

‘Where She Could Not Follow’

– The Lesbian Subplot in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*

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Abstract

Charlotte Brontë complained about Jane Austen’s lack of passion, but the trademark irony in her novels was applied to many risqué subjects, in ways that have become increasingly obvious, making the myth of a sexless Austen untenable. In the last half century, a number of commentators have pointed at lesbian inclinations and attachments in Austen’s novels, generally focusing on the protagonist of *Emma*. Seemingly unnoticed by critics, *Mansfield Park* includes a lesbian subplot, discreetly but firmly embedded onto the main narrative, facilitating the internal development of the protagonist Fanny Price, contributing to the novel’s debate on ‘nature versus improvement’, and inspiring some of the most outrageous humour in the book. The present essay traces the lesbian subplot in *Mansfield Park*, and poses an invitation to marvel anew at a complex novel full of rich subversive moods.

Keywords: Austen, *Mansfield Park*, lesbian literature, Queer literature, subtext, humour, risqué literature, improvement, garden as metaphor, nature as metaphor, horse as metaphor, music as metaphor, theatre as metaphor, kotzebue, Lovers’ Vows, satire, ambiguous gender and sexuality, doubling

1. Introduction

Since Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick unveiled the relevance of sexuality in the work of Jane Austen, with a conference paper of 1990 on *Sense and Sensibility* (Sedgwick, 1991) which caused mass hysteria in and out of the academic world, there has been some trepidation among Austen fans and scholars.ⁱ Austen’s relatives may have been proficient at editing their family history (see Sutherland, 2002),ⁱⁱ but many readers seemed just as fidgety about her and her writing. In 1995, Terry Castle’s reference to the “underlying eros – of the sister-sister bond”, in her discussion of Jane’s letters to Cassandra, caused a storm in a teacup (Castle, 1995, 3).ⁱⁱⁱ A subsequent article by Claudia Johnson pointed out that there was actually a tradition of queering Austen and her books, parallel to a normativizing tradition and sometimes enmeshed with it (Johnson, 1997).^{iv} An example is the critic Edmund Wilson, who in 1945 despairingly declared the protagonist of *Emma* to be obviously lesbian, while drawing attention to the fact that in *Sense and Sensibility* heterosexual pursuits are of less interest to Elinor and Marianne Dashwood than each other’s company, irregularities which Wilson linked to the unorthodox temperament of the novelist (see *ibid*).^v Charlotte Brontë had complained about Austen being unacquainted with passion, but others begged to differ – for example W. H. Auden in an often quoted poem from the nineteen seventies: “You could not shock her [Austen] more than she shocks me;/Beside her Joyce seems innocent as grass” (Auden, 1976, 79). Johnson widened the debate in 1995 with the publication of a study surveying female homoerotic and homosocial bonds in literature by women writers of the 1790s, concluding with a chapter on Austen (Johnson, 1995). A book of erotica published in 2001 with Austen ‘missing scenes’, written by one Arielle Eckstut in the spirit of fanfiction, and opening with a romp between Jane Bennet and the Bingley sisters in *Pride and Prejudice*, inspired irate fan reviews on-line (Eckstut, 2003). But the tide was turning. In 2000, Jill Heydt-Stevenson evidenced the bawdy humour integrated into the narratives of Austen’s novels, through references to prostitution, sexually transmitted diseases, and male homosexuality, among other things (Heydt-Stevenson, 2000).^{vi} Two years later, a study by Berryl Jones discussed the unsettled gender and sexual boundaries in Austen’s work as a matter of course (Jones, 2002).^{vii} In 2004, when a best selling novel by Karen Joy Fowler acknowledged the enduring existence of an Austen lesbian fan base, while suggesting that Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice* could be lesbian (see Fowler, 2004,171),^{viii} not a plucked eyebrow was raised.

The long shadow cast by Michel Foucault, and the seismic appearance of queer theory, have resulted in a seemingly endless and often circular debate on the a-historicism of discussing sexual identities before the nineteenth century. Rest assured, the present essay will not once mention the diaries of Anne Lister, nor the Sapphic narrative cartographies of ‘damnation-escape’ and ‘dysphoria-euphoria’, nor the prism of ‘lesbian’ as positionality and metaphor.^{ix} Our discussion is not concerned with the lesbian identity of individuals or texts, but with ‘lesbian’ as adjective. It is my contention that Austen’s last novel has a lesbian subplot; that is, a subplot which deals with a woman’s erotic attraction for another.

Critical attention to *Mansfield Park* has focused on its place within Jane Austen’s work, as well as on issues like the treatment of slavery, and imperial and gender politics. Lionel Trilling believed the novel’s main concern to be morality, while John Odmark saw irony – “perhaps the most used term in Jane Austen criticism”, he explained – as its structuring principle (Trilling, 1955; Odmark, 1983, 190). Considered by some (notably Edward Said and Marilyn Butler) to be a decidedly conservative book in outlook, others (notably Johnson) have highlighted its subversive elements (Said, 1993; Butler, 1987; Johnson, 2005).^x This apparent undecidability has prompted Jane Stabler to describe the novel as Austen’s “most disturbing” (Stabler, 2003, xiii).^{xi} Virginia Woolf pointed out that, as a satirist, Austen “could be merciless enough” (Woolf, 2003: 139); which is not to say she didn’t also excel at a seductive playfulness that may be most apparent in a second reading (see Dave, 1971, xii).^{xii} The irreverent Mary Crawford, who may be seen to embody that attitude in *Mansfield Park*, is however an oddity in Austen’s work according to D.A. Miller, because she queerly chooses celibacy – and with it, Style (see Miller, 2003, 1-30).^{xiii} Jill Heydt-Stevenson has discussed the erotic humour in *Mansfield Park*, which “arguably contains more examples of libidinous humor and sexual allusion than any other Austen novel” (Heydt-Stevenson, 2000, 332).^{xiv} It is all the more surprising, therefore, that Heydt-Stevenson fails to discuss the lesbian references in the novel. In the film version of *Mansfield Park*, of 1999, Patricia Rozema included some near-invisible lesbian titillation, but she chose not to explore the ramifications of the book’s sustained innuendo.^{xv} Also, as Fowler’s novel equally suggests, Rozema’s movie presented the protagonist Fanny as an autobiographical portrait of Austen, despite the fact that the character of Mary would seem to be much closer to the novelist’s personality (see Fowler, 2004, 83).^{xvi} Against the tide, 1995 saw the publication of a groundbreaking essay by Misty Anderson positing that:

Fanny’s relationship to Mary [in Mansfield Park] represents the most significant source of the heroine’s subjectivity as a desiring adult. Austen defines Fanny’s character both against and in terms of Mary and in the process creates an intimacy between them that can be termed homoerotic. (Anderson, 1995, p. 167)^{xvii}

This is an illuminating essay, and it seems rather extraordinary that the lesbian content in the novel has not inspired more scholarly work of its kind, given the fact that the triangular relationship between Fanny Price, Edmund Bertram, and Mary Crawford is essential to the plot, and that Fanny’s growing closeness to Mary is vital to her development. It is true that the subplot, for that is what it amounts to, unfolds in a relatively discreet fashion, but this is not new to Austen readers. As Woolf suggestively (even erotically) put it:

Jane Austen is thus a mistress of much deeper emotion than appears on the surface. She stimulates us to supply what is not there. What she offers is, apparently, a trifle, yet is composed of something that expands in the reader’s mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial” (Woolf, 2003, 139-40).^{xviii}

Fanny’s only friend in the hostile environment of Mansfield Park is Edmund, who, as the novel progresses, becomes her love interest. However, from the moment Miss Crawford enters the narrative, her friendship with Fanny seems to be on the verge of becoming something else. If Edmund and Fanny are equally impressed by Miss Crawford when they meet her, Edmund’s admiration, the narrator explains, ‘might led him to where Fanny could not follow’. This is a paralipsis, a rhetorical device by which attention is brought to something by (unnecessarily) dismissing it. The lesbian subplot shows that Fanny could and did follow Edmund’s lead.

Mansfield Park is, ostensibly, a novel of female development, in which the heroine elevates her social status through marriage, after holding fast to her moral ideals. The protagonist’s introversion, and her physical and intellectual deficiencies, are set in contrast with the outspokenness and the active lives of other women, who are, however, unable to match Fanny’s moral values. The characters are presented at various stages of romantic involvement from courting to sexual attachments and marriage, but all the couples in the novel are seriously flawed in one way or another. The only successful relationship in the book, as the story closes, is that of Edmund and Fanny, a relationship based on a shared sense of morality and a friendship of many years. The function of the lesbian subplot in the novel is neither to advance, nor to delay, the heterosexual romantic plot. Austen may be addicted to ‘counterplots’ (Dave, 1971, xiv), but this is not a lesbian one. It would be unrealistic to expect it in a

respectable novel of 1814. Considering the centrality of the relationship between Edmund and Fanny, therefore, the lesbian story line would appear to be no more than an amusing diversion, or perhaps a mischievous ‘gift to the reader’ (see Stabler, 2003, xxxvi).^{xxix} However, the subplot, in conjunction with the heterosexual romance, in fact serves to illustrate the main theme in the novel, a debate on nature versus education.

As Margaret Anne Doody points out, “[a]ll of Jane Austen’s novels express a profound epistemological interest, and their plots are sustained adventures in modes of knowing” (Doody, 1990: xxxiii).^{xx} *Mansfield Park* has something of the quality of a riddle, and it is tempting to agree with Daryl Jones, when he claims that this novel “habitually raises issues which it finds unable to resolve” (Jones, 2002: 122). If we are to explore the lesbian subplot in which Fanny plays a part, it seems important to establish how innocent Fanny really is. Male homosexuality is explicitly referred to by Miss Crawford in her presence, shortly after Fanny explains that her brother works in the navy.

“Certainly, my home at my uncle’s brought me acquainted with a circle of admirals. Of Rears, and Vices, I saw enough. Now, do not be suspecting me of a pun, I entreat” (Austen, 1996, 51).^{xxi}

The comment is not remarked upon by those present. Edmund feels ‘grave’ and simply replies “It is a noble profession” (Ibid: 52). But Fanny is unaffected by the joke and, when Edmund asks her opinion about Miss Crawford the following day, in a conversation worth quoting at length, she replies:

“I like to hear her talk. She entertains me; and she is so extremely pretty, that I have great pleasure in looking at her.”

“It is her countenance that is so attractive. She has a wonderful play of feature! But was there nothing in her conversation that struck you Fanny, as not quite right?”

“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”

“Ungrateful is a strong word” (Ibid, 54).

On the one hand, Fanny appears unconcerned by the implication that her own brother may be inclined to ‘vice’, and is impressed by Miss Crawford’s charms in spite of her crudeness. On the other hand, when she admits to some reservations, these are related to Miss Crawford’s ungratefulness as a dependant. It is plausible to interpret the scene as beginning with Fanny pretending sexual ignorance, after which she is forced to admit that she fully understood the joke, after which she diverts the subject to the generosity of Miss Crawford’s host family. Since Fanny is a dependant in the Bertram household, and since she is being cross-questioned by her rich cousin and mentor, what else is she to do but negotiate her answers to please him? If he expects her to be ignorant of homosexuality, she tries to accommodate; when it is clear that this is not the case, she attempts to comply with Edmund’s assumptions, regarding propriety, familial duty, or whatever else they may be about. The narrator is playing a similar game, accommodating to the reader’s expectations by leaving room for a number of interpretations. In fact, Edmund and Fanny’s conversation can also be taken to refer to an earlier comment by Miss Crawford, criticizing her own uncle’s garden improvements as a nuisance for visitors, a comment that had upset Edmund. In this way, even for those readers who have missed, or have chosen to ignore, the meaning of “*Rears, and Vices*”, the conversation between the cousins the following day is still coherent.

This ambivalence is typical of the novel. Many readers have found Fanny’s introversion and righteousness irritating. But, below the surface, there is a fluidity of character and a moral ambiguity that are genuinely troubling. Woolf rightly claimed that Austen had been close to becoming “the forerunner of Henry James and Proust”, given her psychological probing (Woolf, 2003, 145). In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny uses her silence as a protective shielding, her compliance as a survival strategy, and her morality as a hook to get the right man.^{xxii} The critic Nina Auerbach, interestingly, sees Fanny as both a villain and a hero (Auerbach, 1983).^{xxiii} She certainly *appears* to be simple to the people around her, but there is no reason why the readers should agree. There are many incidents in the book where her ostensible lack of awareness of what is going on is thrown into question by developments in the plot. One example is Fanny’s insistence, when cornered, that Henry’s marriage proposal came as a complete surprise. The reader has enough evidence to doubt her word in this and many other occasions, enough to suspect her of some form of ‘negative maneuvering’. To put it another way, her being static forces others to advance the action in ways that often suit her.

Fanny's awareness of, and openness to, non-normative sexual behavior, is quite simply impossible to determine. But if we use Fanny's own 'method', and we focus on what a scene/description/line of dialogue *does not do*, instead of what it *does*, we can ascertain the story's target with reasonable accuracy. In the incident just mentioned, Miss Crawford's criticism of the admiral's management of his shrubbery *does not* warrant a charge of 'indecorousness' when there is a more valid explanation at hand (just as Miss Crawford and Fanny's rehearsal of a love scene in a play *does not* do anything to advance the central heterosexual romantic plot). If we agree to this premise, it is clear then that Fanny, Miss Crawford, and Edmund are aware of male homosexual activities, and that the three of them are able to mention these in conversation. Edmund does it to condemn Mary's joke –not, it may be remembered, homosexuality itself. Interestingly, even after Edmund has forgotten the incident, it still lingers in Fanny's thoughts, being 'almost always reminded by a something of the same nature whenever she was in her company...' (56). The slippery quality of 'nature' becomes increasingly more apparent as Austen uses the word again and again throughout the book. As regards Fanny and Edmund's feelings towards Miss Crawford, the narrator explains:

Having formed her mind and gained her affections, [Edmund] had a good chance of [Fanny] thinking like him; though at this period, and on this subject there began now to be some danger of dissimilarity, for he was in a line of admiration of Miss Crawford, which might lead him where Fanny could not follow (55).

The comment ostensibly refers to Edmund's and Fanny's divergent appreciation of Miss Crawford's moral character, with Edmund progressively softening his judgement of her. But in fact it is Fanny the one to initially appear less critical, and it is Fanny the one who quickly abandons any reservations she might have had, actively seeking Miss Crawford's friendship. Clearly, 'Where Fanny could not follow' can also be taken to refer to the possibility of a romantic attachment which could end in marriage. Let us now consider a number of threads in the narrative which suggest that Fanny is not merely inclined, but also invited, to 'follow' Edmund's growing feelings for Miss Crawford. These crisscrossing lines in the novel make symbolic use of theatricals, harp playing, horse riding, and nature. Let us consider them in turn, in order to add a few pieces to what one critic described as "[t]he puzzle that is Fanny Price" (Sutherland xvii).

2. "A Delightful Rehearsal" – Theatricals

Fanny spends much of her time in the East room, a room without a fire –as ordered by her aunt Mrs. Norris-, where she keeps her plants, her books, and her writing desk. As we have seen, the young Bertrams and their friends plan a private performance of August Von Kotzebue's notorious 1791 play 'Lovers Vows' while Sir Thomas is away in Antigua.^{xxiv} When Fanny refuses to take part in the play, she goes to the East room, 'to this nest of comforts (...) to try its influence on an agitated, doubting spirit' (127). She is wondering if, in condemning the inappropriateness of the play, she may be guided by a fear to take part in it because of her shyness. But Fanny's introversion, as we have seen, can not be assumed to be part of her personality. Her consistent preoccupation in the narrative is to be compliant, and what she dreads most is upsetting the Bertrams. In this scene, when she reflects on the right course of action, we see her debating on a suitable public persona for herself, a debate mixed in her thoughts with some frantic soul searching as to what her 'real' feelings are.

...she had begun to feel undecided as to what she ought to do; and as she walked round the room her doubts were increasing. Was she right in refusing what was so warmly asked, so strongly wished for? What might be so essential to a scheme on which some of those to whom she owed the greatest complaisance, had set their hearts? Was it not ill-nature –selfishness- and a fear of exposing herself? (ibid)

Others have no such fears. Shortly after this, Edmund informs Fanny that he has decided to take the part of Anhalt to spare Miss Crawford having to play Anhalt's lover Amelia with a stranger. And a few days later, Miss Crawford calls into the East room to ask Fanny to rehearse what sounds like a love scene with her. Fanny, startled when she appears,

...looked at the bright bars of her empty grate with concern.

"Thank you –I am quite warm, very warm. Allow me to stay here a little while, and do have the goodness to hear me my third act. (...) I came here to-day intending to rehearse it with Edmund –by ourselves- against the evening, but he is not in the way; and if he were, I do not think I could go through it with him, till I have hardened myself a little, for really there is a speech or two – You will be so good, won't you?"

Fanny was most civil in her assurances, though she could not give them in a very steady voice.

"Have you ever happened to look at the part I mean?" continued Miss Crawford, opening her book. "Here it is. I did not think much of it at first –but, upon my word-. There, look at that speech, and that, and that. How am I ever to look him in the face and say such things? Could you do it? (...) You must rehearse it with me, that I may

fancy you him, and get on by degrees. You have a look of his sometimes.”

“Have I? ...” (140)

Miss Crawford tells Fanny that: “Could Sir Thomas look in upon us just now, he would bless himself, for we are rehearsing all over the house”, and explains that she has just stumbled upon a couple “trying *not* to embrace” (ibid). After this, she starts her soliloquy,

...and Fanny joined in with all the modest feeling which the idea of representing Edmund was so strongly calculated to inspire; but with looks and voice so truly feminine, as to be no very good picture of a man. With such an Anhalt, however, Miss Crawford had courage enough...(ibid).

They are half way through rehearsing a scene, when Edmund comes in intending to rehearse his part with Fanny.^{xxv} Initially, ‘surprise, consciousness, and pleasure, appeared in each of the three’ (140), but, faced with the ‘real’ Anhalt and Emilia, Fanny finds that: ‘*She could not equal them in their warmth. Her spirits sank under the glow of theirs, and she felt herself becoming too nearly nothing to both, to have any comfort in having been sought by either*’ (141). This can not get much closer to an admission of bisexual yearning. Meanwhile, just as Fanny and Miss Crawford’s rehearsal had been interrupted by Edmund, the larger scale experiment of the Mansfield Park play is cut short with the unexpected return of Sir Thomas, who, shocked as expected, scolds everyone but Fanny. It is not until Volume III of the novel that the incident in the East room is considered again. It happens when Miss Crawford seeks Fanny to express her disappointment after she has refused to marry Henry, as well as to say goodbye. This important scene deserves to be quoted in full:

They were no sooner in the hall than all restraint of countenance was over on Miss Crawford’s side. She immediately shook her head at Fanny with arch, yet affectionate reproach, and taking her hand, seemed hardly able to help beginning directly. She said nothing, however, but, “Sad, sad girl! I do not know when I shall have done scolding you,” and had discretion enough to reserve the rest till they might be secure of having four walls to themselves. Fanny naturally turned up stairs, and took her guest to the apartment which was now always fit for comfortable use [having a fire]; opening the door, however, with a most aching heart, and feeling that she had a more distressing scene before her than ever that spot had yet witnessed. But the evil ready to burst on her, was at least delayed by the sudden change in Miss Crawford’s ideas; by the strong effect on her mind which the finding herself in the East room again produced.

“Ha!” she cried, with instant animation, “am I here again? The East room. Once only was I in this room before!” –and after stopping to look about her, and seemingly to retrace all that had then passed, she added, “Once only before. Do you remember it? I came to rehearse. Your cousin came too; and we had a rehearsal. You were our audience and prompter. A delightful rehearsal. I shall never forget it. Here we were, just in this part of the room; here was your cousin, here was I, here were the chairs. –Oh! Why will such things ever pass away? (...) The scene we were rehearsing was so very remarkable! The subject of it so very - very – what shall I say? He was to be describing and recommending matrimony to me. I think I see him now, trying to be as demure and composed as Anhalt ought, through the two long speeches. ‘When two sympathetic hearts meet in the marriage state, matrimony may be called a happy life’” (296-7)

Miss Crawford, who had hoped that Edmund and herself would make their own ‘lovers’ vows’, remembers the incident as an enactment of what could have been between them. But the fact that the precise content of the scene in the play has taken one hundred and fifty pages to be explained, is so very remarkable in itself as to force the readers to reconsider the rehearsal, and wonder in which way was it useful to the narrative *not to include* any lines at that point, encouraging a suggestion of sexual innuendo instead. Back in the present, the characters are still reveling in ambiguity.

And embracing her very affectionately, - “Good, gentle Fanny! When I think of this being the last time of seeing you; for I do not know how long – I feel it quite impossible to do any thing but love you.”

Fanny was affected. She had not foreseen anything of this, and her feelings could seldom withstand the melancholy influence of the word “last.” She cried as if she had loved Miss Crawford more than she possibly could; and Miss Crawford, yet farther softened by the sight of such emotion, hung about her with fondness, and said, “I hate to leave you. I shall see no one half so amiable where I am going. Who says we shall not be sisters? I know we shall. I feel that we are born to be connected; and those tears convince me that you feel it too, dear Fanny.” (297)

The trouble with Fanny is, that unlike with the rest of the characters, with her it is impossible to establish where the acting stops and the self begins. Is Fanny crying because, as the narrator says, she is overwhelmed by ‘the melancholy influence’ of a word, instead of any real feelings? Is she crying to pretend she cares for Miss

Crawford more than she actually does? Or because she really loves her beyond what she could have thought possible? Fanny herself may not have an answer: ‘... the two girls sat many minutes silent, each thoughtful; Fanny meditating on the different sorts of friendship in the world, Mary on something of less philosophic tendency.’ (98) Even the narrator seems moved, reverting to the familiar ‘Mary’, instead of the usual ‘Miss Crawford’ (she will be ‘Miss Crawford’ again by the end of volume II). The narrator’s voice moulds to adapt to the changing moods of the characters, at times to support them, but often to contradict or ironically comment on them. However, the dialogue itself shares this ability to unexpectedly shift emphasis. Often, words seem to point in an alternative direction, opening up possibilities instead of reinforcing what is already there. For example, it is interesting to consider the effect of the repetitions in: “I came to rehearse. Your cousin came too; and we had a rehearsal. You were our audience and prompter. A delightful rehearsal”, and to relate it to Mary’s goodbye to Fanny, described with emphasis by the narrator as ‘A very, very kind embrace...’ (296, 301). As regards the ‘different sorts of friendships in the world’, Mary’s meditations might have been of a different quality than Fanny’s, but the subject is still the same. Miss Crawford says:

“How perfectly I remember my resolving to look for you up stairs; and setting off to find my way to the East room, without having an idea whereabouts it was! How well I remember what I was thinking of as I came along; and my looking in and seeing you here, sitting at this table at work...” (298)

What Miss Crawford was thinking of on her way to the East room she never tells, but we may remember that the idea of Fanny’s impersonation and the ‘feeling’ this inspired in Fanny were, in the narrator’s words, ‘strongly calculated’ (140).

3. “Gratified in More Ways Than One” – Playing the Harp

Earlier in the book, just before the reference to ‘rears and vices’,

Edmund spoke of the harp as his favorite instrument, and hoped to be soon allowed to hear [Miss Crawford]. Fanny had never heard the harp at all, and wished for it very much.

“I shall be most happy to play to you both”, said Miss Crawford; “at least, as long as you can like to listen; probably, much longer, for I dearly love music myself, and where the natural taste is equal, the player must always be best off, for she is gratified in more ways than one.” (50)

The link between music and sex is clear. Later in the novel, Miss Crawford, worried about potential rivals, asks Fanny if the young women Edmund is visiting in London are “musical”: “That is the first question, you know,” said Miss Crawford, trying to appear gay and unconcerned, “which every woman who plays herself is sure to ask about another” (238). Miss Crawford’s harp playing abilities prove to be instrumental in encouraging Edmund’s romantic attachment to her, as the narrator ironically remarks:

...for he was in a line of admiration of Miss Crawford, which might led him where Fanny could not follow. Miss Crawford’s attractions did not lessen. The harp arrived and rather added to her beauty, wit, and good humour, for she played with the greatest obligingness, with an expression and taste which were peculiarly becoming, and there was something clever to be said at the close of every air. Edmund was at the parsonage every day to be indulged with his favourite instrument; one morning secured an invitation for the next, for the lady could not be unwilling to have a listener, and everything was soon in a fair train.

A young woman, pretty, lively, with a harp as elegant as herself; and both placed near a window, cut down to the ground, and opening on a little lawn, surrounded by shrubs in the rich foliage of summer, was enough to catch any man’s heart. (55)

Is this a description of female genitals? Perhaps not, but the harp seems brimful of meaning to Edmund. Fanny is not impervious either to the pleasures she intuitively feels. Prior to her acquaintance of Miss Crawford she had been unable to appreciate a duet, and had shown no interest in music whatsoever (see 13-4, 17). But it seems that in this, as in everything that Edmund may enjoy, there is ‘a good chance of her thinking like him’: ‘Fanny could not wonder that Edmund was at the parsonage every morning; she would gladly have been there too, might she have gone in uninvited and unnoticed to hear the harp...’ (56). Her desire to hear the harp is eventually satisfied when Fanny shelters from the rain in the Grants’ house, to the delight of her friend. As we have seen, Miss Crawford makes Fanny change her wet clothes,^{xxvi} presumably making her wear her own,^{xxvii} and plays the harp for her after Fanny’s...

... acknowledgement of her wishing very much to hear it, and a confession which could hardly be believed, of her having never yet heard it since its being in Mansfield. To Fanny herself it appeared a very simple and natural circumstance (...) –and “shall I play to you now?” –and “what will you have?” were questions immediately following with the readiest good humour.

She played accordingly; happy to have a new listener, and a listener who seemed so much obliged, so full of wonder at the performance, and who shewed herself not wanting in taste. She played till Fanny's eyes, straying to the window on the weather's being evidently fair, spoke what she felt must be done.

"Another quarter of an hour", said Miss Crawford, "and we shall see how it will be. Do not run away the first moment of its holding up". (172)

A reading of the scene as a 'good humoured' version of an erotic encounter –a patient and solicitous lover with a somewhat nervous, eager yet inexperienced partner- is supported by Mary's asking Fanny to stay and listen to Edmund's favorite piece. Fanny agrees, and imagines him in her place as she enjoys the music.

... she fancied him sitting in that room again and again, perhaps in the very spot where she sat now, listening with constant delight to the favourite air; played, as it appeared to her, with superior tone and expression... (173)

Some inconsistent behavior ensues. Fanny is "more sincerely impatient to go away at the conclusion of [the air] than she had been before" (ibid). But when she eventually leaves, '... she was so kindly asked to call again (...), to come and hear more of the harp, that she felt it necessary to be done, if no objection arose at home' (ibid). Curiously, no more private harp playing is reported in the novel. *Necessity*, however (it was 'necessary' for Fanny to return), takes on a new meaning.

Such was the origin of the sort of intimacy which took place between them (...), an intimacy resulting principally from Miss Crawford's desire of something new, and which had little reality in Fanny's feelings. Fanny went to her every two or three days; it seemed a kind of fascination; she could not be easy without going, and yet it was without loving her, without ever thinking like her, without any sense of obligation for being sought after now when nobody else was to be had; and deriving no higher pleasure from her conversation than occasional amusement... (ibid)

If there is no obligation on Fanny's part, and she does not enjoy Miss Crawford's conversation or feels any love for her, what then is the 'kind of fascination' that compels Fanny to pursue the 'sort of intimacy' that they share? The narrator's lack of precision here is remarkable, until we remember that 'necessity' is, of course, synonymous with a word that would be more shocking and less fun to use: 'desire'. Miss Crawford appeals to the senses in such a way that her closeness stirs the soul, her hypnotic effect being as impossible to describe accurately as the sensual, sexual, magnetism of her harp.

4. "She Rides for Pleasure, You for Health" - Horse Riding

Edmund has given use of a mare to Fanny. When Miss Crawford shows an interest in learning to ride, he offers the horse to her, on condition that she should only ride it without disturbing Fanny's routine. One morning, however, 'Fanny was ready and waiting, (...) and still no horse was announced, no Edmund appeared', although later, 'Her feelings for one and the other [Edmund and the mare] were soon a little tranquilized...' (57, 58). Edmund's attentions are such an important part of the ritual, that man and horse mix in Fanny's thoughts. But Miss Crawford's motives are slightly different to Fanny's.

Active and fearless, and, though rather small, strongly made, she seemed formed for a horse woman; and to the pure genuine pleasure of the exercise, something was probably added in Edmund's attendance and instructions, and something more in the conviction of very much surpassing her sex in general by her early progress, to make her unwilling to dismount. (57)

It is not without relevance that the narrator distinguishes Miss Crawford's competition with her sex and her designs for Edmund as two distinct pleasures. And her abilities certainly have another, perhaps unforeseen effect: to gain the admiration of the women who observe her.

Her merit in being gifted by nature with strength and courage was fully appreciated by the Miss Bertrams; her delight in riding was like their own; her early excellence in it was like their own, and they had great pleasure in praising it.

"I was sure she would ride well," said Julia, "she has the make for it. Her figure is as neat as her brother's".

"Yes," added Maria, "and her spirits are as good, and she has the same energy of character. I cannot but think that good horsemanship has a great deal to do with the mind". (59)

When we remember Miss Crawford's comment in the East room on Fanny and Edmund's physical similarity, the likening of Miss Crawford to her brother Henry is remarkable, being equally unnecessary to the heterosexual romantic plot. Henry will soon start flirting with Fanny, who will not be immune to his charms, just as Miss Crawford has designs for Edmund, who is attracted to her. The suggestion of Mary as Henry's duplicate is as delightfully subversive as that of Fanny substituting Edmund. This kind of detail facilitates a ghostly dance of

connotation in the background, which occasionally leaps into the main story to invite an alternative reading of entangled lesbian longings.

If the Bertram girls are impressed by Miss Crawford's command of her horse, Fanny herself also admires her manly physique and 'energy of character'. Fanny may be hurt at Edmund's shifting of interest, but she can not help to be so taken by Miss Crawford's prowess as to momentarily forget her jealousy. Watching them from afar, '...to Fanny's timid nature it was most astonishing to see how well she sat' (57). The old coachman praises 'Miss Crawford's great cleverness as a horse woman, which he had been watching with an interest almost equal to [Fanny's] own' (59). It is only too evident that Fanny's attitude and abilities do not compare to the newcomer's. Considering "...what terrors it gave me to hear [riding] talked of as likely to do me good" (24), the contrast is as striking to herself as to others, who feel it necessary to comment upon it.

"It is a pleasure to see a lady with such a good heart for riding!" said [the old coachman]. "I never see one sit a horse better. She did not seem to have a thought of fear. Very different from you, Miss, when you first began, six years ago come next Easter. Lord bless me! How you did tremble when Sir Thomas first had you put on!" (59)

A darker picture of Fanny's obligations towards the Bertram males is suggested here. If the reader is to understand horse riding as a metaphor for sexual initiation, the story that emerges may be more disturbing than amusing.

Unlike Fanny, who has had no choice in the matter, Miss Crawford is free to seek or abandon any pastime, being economically and emotionally self sufficient, as well as being an outsider to the rarefied atmosphere of Mansfield Park. Edmund explains to her cousin that "*She rides only for pleasure, you for health*" (ibid). In fact, "Miss Crawford's enjoyment of riding was such, that she did not know how to leave off" (57) (a bit like the harp then, and a pleasure equally heightened by securing an audience). In spite of her admiration, Fanny is upset, and her fear of appearing to be 'rude and impatient' causes in her 'a great anxiety to avoid the suspicion' (58). By contrast, Miss Crawford is honest enough to admit to Fanny that she has not an acceptable excuse for riding longer than it had been agreed, "and, therefore, if you please, you must forgive me. Selfishness must always be forgiven you know, because there is no hope of a cure" (ibid). Miss Crawford and Fanny differ as much in their character as in their physical strength. But, at least regarding their determination, the difference is merely an outward one. Here, as so often in the narrative, a potential disadvantage turns out to improve Fanny's circumstances. Her supposedly frail health will guarantee that she regains Edmund's attentions. After four days without riding, Fanny is sitting quietly in a corner of the sitting room and Edmund suspects her of having a headache. When asked, 'She could not deny it, but said it was not very bad' (61). Readers should by now be accustomed to Fanny's commitment to accommodate to people's perceptions of her, so it would not be surprising if this 'headache' is another case of skillful *chance management*, where her inaction allows the narrative to meet her needs. Without a word from Fanny, those present engage in a discussion that results in her headache being blamed on her lack of riding exercise, and ending with Edmund 'ashamed', and 'resolved, however unwilling he must be to check a pleasure of Miss Crawford's, that it should never happen again' (63).

Edmund hopes that Miss Crawford will not be too fatigued by having to walk home, but she answers: "I am very strong. Nothing ever fatigues me, but doing what I do not like" (58). The same could be said of Fanny, weak and compliant as she seems. Her 'headache' after being deprived of her horse and having to run errands for her aunt, has nothing to do with exercise and everything to do with her suppressed will and the withdrawal of a privilege that she now sees as a pleasure. Fanny and Miss Crawford are in fact equals, not just regarding assertiveness but cunning. They are both developing 'plans' that include Edmund, and hide them behind very different masks: Miss Crawford's impulsive outspokenness is matched by Fanny's quiet perseverance. The two women also share an appreciation of each other's needs and, surprisingly, a generous streak that makes them actually capable of genuine self-sacrifice. Fanny begins '...to think it rather hard upon the mare to have such double duty; if she were forgotten the poor mare should be remembered' (ibid). For her part, Miss Crawford explains: "Miss Price I give way to you with a very bad grace, but I sincerely hope you will have a pleasant ride, and that I may have nothing but good to hear of this dear, delightful, beautiful animal" (ibid). Fanny may pretend it and Miss Crawford deny it, but they are both truly altruistic to the verge of sanctity: it is the ride itself that matters, even if the rider is someone other than oneself.

5. "While You Do Wrong Together" – Nature

We have seen how, after Fanny's sheltering from the rain in Miss Crawford's house makes possible her first experience of harp music, a 'sort of intimacy' grows between the two women (173).

Fanny went to her every two or three days; it seemed a kind of fascination; she could not be easy without going, and yet it was without loving her, without ever thinking like her, (...); and deriving no higher pleasure from her conversation than occasional amusement, and that often at the expense of her judgement, when it was raised by pleasantries on people or subjects which she wished to be respected. (ibid)

‘Without loving her’ and, particularly, ‘without ever thinking like her’, are noteworthy because of what they do not do: they never explain what Fanny feels about Miss Crawford, or what her friend’s thoughts may be. And there are other related occurrences in this curious passage. The ‘that’ in the last sentence emphasizes ‘amusement’ as opposed to ‘pleasure’. But in the book, the narrator’s voice regularly recurs to italics in passages mentioning both women, ostensibly to clarify precisely whom it refers to, with ‘she did’, ‘her thoughts’, and so on, peppering descriptive paragraphs. The accumulated effect of such a device paradoxically reinforces the reader’s awareness of Fanny and Miss Crawford’s similarity - if there is a constant need to insist on their individual voices, the reminders are a self-defeating tactic. Considered as a whole, the passage above works in a similar fashion, since the explicit negation of Fanny’s ‘pleasure’ in her encounters with Miss Crawford, in fact draws attention to *that* possibility. The corrections deemed necessary by the narrator here, the strained, unsuccessful effort to pin down Fanny’s feelings, appear to mirror her mental processes, as if Fanny herself could not decide, or express, the reason for her ‘fascination’. The contradictory statements in the paragraph hint at Fanny’s complex, dynamic personality behind her motionless, monochromatic front. The opposition between the ‘pleasure’ Fanny does not obtain and the ‘pleasantries’ offered her, indirectly points to Fanny’s passionate longing for Miss Crawford, since there is otherwise no need to avoid plain words. Again, the reader is forced to notice what the text does-not-do as much as what Fanny and the narrator can-not-say. One thing is clear: if it was Miss Crawford the one who initially sought out the lethargic Fanny’s company, the roles are now reversed, with Fanny actively seeking something other than what her friend can provide. The paragraph continues:

She went however, and they sauntered about together many an half hour in Mrs. Grant’s shrubbery, the weather being unusually mild for the time of year; and venturing sometimes even to sit down on one of the benches now comparatively unsheltered, 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. (ibid)

Leaving the constrictive, strictly regulated space of the house at Mansfield Park, sitting in unsheltered benches at the mercies of the cold wind with someone towards whom she has ‘no obligation’, naturally enables Fanny to be herself. Later in the novel, walking with Henry Crawford along Portsmouth harbor under uncertain weather, Fanny will have some ‘tender reveries now and then’ (339) which bring to mind Fanny’s ‘tender ejaculations’ to his sister. It is liberating to depend only on the egalitarian, unforeseeable forces of nature, however briefly. In addition to that, the romantic effect of a background of shrubs has already been remarked by the narrator. The reader need only to conflate that comment with the two young women sitting in the middle of the shrubbery to fully appreciate the ‘sweets’ of the scene. The novel regularly uses vegetation, at various stages of control, to symbolize the characters’ feelings, reflecting the author’s preoccupation with the notion of education as shaping.^{xxviii} In an excursion to Sotherton, for example, the wilderness of the woods acts as backdrop and facilitator to Edmund and Miss Crawford’s flirtatious endeavors, while Fanny is told to ‘rest’ sitting alone on a bench. If the title of the novel suggests human intervention to transform a field into a park,^{xxix} many a discussion in the book is centered on adequate landscape design, a leisured pastime indulged on a smaller scale by Fanny herself, who grows plants in the East room. The link with personal growth is inescapable, as Fanny’s words to Miss Crawford in the shrubbery make clear.

“This is pretty — very pretty,” said Fanny, looking around her as they were thus sitting together one day: “Every time I come into this shrubbery I am more struck with its growth and beauty. Three years ago, this was nothing but a rough hedgerow along the upper side of the field, never thought of as anything, or capable of becoming anything, and now it is converted into a walk, and it would be difficult to say whether most valuable as a convenience or an ornament; and perhaps in another three years we may be forgetting — almost forgetting what it was before. How wonderful, how very wonderful the operations of time, and the changes of the human mind!” (173-4)

And Fanny goes on and on, in her longest and most uninhibited speech in the novel.^{xxx} Her monologue grows organically, unplanned, unrestrained, and ungrammatical. Her enthusiasm is shocking only to those readers who believe that Fanny’s introversion is real and permanent, instead of faked and circumstantial. An exclamation like “The evergreen!— How beautiful, how welcome, how wonderful the evergreen!” (174) is not merely atypical of Fanny’s public demonstrations, but it is in fact unique. If she surprises some readers with the outburst, those readers must be equally unprepared for Fanny’s choosing to open up to the woman that she saw as a rival. For a

brief moment, the future shape of the friendship, as that of the shrubbery, is impossible to predict, and this is true for everyone, on and outside the page. It may be added that the value of this scene and the lesbian subplot it belongs to are also difficult to determine in the context of the main storyline, either 'as a convenience or an ornament'. The interlude in the shrubbery certainly re-creates a space and a time of possibility, where an "astonishing variety of nature" is nurtured by "the same soil and the same sun" (ibid). The narrative is momentarily thrown off course, just as Fanny's unbridled thoughts drift back and forth, wandering for a while towards the 'nature' of memory.

"The memory is sometimes so retentive, so serviceable, so obedient — at others, so bewildered and so weak — and at others again, so tyrannic, so beyond controul! — We are to be sure a miracle every way — but our powers of recollecting and of forgetting, do seem peculiarly past finding out." (ibid)

Miss Crawford is not interested in Fanny's tender musings and, realizing it, Fanny collects herself, bringing back 'her own mind to what she thought must interest', which is the design of the garden, and remarking: "There is such a quiet simplicity in the plan of the walk! — not too much attempted!" (ibid). However, the wisdom of restraint praised by Fanny prompts Miss Crawford to wonder about country parsons -since Edmund is likely to become one. 'The powers of recollecting and of forgetting' are inscrutable indeed, since Fanny is undistracted by the reference to Edmund and remains enthralled by her present surroundings. It certainly seems impossible for them to align their trails of thought, so much so that Fanny starts rambling again and must apologize.

"You will think me rhapsodizing; but when I am out of doors, specially when I am sitting out of doors, I am very apt to get into this sort of wondering strain. One cannot fix one's eyes on the commonest natural production without finding food for a rambling fancy." (ibid)

Miss Crawford answers with a discouraging quip: "I see no wonder in this shrubbery equal to seeing myself in it" (175). Unattuned to Fanny's 'rambling fancy', Miss Crawford can not believe she has spent the summer months in a place of such unbearable quietness. However, "there is no saying what it may lead to" (ibid). Upon mentioning the future Miss Crawford brightens up, but the effect on her friend is quite different: 'Fanny's heart beat quick, and she felt quite unequal to surmising of soliciting anything more' (ibid). Soon after, Edmund and Mrs. Grant appear.

"Well," said Miss Crawford, "and do not you scold us for our imprudence? What do you think we have been sitting down for but to be talked to about it, and entreated and supplicated never to do so again?"

"Perhaps I might have scolded," said Edmund, "if either of you had been sitting down alone; but while you do wrong together I can overlook a great deal."

(...)

"Upon my word," cried Miss Crawford, "you are two of the most disappointing and unfeeling kind friends I ever met with! There is no giving you a moment's uneasiness. You do not know how much we have been suffering, nor what chills we have felt!" (176)

The threat from the cold autumn winds can be as symbolic as the growth of the shrubs. This is confirmed by Miss Crawford's comment, a few paragraphs earlier, that Edmund's name 'sinks under the chill' of a 'Mr' preceding it (ibid), as well as by Mr. Crawford's explicit use of the image shortly afterwards, when he remembers the rehearsal of 'Lovers Vows':

"...we certainly were very unlucky. Another week, only one other week, would have been enough for us. I think if we had had the disposal of events — if Mansfield Park had had the government of the winds just for a week or two about the equinox, there would have been a difference. Not that we would have endangered his safety by any tremendous weather — but only by a steady contrary wind, or a calm. I think, Miss Price, we would have indulged ourselves with a week's calm in the Atlantic at that season." (188)

The wind is used a number of times in the novel to symbolize the possibility of steering events towards an alternative course. Standing at the harbour in Portsmouth, Fanny enjoys the 'brisk soft wind', and watches 'the shadows pursuing each other, on the ships at Spithead and the island beyond', the charms of the scene making her 'almost careless of the circumstances under which she felt them' (339). Longing to be back at Mansfield Park, the breeze makes Fanny dream of destinations beyond her reach.

In Portsmouth, Henry notices that Fanny's face is 'less blooming than it ought to be' (ibid), the reason being that she has spent her youth in the Mansfield greenhouse. The 'imprudence' of Fanny and Miss Crawford sitting at the mercy of the winds, framed by the shrubs, marks an interlude where the real self can be aired, where possibilities can be explored. In the end, Fanny will choose the safe and unchallenging environment of the

Bertram household. Edmund remarks how ‘natural’ it is for the two women to get on well (182), but in Mansfield Park nature is kept at a distance, not indulged upon.

6. ‘Where Fanny Could not Follow’

We have considered in turn some aspects of the lesbian subplot, but there are other incidents that contribute to its accumulative effect, forcing the reader to constantly reassess the storyline. For instance, as we have seen, Fanny is given a necklace by Miss Crawford that she later discovers to be a present from Henry, and Fanny admits to her that, at the time, “there was something in your look that frightened me” (300). This threatening quality leaves Fanny, after displeasing Miss Crawford, in ‘continual terror’ of her, so for a while she takes ‘no solitary walk in the shrubbery, in her caution to avoid any sudden attack’ (295). Fanny’s feelings are reminiscent of her ‘terror’ in anticipating Sir Thomas’ sudden visit to the East room to ‘examine her in French and English’ (257-8), and have the same implication of sexual menace. But Fanny’s fear does not prevent her from accepting the necklace or, even as she predicts that ‘[a] devil was ready to burst onto her’ (296), from instinctively taking Miss Crawford to her room. Once there, as we have seen, Miss Crawford reminisces about their rehearsal, after which ‘she thus attacked her companion’: “Why, Fanny, you are absolutely in a reverie! Thinking, I hope, of one who is always thinking of you” (298). Even if she is taking about Henry, the ambiguity of the scene is characteristic. However, Miss Crawford’s puzzling behavior is more than matched by Fanny’s reactions to it. Miss Crawford, often sincere to the point of offence, is at times suggested to be a manipulator, as with her ‘calculated’ rehearsal with Fanny or the emotional goodbye to her.

There was no resisting so much apparent affection. Her disposition was peculiarly calculated to value a fond treatment, and from having hitherto known so little of it, [Fanny] was the more overcome by Miss Crawford’s. (301)

While Miss Crawford’s speech and body language invite multiple readings, Fanny uses her coyness and her silence to the same purpose: ‘Fanny felt obliged to speak. “You can not doubt your being missed by many,” said she. “You will be very much missed” ’; but even if ‘Miss Crawford turned her eye on her, as if wanting to hear or see more’, Fanny does not forward any more information (238). Fanny’s demeanor, including her apparent compliance, suggests in scenes such as this, a knowing sexual ambiguity.

We have seen how the text uses wind and vegetation to explore the characters’ nature. If Fanny did not consider riding or music to be pleasurable activities, it is not instruction what changes her mind on both accounts, but meeting Miss Crawford. Wonder, amazement, ecstatic raptures as her friend rides, plays the harp, and sits in the shrubbery, are an unlearned response. This marks the lesbian subplot as an important illustration of the novel’s main concern: the difference between nature and nurture. The real Miss Crawford and the real Fanny exist *in spite of* education – which is nowhere as clear as in their relationship. Towards the end of the novel, Fanny’s reference to Miss Crawford’s ‘natural’ evilness represents her final change of heart towards her friend (375). It is an interesting choice of words considering that earlier, Fanny had blamed Miss Crawford’s abruptness – “she does not think evil, but she speaks it”- on “the effect of education” (222). A debate on education is essential to the novel, including the related question of the need to control nature by forcibly shaping it, with the references to gardening facilitating the discussion. The word ‘natural’ appears constantly in the text, in different and often surprising contexts. For instance, after acknowledging the rampant homosexuality among rear/vice-admirals, the army and navy are said to be a ‘natural’ choice for men (91). To give another example, if it is ‘as natural for William to love Fanny as for him to express it’, Henry’s attachment to her is as ‘unnatural’, according to Fanny, as Miss Crawford’s approval of it; and near the end of the novel, a ‘natural change’ prompts Edmund to fall in love with Fanny (195, 252, 386).

Nature, together with an education system based on ‘emulation’ (17), is also linked to the use of the theatre in *Mansfield Park*, which is by no means limited to the rehearsal of ‘Lovers Vows’. Role swapping is a feature used in the novel with staggering frequency. Figuratively or actually, at various points, Edmund replaces William, Henry replaces Edmund, Fanny replaces Miss Crawford, Edmund replaces Sir Thomas, Henry replaces Miss Crawford, Fanny replaces Edmund, Susan replaces Fanny, Miss Crawford replaces Edmund -etc. Even the author’s decision to give the same name to the two disgraced women in the book, Mary and Maria, *does not do* anything for the plot other than suggesting the interchangeability of their situations. In a number of scenes, the rearrangements are explicitly referred to by the characters, with Miss Crawford telling Fanny that she looks like Edmund at the rehearsal, while Fanny imagines to be him as she listens to Miss Crawford’s harp, and the Bertram girls remark on Miss Crawford’s likeness to Henry. While the lack of female parts in ‘ranting tragedies’ is criticized at one point (110-1), perhaps the most striking implication of this aspect of the novel is the fact that there are so few roles available for the characters to swap: siblings or lovers, dependants or masters, wooers or

wooded. Fanny proves to be a supreme actress, grabbing the only role available to her –that of subservient introvert- and, in method acting mode, training herself to become her character. She subtly maneuvers between arrangements, and does it with enough self-awareness and determination to turn herself into the star of the show by the end of the book. As we have seen, the lesbian subplot also relies heavily on approaching gender as a ‘role’ –quite literally. In a way, *Mansfield Park* shows that playing a woman allows for a surprisingly broad range, despite the limited number of acceptable roles. It certainly would be impractical for the dependant Fanny to adopt Miss Crawford’s ‘unfeminine’ free thinking (375), however alluring it may be. In the long run, it is Fanny’s caution in her dealings with loves, friends, and masters, her restrained performance, which guarantees her success.

Nature and nurture, or essence and social construction, are treated in the book as representing instability and opportunity respectively, although the tension between the two is never fully solved. The natural supremacy of the privileged is thrown into question, with the outsider Fanny proving her skill in playing the game of the Bertrams better than themselves. The hegemony of heterosexuality is treated as an equally unnatural arrangement. In a book where every marriage included is a failure, single women like Miss Crawford can regularly enjoy “a tête-à-tête with the person one feels most agreeable in the world”, as she teasingly tells the silent Fanny (the French ‘tête’ is phonetically kin to ‘breast’): “There is nothing frightful in such a picture, is there Miss Price?” (175). The lesbian subplot provides a space of real possibility, cancelled because the shifting currents of emotion between the two women are never allowed to intersect. They could not have been, in a respectable novel from the nineteenth century, but Austen’s pontoon holds up as many bridges as she can manage. About to depart, the wicked Miss Crawford, with needlessly awkward phrasing, tells the chaste Fanny that “I may be discovered by those who want to see me. I shall not be in any doubtful, or distant, or unapproachable region” (238-9). This suggests that she embodies Fanny’s sexuality, but she could as easily be speaking for the lesbian subplot in *Mansfield Park*.

Fanny emulates Edmund in ‘following’ his feelings for Miss Crawford. This teaches her to enable and suppress her nature in equal measure, which are the contradictory aims of education. Even though the alternative project of Fanny and Miss Crawford’s intimacy ultimately fails, the reshaping of Edmund and Fanny’s fraternal relationship into a matrimonial union is utterly unconvincing. The narrator succinctly describes the predictable twist that closes the book as ‘a natural change’, with a carelessness bordering on disdain. As Misty Anderson has pointed out, Fanny’s fascination with Miss Crawford and her own ambivalence toward that fascination are “the most radical aspects” of Austen’s novel.^{xxxi} The unpruned edges of *Mansfield Park* are an invitation to reconsider the work of Jane Austen. Like many critics have suggested, it is time we look at Austen with new eyes, as a spirited, bold, hilarious, clever, cruel, historically aware, psychologically masterful, politically engaged, philosophically rich, and profoundly unsettling writer of exquisite craftsmanship, who can be sexy too.

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- ⁱ According to Sedgwick, the character of Marianne, in *Sense and Sensibility*, showed that ‘the masturbator’ was a well established sexual identity category before the Foucaultian zero year of 1870. In a subsequent essay, she complained about the “history of impoverished ‘Jane Austen’ readings” (Segwick, 1991, 830).
- ⁱⁱ See Kathryn Sutherland’s introduction to J.E. Austen-Leigh’s memoir, including a subsection called “Partiality and Evasion, or Secrets and Lies” (Sutherland, 2005: xxxi).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Despite her subsequent protestations, Castle was queering the novelist.
- ^{iv} Johnson declared: “I make no claims to neutrality. I cast my lot with the queer Austen” (Johnson, 1997, 146). ‘Was Jane Austen queer?’ may be an irresolvable question. I agree with David M. Robinson that “‘irresolvable’ does not mean ‘false’, nor ‘unimportant’” (Robinson, 2006, 83). *Mansfield Park* is certainly the work of a queer writer.
- ^v Claudia L. Johnson discusses Wilson in her article “The Divine Miss Jane” (1997).
- ^{vi} Most of the discussion is taken up by Austen’s use, in *Emma*, of a “sexually frank and brutal” riddle (Heydt-Stevenson, 2000, 319) by David Garrick, where raping boys is presented as a cure for syphilis in men.
- ^{vii} In the last section of the Afterword to the book, titled ‘Masturbation, Sodomy and Lesbianism’, Jones castigates Sedgwick and spouses Castle.
- ^{viii} Fowler also summarized and referenced the work of Castle and Johnson in an appendix to the novel (see Fowler, 2004, 266, 277).
- ^{ix} The recent publication of the diaries of Anne Lister, written in the early nineteenth century, demolished the thesis that ‘romantic friendships’ between women did not have a sexual component. For lesbian narratology, see for example Catherine R. Stimpson, Terry Castle, or Marilyn R. Farwell. For lesbian as ‘signifier’, see for example Monique Wittig, Teresa de Lauretis, or Joanne Glasgow.
- ^x Edward Said and Marilyn Butler saw *Mansfield Park* as upholding imperialist and Burkean values respectively, while Claudia Johnson saw it as critique of those values. In *Jane Austen, Politics, and the Novel*, Johnson responded to accusations of Austenian anti-abolitionism, among other things by pointing out that Fanny’s position in the Bertram household in fact resembles a slave’s.
- ^{xi} Jane Stabler claims that the book offers a covert commentary on the state of the monarchy in contemporary Britain, with the head of *Mansfield Park* as a George III/Kin Lear (see Stabler, 2003, xi, xxvi-xxvii).
- ^{xii} John Dave has referred to “the kind of unobtrusive proleptic irony which makes the rereading of [Austen’s] novels so rich in discovery” (Dave, 1971, xii). However, Dave seems impervious to Austen’s remarkably rich use of symbolism (see *ibid*, xvi).
- ^{xiii} See in particular the ‘Secret Love’ section (Miller, 2003, 1-30).
- ^{xiv} See also Jill Heydt-Stevenson, *Austen’s Unbecoming Conjunctions*.
- ^{xv} The film was most notable for making manifest the subtle anti-slavery strand in the novel. Rozema had previously made two important lesbian films, *I’ve Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987), and *When Night is Falling* (1995).
- ^{xvi} This is the conclusion reached by the characters of Fowler’s novel as they discuss Rozema’s film: “the two were nothing alike—Fanny so shrinking and Austen so playful. What resulted was a character who thought and spoke like Jane, but acted and reacted like Fanny. It made no sense. (...) While Austen, by some accounts, had been quite a flirt, full of life and charm. More like *Mansfield’s* villainous Mary Crawford” (Fowler, 2004, 83).
- ^{xvii} Misty G. Anderson. “The Different Sorts of Friendship’: Desire in *Mansfield Park*”. *Jane Austen and Discourses of Feminism*. Devoney Looser ed. New York: St Martin’s Press, 1995, pp. 167-185.
- ^{xviii} This passage is quoted by John Odmark within a discussion of reader-response approaches to Austen (see Odmark, 1983, xiii-xiv).
- ^{xix} Stabler refers to the ending, “like all the other transfers in the novel, this gift to the reader bestows a mixture of gratification and unease” (Stabler, 2003, xxxvi). Stabler is no doubt making a link to Miss Crawford’s gift of a chain (for a cross) to Mary, described by one critic as “a kind of blasphemy” (Odmark, 1983, 164).
- ^{xx} Doody analyses the relevance of the poetry of William Cowper in *Mansfield Park* to contemporary debates on slavery (see Doody, 1990, xvii-xviii).
- ^{xxi} ‘Vice-admirals’ commanded the lead ships on the squadron and ‘Rear-admirals’ those in the rear (see Kathryn

Sutherland's note in *ibid.* 396). Brian Southam has argued that Miss Crawford's comment may not refer to homosexuality, given Edmund's relatively mild reaction. Heydt-Stevenson has identified a further queering intervention, in the book's references to army officers (such as Fanny's brother William) as "nothing", picking up a famous Shakespearean pun on female genitals (Heydt-Stevenson, 2000, 325).

^{xxii} Fanny's carefully managed compliance may be typical of Austen. According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar: "Using silence as a means of manipulation, passivity as a tactic to gain power, submission as a means of attaining the only control available to them, the [Austen] heroines *seem* to submit as they get what they both want and need" (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000, 163).

^{xxiii} Auerbach compared Fanny to Beowulf's Grendel, Byron's Childe Harold, and Frankenstein's creature.

^{xxiv} Kotzebue's play was originally entitled 'The Love Child'. The text used in *Mansfield Park* is Elizabeth Inchbald's somewhat more restrained English version of 1798. Theatricality in the novel has attracted interest from critics, who see it as facilitating either a subversive (heterosexual) interlude in the story, or an Austenian debate on the superiority of fiction over drama. See for example Peter Conrad's introduction to the novel.

^{xxv} In Rozema's film, a scene presents the two women's rehearsal (reciting the original text from *Lover's Vows*), but Miss Crawford only manages an air of inconsistent, slight, and brief erotic menace. One of two erotic short stories by Eckstut based on *Mansfield Park* relates a threesome between Mary, Fanny and Edmund triggered by their rehearsal of a salacious play called "The Curious Cousins" (after considering the play "The Lonesome Deck-Hands; or, A Romance of the West Indies"). The other story by Eckstut refers to an incestuous bond between Mary and Henry Crawford. Like the best fanfiction, these stories are derived from actual ambiguities in the original text and supported by it to an extent (see Eckstut, 2003, 61-87).

^{xxvi} Patricia Rozema's film showed Fanny changing her clothes in Mary's room, in a scene conspicuously absent in the novel.

^{xxvii} Anderson, "Friendship", p. 172.

^{xxviii} See Kathryn Sutherland's comments in her introduction to the novel, and her notes to chapter VI.

^{xxix} As John Sutherland and Deirdre le Faye explain: "Names and titles in Austen are often subtly loaded: here 'man', 'field', 'park'. What makes a field a park? Man's improvement of the land." (Sutherland and le Faye, 2005, 174).

^{xxx} As Anderson notes, "an expansive 350 words for the quiet heroine". Anderson, "Friendship", p. 173.

^{xxxi} Anderson, "Friendship", p. 172.