

Style and Character in *Mansfield Park*

(Page references to the Penguin edition, 1966; none for Chapter 47)

About thirty years ago, Miss Maria Ward of Huntingdon, with 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. All Huntingdon exclaimed on the greatness of the match, and her uncle, the lawyer, himself, allowed her to be at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to it.

It's no wonder there are "Janeites". We're all Janeites, more or less. With what other writer do you so much feel you're being admitted into a kind of personal intimacy? It's not just that she seems present to us in her books but that we seem to be present to her as she's writing them. She seems, peculiarly, to be writing *for* us, her style peculiarly to presuppose our attention and co-operation. She is playful but not as Joyce is—playing with his material, for our amazement, like a juggler at the circus; *she* seems to be inviting us to join in, flatteringly, as a kind of partner in the game. The style of her narration isn't so much *a* style as a play of styles, this style, more or less hers, playing off against that, more or less not hers. As she reports on her characters so she invites us to follow the ironic and teasing comings-and-goings of her voice in theirs, theirs in hers, to make out where the boundaries between the two form and where dissolve, where this blends with and where it separates from that and where one lies on top of the other, as if one but distinctly two; and to make out the upshot as a form of judgement. And to follow the play, without missing anything, follow it *home*, is like being, for the moment, while the game lasts, as clever as she is herself. *Here's* what it is to think and to judge then. So *this* is what language might be? This is what it is to know? It's like flying, on her wings. No *wonder* there are Janeites.

The opening of *Mansfield Park* is characteristic. The first phrase could hardly be more perfectly factual or neutral, toneless, anyone's or no-one's. The phrase that succeeds it momentarily seems so too; though, in retrospect, we might feel there had been a certain passing flicker of *something* in that "Miss ... of Huntingdon", especially when we find it echoing a little later, but more grandly of course, in the multiple and mutually reinforcing (but nevertheless still factually truthful) dignities of "Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton", where "Sir Thomas" lends at least as much

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dignity to the county as the county does to him and where the phrasing would not need *so* much pressing in the direction of Sir Leicester Dedlock and Lincolnshire [1] to get there.

But the girl could hardly have “only” seven thousand pounds to the perception of just anyone or no-one. She has that for what must be quite a small set of definite someones, those able to recognise the circumstance in which the sum might or might not count as “only”, the same small (as the world goes) set of people for whom pretty young girls do, or not not, have the “good luck” to “captivate” baronets with fortunes to match their rank, the same small, very small set of people on familiar enough terms with the parties concerned—or plausibly capable of claiming to be so—to speak of the the girl’s uncle, the lawyer, as “himself”, the set, that is, that comprises “All Huntingdon”, large enough in its own eyes and amongst whom the cash value of a girl’s good looks can in any given case be (in retrospect at least) reckoned pretty exactly.

Jane Austen—it seems plain enough—doesn’t judge as Huntingdon judges, doesn’t share Huntingdon’s worldliness; and she uses Huntingdon’s voice to say so. But that she *can*, is a sign that the relation between her voice and her judgement and those of Huntingdon at large isn’t a simple one. She isn’t quoting Huntingdon *sarcastically* after all, as someone who herself despises “the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income”. On the contrary, she speaks as someone fully able to value such things. She and Huntingdon, in large measure, “speak the same language”. It’s in Huntingdon, and from Huntingdon, after all, that she found her own voice. Its voice is sufficiently hers for her to use for her purpose, which isn’t quite that of Huntingdon at large but is that of Huntingdon at its best. So if we suppose that “All Huntingdon” must be in the author’s eyes contemptibly small and its scale of values simply false, we suppose wrong. Rank and income may not be everything but that doesn’t mean they’re nothing. If we live in a world in which they exist and matter, it can’t be right to live as if they don’t. That it’s wrong to marry for the sake of rank and income (or looks) doesn’t make it right to marry with “imprudent” indifference to “education, fortune, or connections”. Five or so sentences after the opening quoted above, we find Jane Austen and Huntingdon speaking simply as one:

But Miss Frances married, in the common phrase, to disoblige her family, and by fixing on a Lieutenant of Marines, without education, fortune, or connections, did it very thoroughly. She could hardly have made a more untoward choice. Sir Thomas Bertram 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 for the advantage of Lady Bertram’s sister; but her husband’s profession was such as no interest could reach: and before he had time to devise any

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other method of assisting them, an absolute breach between the sisters had taken place. It was the natural result of the conduct of each party, and such as a very imprudent marriage almost always produces.

Jane Austen now speaks, and judges, without irony, just as Huntingdon does: as if education, fortune, connections, interest, respectability, advantage all matter and as if it does count against a course of action that it might be called untoward or imprudent. And if she needs a phrase to denote the opposite of marrying for money what she'll choose is not marrying for love but marrying, "in the common phrase", to disoblige one's family. She sides with Huntingdon.

On the other hand, of course, there is prudence and prudence; one man's isn't necessarily another's. And as the earlier quotation suggests, Jane Austen's own idea of what's prudent might be perfectly compatible with thinking that to marry a Mr Collins or a Mr Rushworth, or not to marry a Captain Wentworth, is—house or no house, rank and income notwithstanding—not prudent at all.

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But whatever there might be of difficulty in keeping up with her in the narrative parts of her novel—in following her changes of tone and reconciling one judgement with another—it's nothing compared with the difficulties that can face us when she abandons narrative for dialogue. *Then* we may feel that we've been pretty thoroughly grounded, *dumped*. How, for instance, *are* we to read that scene in Chapter 47 in which Edmund recounts to Fanny his last meeting with Mary Crawford? Jane Austen gives us not the slightest bit of help. She leaves us, brutally, to get airborne, if we can, on our own.

Patricia Menon, in her book reviewed in the fifth issue of this magazine, says that Edmund's reactions to Mary "are not just a simple victory of right over wrong" [2] and that the chief wrong in them is the distrust of Mary's sexual attraction which shows in his belief that she tries to use it on him, as a last resort, to overcome his better judgement:

"Mr Bertram," said she, I looked back. "Mr Bertram," said she, with a smile – but it was a smile ill-suited to the conversation that had passed, a saucy playful smile, seeming to invite, in order to subdue me; at least it appeared so to me. I resisted

As Patricia Menon says, it's impossible to know whether Edmund is right or not; he himself is unsure. But what we can know, I think, is that Patricia Menon would be glad to think him wrong (as, I admit, I would myself). The reviewer saw the scene differently and as less in doubt:

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When love and judgement go together let's hope that both are reinforced. But people do fall in love sometimes with someone it would be quite wrong or inappropriate or bloody hopeless to marry. Isn't this one of the things that art shows us? ... Both Edmund and Jane Austen are wholly right. Edmund resists the [smile]—a smile surely in the character so vividly created in the novel? To put it baldly, Mary Crawford's indulgence in her brother's playing with fire, leading to her seeing his absconding with Mrs Rushworth as only folly, makes her an unsuitable marriage partner for a clergyman, especially one she has "subdued". Edmund overcomes his being in love with her to make this right judgement.

Without any guidance from a narrator, how we take the characters in this scene must in part depend, as the reviewer suggested, on how we take them in the novel at large. But that applies, of course, just as much—or rather, as the one telling the story, perhaps even more—to Edmund than to Mary. That there may be nothing out of character in Mary's smile as Edmund interprets it doesn't necessarily mean we are to think his interpretation right, and it doesn't necessarily mean that the scene vindicates him generally at her expense. I think we have to accept that we don't know what Mary means by her smile and also that that we don't is one of the things we do know. If Edmund's interpretation of the smile is capable of telling us anything, it can only be something about him. It's him in his telling, I think, more than Mary that Jane Austen is interested in here, i.e. the scene presented for our attention is as much or more the one between him and Fanny that is taking place in the present as the one between him and Mary that took place earlier.

I am sure the reviewer is right and it *would* be wrong or inappropriate or bloody hopeless for him to marry her, that she is an unsuitable wife for a clergyman (for this clergyman certainly and perhaps any other clergyman too) and that, in so far as his judgement is of her suitability or of the bloody hopelessness of a marriage between them, he is right, wholly right and nothing but right. He makes, that is, the right choice. But that leaves plenty of room for thinking, like Patricia Menon, that he is, nevertheless, a good deal wanting and that it shows in his reactions, and his account to Fanny of his reactions, to Mary. I don't believe Jane Austen is vindicating Edmund in what he says here to Fanny as, say, she vindicates Darcy in what he says in his letter to Elizabeth Bennet. Edmund's decision might be vindicated, *he* isn't. On the other hand, it does not follow that if Jane Austen isn't vindicating him, she must be vindicating Mary. She seems to me to be wonderfully even-handed in what she shows us of them. I concentrate on Edmund's failings only because his are the ones we have to see for ourselves. Hers, in his account of them, we can hardly miss.

Patricia Menon is good on Edmund's failings (she showed me things I hadn't seen): "conventionality and emotional blindness",

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simplifying causes to fit “orthodox terms”, giving “conventional reason[s]” for desires, “convenient allegiance to . . . principle”, “insensitivity to the depth of another’s feelings”, “the theatricality of his performance” (when he *isn’t* on stage) etc.

He is a clergyman, and Mary *is* hardly suitable as a clergyman’s wife. But what sort, quite, of clergyman is he and, therefore, is she unsuitable for? He is certainly serious-minded, conscientious, well-intentioned, nothing of a Dr Grant. He takes his profession seriously . . . as seriously as he can. But how seriously, as Jane Austen shows it, is that? In defending the profession against Mary’s slights at Sotherton, in Chapter 9, he says,

I cannot call that situation nothing, which has the charge of all that is of the first importance to mankind, individually or collectively considered, temporally and eternally – which has the guardianship of religion and morals, and consequently of the manners which result from their influence. (p. 120)

Well, that certainly seems serious enough and inclusive enough, except that, when he comes to develop the topic, the eternal and religion are forgotten and “all that is of first importance to mankind” shrinks to the manners that might be called the conduct that results from good principles or is the effect of the doctrines it is the clergyman’s duty to teach and recommend:

We do not look in great cities for our best morality. It is not there, that respectable people of any denomination can do most good; and it is certainly not there, that the influence of the clergy can be most felt. A fine preacher is followed and admired; but it is not in fine preaching only that a clergyman will be useful in his parish and his neighbourhood, where the parish and neighbourhood are of a size capable of knowing his private character, and observing his general conduct, which in London can rarely be the case. The clergy are lost there in the crowds of their parishioners. They are known to the largest part only as preachers. And with regard to their influencing public manners, Miss Crawford must not misunderstand me, or suppose I mean to call them the arbiters of good breeding, the regulators of refinement and courtesy, the masters of the ceremonies of life. The *manners* I speak of, might rather be called *conduct* perhaps, the result of good principles; the effect, in short, of those doctrines which it is their duty to teach and recommend; and it will, I believe, be every where found, that as the clergy are, or are not what they ought to be, so are the rest of the nation.

Jane Austen isn’t—surely, she isn’t?—simply endorsing Edmund here, as, say, Chaucer endorses his “poure persoun of a toun”?

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Patricia Menon comments—in a way which suggests where *her* sympathies lie—“The carefully constructed pronouncements provoke flippancy from his newest pupil [Mary].” “Pronouncements” seems to me the right word, and “provoking” does too. Isn’t Edmund being just a bit *too* smugly and irreproachably correct to bear? And whose reaction do you prefer, his old pupil’s (“ ‘Certainly,’ said Fanny with gentle earnestness.”) or his newest’s (“ ‘There,’ cried Miss Crawford, ‘you have quite convinced Miss Price already.’ ”)? And then, for all its correctness, Edmund’s conception of religion and his own profession, lacks depth. He may raise “manners” up to “conduct” but he levels “religion” down to it. If anyone wants an explanation of the rise of Methodism or the Oxford Movement they need look no further than this glimpse Jane Austen gives us of a serious-minded, conscientious and well-intentioned Church of England clergyman of the Age of Reason. No wonder she said in a letter that we all ought to be evangelicals.

As he himself suggests, a clergyman is a teacher. Well, what sort of teacher is he? And, therefore, again, what sort of clergyman too? Don’t we see that, reflected in what his old pupil Fanny says to him, in the following?

Fanny spoke her feelings. “Here’s harmony!” said she. “Here’s repose! Here’s what may leave all painting and all music behind, and what poetry alone can attempt to describe. Here’s what may tranquillize every 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 would certainly be less of both if the sublimity of nature were more attended to, and people were carried more out of themselves by such a scene.” (p. 139)

The only thing that saves this from being a speech by Mary Bennet is something that wasn’t in the lesson it was learned from. For it means something quite different from what it says. Fanny isn’t a monster, and what she means is, more or less, “Don’t go to her. Stay by me, by *me!* I am yours.”—something Mary Bennet wouldn’t be capable of meaning at all. But, unfortunately for Fanny, sentiments, however right-minded, aren’t what young men want of young women, not even (or perhaps especially) when they are their own coming back to them. Edmund acknowledges Fanny’s right-mindedness, and that she got it off him, then, helplessly, goes off to Mary Crawford at the piano, leaving Fanny to be carried out of herself by attending to the sublimity of nature seen through the window. Right-mindedness has to be its own reward.

Edmund may be a good man but only doubtfully so; good but only within certain conventional limits; tested beyond those limits he becomes something else. His goodness is of that limited (or doubtful) kind that has nothing of the creative about it. He can, as it

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were, keep things going but not renew them, repeat but not discover. He takes what he is given and hands it on unchanged, as something to be handed on (or back) unchanged again. So Fanny, wanting to keep him by her and away from Mary Crawford, gives back to him unchanged what he has given her unchanged from the book he got it from.

And it is with these limitations of Edmund's in mind, as they have been created in the book as a whole, that we need to read the account he gives to Fanny of his last meeting with Mary Crawford. That account contains a series of adverse judgements of Mary, together with a sufficient glimpse of what provokes them, to suggest their partiality or inadequacy. Edmund, it seems to me, ends up being portrayed as more than a bit of a pharisee and Mary as someone with more to her than he can see, someone he might have helped to make—were he a better man than he is—a better woman than she is, someone who might have helped to make him a better man in turn. One of the questions Jane Austen's portrayal of Edmund seems to me to throw up is, "What sort of goodness can someone possess who can't judge rightly? Are there aspects or reaches of moral goodness that depend on a capacity to know and judge that seems itself not quite to fit comfortably in the sphere of morality? That seems to belong more, say, to art and criticism?"

There is, of course, no quarrelling with Fanny's judgement of Henry and Maria, which Edmund fully shares and Mary hasn't the least glimmering of:

The event was so shocking, that there were moments even when her heart revolted from it as impossible – when she thought it could not be. A woman married only six months ago, a man professing himself devoted, even *engaged* to another – that other her near relation – the whole family, both families connected as they were by tie upon tie, all friends, all intimate together! – it was too horrible a confusion of guilt, too gross a complication of evil, for human nature, not in a state of utter barbarism, to be capable of! *His* unsettled affections, wavering with his vanity, *Maria's* decided attachment, and no sufficient principle on either side ... (p. 429)

There is just nothing like this in Mary's view of the matter. Had there been, Edmund might, even at this stage, have ended up marrying her, just as Fanny fears when he begins his account of their meeting. What Mary sees in her brother and his sister is only "folly"; and with that, one word, everything, instantly, is over between her and Edmund. He is finished with her.

What are we to think of it, that Edmund places so much importance on this word? The answer, it seems to me, must all depend—on what Mary does and does not make of the word and on what Edmund does and does not do to get her to see the limits of

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what can be made of it. For it is possible to imagine the conversation going in such a way that she should convince him that folly can go deep and he convince her that, in this case, it doesn't go deep enough in certain necessary directions. It's possible to imagine their arriving, through mutual education, at a mutual understanding, like Darcy and Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*.

And there *ought* to be, if Edmund is quite what he thinks himself, room for something like that to happen (without their needing to *be* Darcy and Elizabeth) for he goes to meet Mary, he reports to Fanny, for "the last, last interview of friendship ... in such a state of mind, so softened, so devoted, as made it for a few moments impossible to Fanny's fears, that it should be the last". He may be expected to listen to Mary, that is, as a man still in love with her.

And what Mary makes of "the folly of our two relations" seems to me not so absolutely contemptible as he thinks it. For the question for Edmund shouldn't be—not if he feels anything like love for her—"What does this woman not say?"—but "What am I to think of what she does?" The question for him (and us) is not only whether Mary's judgement has anything essential missing from it but also whether there is anything to respect in it—a sight of things hidden, perhaps, from him, or Fanny. And it's not Mary alone who is in question here. As he says, it was "natural to her to treat the subject as she did. She was speaking only, as she had been used to hear others speak, as she imagined every body else would speak." What Edmund is judging is not Mary alone but the world she's from. He is judging the morality, as she expresses it, of the "great cities" he has spoken of earlier in the book; and, of course, at the same time revealing his own morality for our judgement. And just as the one is shown not to be so bad as he thinks it, so the other is shown not to be so good.

He says he cannot recall all Mary's words and would not dwell on them if he could. He finds them "hardly fit to be repeated" to Fanny. Then he repeats them:

She reprobated her brother's folly in being drawn on by a woman whom he had never cared for, to do what must lose him the woman he adored; but still more the folly of – poor Maria, in sacrificing such a situation, plunging into such difficulties, under the idea of being really loved by a man who long ago had made his indifference clear.

But, for me, there, Mary goes a good way towards justifying the word "folly", not only suggesting the loss or suffering Henry and Maria have brought on themselves—and the greater suffering of the woman—but bringing out what in their "folly" has the character of depth: the perversity or wilfulness of the self-destructiveness involved: "drawn on by a woman whom he had never cared for, to do what must lose him the woman he adored"; "plunging into such difficulties, under the idea of being really loved by a man who long ago had made his indifference clear". And Mary doesn't distinguish between Henry and Maria just on the grounds that the latter is sure to

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suffer more; what she says about Maria's folly implies Henry's greater culpability. It makes a very favourable contrast, it seems to me, with Edmund's own pompous and self-righteous refusal to distinguish between the two ("with whom lay the greater seduction, I pretended not to say"). Saving the words "situation" and "adored", these are remarks Jane Austen herself might make. They are so far from being contemptible that I don't think it is going too far to say that Dr Johnson can be heard at the back of them.

Having introduced them as scarcely repeatable, Edmund dismisses them with:

Guess what I must have felt. To hear the woman whom –
no harsher name than folly given! – So voluntarily, so
freely, so coolly to canvass it! – No reluctance, no horror,
no feminine – shall I say? no modest loathings! – This is
what the world does. For where, Fanny, shall we find a
woman whom nature had so richly endowed? – Spoilt,
spoilt! –

Knowing that Fanny shares his disgust, Edmund is free self-consciously to perform it in front of her without needing to justify it. He concludes his performance, virtuously, more in sorrow than in anger. He's a bad novelist, bad critic and a ham actor, all for an audience he can be sure will applaud and encourage him. It doesn't seem to me—*he* doesn't seem to me—at all *nice* (in any sense).

The most damning thing Edmund reports of Mary is:

She saw it only as folly, and that folly stamped only by exposure. The want of common discretion, of caution – his going down to Richmond for the whole time she was at Twickenham – her putting herself in the power of a servant; – it was the detection, not the offence which she reprobated. It was the imprudence which had brought things to extremity

But the judgement expressed in the first two and last three lines here isn't adequately justified either by what he reported of Mary's words earlier or the new evidence he supplies here in the middle two or three lines. The latter certainly justify the word "imprudence" but imprudence of a kind that might just as easily—or more easily—be thought of as irresponsibility as carelessness of detection. My point is not that Mary does think her brother irresponsible but that Edmund fails to see her as Jane Austen presents her, that is, as someone who, seen with the eyes of love, might be brought to think that.

There are other remarks of Mary's which attract Edmund's adverse judgement—all belonging to what you might call a worldly treatment of the subject—which I think a word might be put in for. When she catches Edmund's look of disapproval at her speaking of "folly" she fails to recognise that what matters to him is her use of that word itself; she thinks *he* thinks she is going to defend her

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brother at his sister's expense. That he is without any of that sort of partiality doesn't occur to her. But this detail seems to me a beautiful instance of the even-handedness of Jane Austen's treatment of the two of them. For it's a sharp little detail that cuts both ways. If on the one hand it suggests that disinterestedness doesn't take up much room in her life, it also suggests that the common family partialities that ordinary worldly judgement approves, and which both she and Fanny possess, don't take up much room in his. And if it is natural to her that she should think as she does, given that she has been brought up where and by whom she has, well, it is no less natural to him that he should think as he does, given that he has been brought up where and by whom *he* has. [3]

Then, there is the tone of the following, which betrays, in Edmund's eyes, an "alloy, a dash of evil" in her even when she is at her best. Her best is (as he tells Fanny) to praise Fanny with warm affection; the "evil" in it is that

yet, even here ... she could exclaim "Why would she not have him? It is all her fault. Simple girl! – I shall never forgive her. Had she accepted him as she ought, they might now have been on the point of marriage, and Henry would have been too happy and too busy to want any other object. He would have taken no pains to be on terms with Mrs Rushworth again. It would have all ended in a regular standing flirtation, in yearly meetings at Sotherton and Everingham."

Mary can't help, it seems, like Mr Bennet (see below), seeing the funny side, and developing it. And, on that, Fanny's verdict is "Cruel! ... quite cruel! At such a moment ... and to you! Absolute cruelty." But Mary has Edmund to stick up for her: "Cruelty, do you call it? – We differ there. No, her's is not a cruel nature I do not consider her as meaning to wound my feelings." Then he goes on to say what he does consider her: "The evil lies yet deeper ... perversion of mind ... faults of principle ... of blunted delicacy and a corrupt, vitiated mind." And yet what strong objection of principle—except to someone incapacitated by literal-mindedness—can there be to Mary's joke? "It is all her fault ... I shall never forgive her"? Is that an invitation to laugh a chap (in love) must in decency refuse? No view of Henry there a decent chap could concur in? Of course what Fanny and Edmund condemn is not so much the particular joke Mary makes as the fact of her making a joke at all. Her tone is not the appropriate, the correct one. But the flexibility of mind Mary shows in seeing the possibility of a joke here is *just* what Edmund lacks and needs. He would be a better man for having it. Without it, there's no doubt, he *is* a bit of a Mr Collins.

The last thing he reports her saying to him is:

"Well, she went on to say, that what remained now to be done. was to bring about a marriage between them. She

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spoke of it, Fanny, with a steadier voice than I can.” He was obliged to pause more than once as he continued. “We must persuade Henry to marry her,” said she, “and what with honour, and the certainty of having shut himself out for ever from Fanny, I do not despair of it. . . . I hope we may find no insuperable difficulty. My influence, which is not small, shall go all that way; and, when once married, and properly supported by her own family, people of respectability as they are, she may recover her footing in society to some degree. . . . What I advise is, that your father be quiet. Do not let him injure his own cause by interference. Persuade him to let things take their course. If by officious exertions of his, she is induced to leave Henry’s protection, there will be much less chance of his marrying her, than if she remains with him. I know how he is likely to be influenced. Let Sir Thomas trust to his honour and compassion, and it may all end well; but if he get his daughter away, it will be destroying the chief hold.”

Again, although Mary could hardly be more cynical or (even when talking to a *clergyman*) take less seriously fornication, adultery or the meaning of marriage vows, Edmund could, equally, hardly show less interest in the welfare or interest of his sister, as ordinarily understood, or be less disposed to give Mary any credit for the interest she shows.

There’s an interesting parallel, and contrast, between Edmund’s view here and that of the Bennets (of *everybody*) in *Pride and Prejudice*, where the worthless Wickham and the hardly less worthless Lydia Bennet run away together. Where Edmund’s view of a marriage between Henry and his sister is that it is something “which, thinking as I now thought of her [Mary’s] brother, should rather be prevented than sought”, Mr Bennet’s only *objection* to the marriage being brought about between his runaways, is that he wished “the satisfaction of prevailing on one of the most worthless young men in Great Britain to be her [Lydia’s] husband might . . . have rested in its proper place“, i.e. upon himself. Elizabeth thinks they must marry too, as the only thing that *can* be thought: “And they *must* marry! Yet he is *such* a man.” To which Mr Bennet replies, “Yes, yes, they must marry. There is nothing else to be done.” And there *is* nothing else to be done. Not in the eyes of Huntingdon, of whose view of things Jane Austen’s own is a variation not a repudiation. It is natural to the Bennets to treat the subject as they do, as it is natural to all the inhabitants of Huntingdon, with families to bring up, and the best to make of all sorts of bad jobs. And such a way of treating it isn’t foreign to Jane Austen either. She shares Huntingdon’s (and London’s) ordinary, rough-and-ready concern for practical outcomes and what is best to be done.

Anyone listening to Mary—*without* loving her—merely wanting

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to do her (and capable of doing her) justice would find something there to respect. A man listening with the ears of love must hear someone speaking he can *talk to*, he must hear *possibility*. But not Edmund. The conversation between him and Mary is no conversation at all. There is no to-and-fro of talk—no give-and-take—in it whatsoever. From the moment Mary utters the word “folly”, he merely listens, “like a man stunned”, he reports to Fanny, unable to speak. Then when she has, in his eyes, thoroughly exposed herself—her “perversion of mind”—he denounces her—reporting his denunciation to Fanny for her approval. If anyone here is incorrigible, because not conversible, it seems to me it is Edmund, who would judge but without being a critic.

It is when Mary has finished saying what she thinks would be best to do, that Edmund commences the denunciation he reports to Fanny. Its first passage concludes with the following on his changed opinion of Mary:

That, perhaps it was best for me; I had less to regret ...
And yet, that I must and would confess that, could I have restored her to what she had appeared to me before, I would infinitely prefer any increase of the pain of parting, for the sake of carrying with me the right of tenderness and esteem. This is what I said ... She was astonished, exceedingly astonished – more than astonished. I saw her change countenance. She turned extremely red.

I don't know that the acting on stage that takes place earlier is quite the terrible thing some of the characters think it but this—the man in a triangle making himself available to one woman by reporting to her how he has dished the other—is an abomination. Edmund's been reading too many bad novels; and now he's writing one, with himself as the sentimental hero, parading his virtue and puffing up his feathers specially for Fanny. And he must particularly like the lines he gives himself here, because it's the second time he's delivered them:

Perhaps it is best for me – since it leaves me so little to regret. Not so, however. Gladly would I submit to all the increased pain of losing her, rather than have to think of her as I do. I told her so.

Did you?

Yes, when I left her I told her so.

“I told her so.” “Did you?” “Yes, I told her so.”

Mary, in reply to Edmund's denunciation, sneers at his profession:

A pretty good lecture upon my word. Was it part of your last sermon? At this rate, you will soon reform every body

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at Mansfield and Thornton Lacey; and when I hear of you next, it may be as celebrated preacher in some great society of Methodists, or as a missionary into foreign parts.

To which he replies by turning the other cheek, in victory:

I only said in reply, that from my heart I wished her well, and earnestly hoped that she might soon learn to think more justly, and not owe the most valuable knowledge we any of us could acquire – the knowledge of ourselves and of our duty, to the lessons of affliction – and immediately left the room.

Which would be bad enough even if it weren't being retailed to the girl's (soon to be) successful rival.

It's then, as he is going, that she calls him back and gives him that smile. Perhaps the smile is as he says but perhaps, equally, it isn't. As he imagined he saw in her, immediately before, "a mixture of many feelings – a great, though short struggle – half a wish of yielding to truths, half a sense of shame but habit, habit carried it. She would have laughed if she could. It was a sort of laugh, as she answered ...", and as he says "she tried to speak carelessly; but she was not so careless as she wanted to appear", the smile that follows could have just about any character, and would perhaps be likeliest to have one that was as mixed as the emotions that preceded it, so much so that perhaps Mary Crawford herself would have been hard pressed to say quite what it meant.

All we know for sure is what is taking place between him and Fanny: that a man is telling a woman who would like to have him—and who before long gets him—that another woman, her rival, tried to get him but couldn't. "So: maybe ... but ... maybe not." Edmund's account of what took place between him and Mary needs to be seen in the light of what is taking place between him and Fanny, which is what if not mutual courtship or a necessary preliminary to courtship, a clearing of the ground and burning of dead wood? A burying of bodies even? A process Jane Austen isn't shy of introducing with a joke of her own:

Long, long would it be ere Miss Crawford's name passed his lips again or she [Fanny] could hope for a renewal of such confidential intercourse as had been.

It was long. They reached Mansfield on Thursday, and it was not till Sunday evening that Edmund began to talk to her on the subject.

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On the one hand, that sneer of Mary's isn't so wide of the mark. The Edmund that Jane Austen shows us in this scene does, it seems to

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me, think, talk, judge, behave according to a professional standard, according to what might be codified or prescribed as current best clerical practice. He isn't at all alive to the particularity of what's in front of him; his responses are all, to one degree or another, in this way or that, only approximately equal to it. He seems not to have any emotional or mental flexibility or agility. He behaves, that is, sufficiently "according to type" for Mary's jibe to have some warrant.

On the other hand, it has to be said in his defence, that he behaves so, at least in part, in reaction to what he has found in her, to the type of unprincipled, fashionable woman she undoubtedly, in considerable measure, is. What is her sneer, after all, but the sneer of just such a woman, one for whom nothing could be more certain than that a clergyman is good for nothing but a joke? What is she doing but behaving according to type herself? If he, in reaction to her, becomes one sort of dummy, what does she, in reaction to him, become but another? They bring out the worst in one another. And, I am not sure, myself, that, in them, Jane Austen isn't showing us something more than just two individuals, isn't showing us something gone wrong more generally in the relation between moral seriousness on the one hand and wit and playfulness on the other. Isn't it perhaps her version of "dissociation of sensibility"?

Mick Saunders

1. See the fifth paragraph of Chapter 2 of *Bleak House*.
2. *Austen, Eliot, Charlotte Brontë and the Mentor-Lover*, p. 63; but see pp. 58-64 generally.
3. *Ibid.*, especially pp. 51-7