept her destiny, even if, like Jesus, that destiny seems unclear at the time.

This logic is consistently pursued by the author. During the attic scene we can see Sir Thomas leading Fanny into her wilderness, into her dark night of the soul, into her passion. The passage is complex and ambiguous, for when Fanny tells her uncle that she does not want to marry Crawford, he admits: "I am half inclined to think, Fanny, that you do not quite know your own feelings" (p.316). As a character created by an author who was completely dominated by the distinction between reason and feeling, between classical and romantic, Sir Thomas is perfectly right. Fanny does not yet know her own feelings.

But her passionate refusal to be tempted, by Satan or by God, and her refusal to abandon her principles, will have its rewards. For already her uncle has ventured into the attic, and on

discovering that Fanny was never allowed to have a fire, he has one lit there, and he ensures that it will remain lit for Fanny's well-being, and for the metaphorical well-being of Mansfield Park. This image of a fire in a cold attic is loaded with Kantian symbolism: the cold attic is pure reason and the life of the mind, while the fire is pure feeling and the life of the heart. After Fanny's wilderness experience in the attic, the tension between reason and feeling, between classical and romantic, are reconciled in a particularly theological context.

Once the fire has been lit and the attic is warmed, Sir Thomas's composure and solicitude towards Fanny returns (p.323). Perhaps more than anything else it is the fire in the attic, a sign that the coldness of pure reason has been tempered with the embers of feeling, which makes Fanny able to reasonably cope with her feelings and confront her destiny at Mansfield Park, knowing that she is being guided, however strangely and painfully, by the author's sense of Providence.

For came to the Estate with a lack of formal education, but she brought something more important, something it lacked, her enduring love for her brother William. Quite obviously she brought a Christian spirit of brotherly-love to a place where there was a great deal of education but no evidence of human feeling. There is no real love amongst the Bertram children. Their dispositions are governed by an awe of their father as patriarchal law-giver and little else. And according to the author's logic, if Tom, Maria and Julia do not really love each other, then their lives must be lived out in consequence of this want. Even Edmund, who is going into the Church, seems emotionally absent from his family, and guided more by a sense of duty than by love of family, fellow man, or God.

This is why his father increasingly senses that clerical reform is not enough, that in addition to encouraging clerical residency, he must also encourage spiritual renewal. Fanny's love for William becomes the model for this renewal, and so it can be no coincidence that, at the same time Crawford focuses his evil intentions upon Fanny, so her brother William gives her the cross she is to bear, even if he cannot afford a chain to put it on. The symbolism is, like the fire in the attic, quite obvious, the cross gives Fanny's mission christological overtones which Edmund wants to encourage (naturally enough) but which Crawford is intent on subverting.

Hence they both contrive to give Fanny a chain on which to put her cross, which will determine under whose banner she will fight, the banner of the Church or the banner of Satan. As Tony Tanner observes:

The question is, which chain will Fanny wear to carry her cross? Henry slyly forces a fancy chain on her, while Edmund later gives her a tastefully simple one. She is persuaded to wear Henry's (just as they are trying to force her to accept him as a husband), but fortunately it will not go through the cross, so she can wear Edmund's with a good conscience. Thus the two tokens of the two people she loves most are linked together round her neck when she leads her first ball: and in that moment the final emotional situation at the end of the book is foreshadowed.⁹

That final emotional situation, the banishment of the forces of darkness and decay (the Crawfords and Mrs Norris), and the rehabilitation of the Mansfield Estate, is resolved according to the theological hope of the author, and according to the logic of her allegory.

Jane Austen is widely held to have written novels that contain complex and powerful social commentaries. She wrote about an imperfect world. She offered her opinions about what was wrong with society, and how it might be put right. She wrote her novels in the context of her strong religious beliefs, and so we ought to acknowledge this for the sake of integrity and truth. We cannot divorce theology from her world without distorting it.

REFERENCES

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