



Jane Austen, Hannah More, and the Novel of Education

JANE NARDIN

Jane Nardin is Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, where she specializes in the nineteenth-century English novel. Her most recent book is *Trollope and Victorian Moral Philosophy* (Ohio University Press 1996).

JANE AUSTEN KNEW ALL ABOUT HANNAH MORE, but Hannah More never heard of Jane Austen. Nor is this surprising. Though More's popularity did not long survive her death in 1833 at the age of eighty-eight, in her own time, this Christian moralist was, by a huge margin, England's most famous woman writer.

More's plays, poems, and essays were uniformly successful. Her tragedy, *Percy*, had an exceptional run of twenty-one nights at Covent Garden. She was paid as much for her now-forgotten poem *Sir Eldred of the Bower* as Goldsmith received for his masterpiece *The Deserted Village*. Her books on conduct and religion sold like hotcakes. Her only novel, *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1808), was a sensational success; eleven editions appeared within nine months. Altogether, More earned the impressive sum of £30,000 from her writings. The size of her readership was even more impressive. During the 1790s, More hastily scribbled fifty tracts intended to improve the morals of "the middle ranks" and to combat Tom Paine's influence among the poor. Wealthy men and women distributed several million of these tracts free or at a nominal price. By contrast, Austen's output, sales, and reputation were modest indeed.

By the time Austen's novels were published, More had stopped reading fiction; hence, she never encountered *Mansfield Park*. Had she

done so, More would have realized that this novel makes extensive use of the ideas developed in her own best-selling manual of advice to parents, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, published in 1799. Park Honan suggests that Austen, who “took special pains to allude to serious female writing” in her novels, expected her readers to notice that Fanny’s education conforms closely to the model advocated in the *Strictures* (337).

Like *Mansfield Park*, *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* fictionalizes the *Strictures*. But the two novels do this in very different ways. More’s theory of fiction and her commitment to Evangelical Christianity rigidly controlled the strategies she employed as a novelist. Austen’s approach to the art of fiction left her free to explore complexities that were off-limits to More.

During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, a group who came to be called the Evangelicals sought to revitalize the Church of England. The Evangelicals stressed the importance of a conversion experience that would evoke an intimate sense of God’s reality and love. Moved by his savior’s example, the Christian who has undergone such a conversion will wish above all else to know God and to serve man. To prepare for eternity, true Christians must devote their time to religious ends. To live pleasantly and harmlessly is not enough: “It is against the tree which bore no fruit . . . the unprofitable servant who made no use of his talent,” as well as against the active sinner, More wrote, “that the severe sentence is denounced” (*Thoughts* 271). Their pervasive sense of religious responsibility was the distinguishing characteristic of the early Evangelicals.

More holds that the desire to please God is the only reliable motive for good conduct. Indeed, she goes so far as to assert that “all morality which is not drawn from [a] scriptural source is weak, defective, and hollow” (*Coelebs* 255). Above all else, then, the conscientious educator must implant a firm commitment to Christianity in his or her pupils. Not surprisingly, More, who began her adult life as a teacher, viewed her writing as simply a higher form of pedagogy than that in which she had originally engaged. “The *art* of poetry is to touch the passions,” she argued, but “its *duty* [is] to lead them on the side of virtue” (*Coelebs* 297). No matter what genre she worked in, More worked with a single purpose: to bring her readers to God.

In the *Strictures*, More argues that the educational practices cur-

rent in the fashionable world distort both the intellectual and the moral development of women. “The reigning system” teaches young ladies how “to allure and to shine,” More writes, by stressing showy accomplishments that will boost their value in the marriage market (327). The equally showy rote learning in which girls are drilled “float[s] in the memory,” but does not “contribute to form the mind and enrich the judgment” (343). Only “books of solid instruction . . . grounded in their minds by comment and conversation” can help girls to progress “through just gradations to a higher strain of mind” (343).

But parents must train the character as well as the intellect—and in doing so, principles “should be invariably insisted on as the only true ground of right practice” (340). Girls must not be flattered or indulged, for “an early, habitual restraint is peculiarly important to the future character and happiness of women. A judicious, unrelaxing, but steady and gentle curb on their tempers and passions can alone ensure their peace” (339). “Parental austerity,” however, can be as harmful as indulgence: “It drives the gentle spirit to artifice and the rugged to despair. It generates deceit and cunning” (338). Parents must not conclude that once they have “grounded their daughters in religion . . . [they can] allow them to spend . . . their time exactly like the daughters of worldly people . . . Such parents should go on to teach children the religious use of time” (331). Indeed, parents must inculcate habits of unremitting industry, for sustained, useful activity is both “necessary to virtue” and “indispensable to happiness” (331).

In *Mansfield Park*, the education Sir Thomas Bertram gives his daughters Maria and Julia incorporates every one of the dangerous practices whose prevalence More deplors. “To be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments” was the “authorized object of their youth” (463). Rote learning played a major role in their education. At an age when they should have known better, the girls prided themselves on their ability to “repeat the chronological order of the kings of England . . . besides a great deal of the Heathen mythology, and all the Metals, Semi-Metals, Planets, and distinguished philosophers” (18-19). Their Aunt Norris offered them “excessive indulgence and flattery,” while their father’s austerity taught them to “repress their spirits” deceitfully in his presence (463). Although “they had been instructed theoretically in their religion,” they were “never required to bring it into daily practice”—in fact, as Sir Thomas later concludes,

“principle, active principle, had been wanting” in their educations (463). The discipline that useful labor provides was wanting as well. Selfishness, ennuï, misconduct, and even ruin result—just as More herself would have predicted.

As Park Honan notes, Fanny’s education follows the prescriptions offered in the *Strictures* in several important respects. But in equally important respects, it differs. Early in her stay at Mansfield, ten-year-old Fanny decides that “she does not want to learn either music or drawing” (19). Though her cousins find this decision mystifying, it is in fact an intelligent response to Sir Thomas’s determination that his niece must always “remember that she is not a *Miss Bertram*” (10). Fanny seems intuitively to realize that rivaling her cousins in brilliant accomplishments could endanger her position in the family. With Edmund’s encouragement and guidance, Fanny substitutes a course of solid reading for the pursuit of accomplishments and gradually acquires a firm commitment to Christian principle.

So far, so good. But the gentle restraint that More recommends for girls is replaced in Fanny’s case by the savage repression Mrs. Norris visits upon her—with Sir Thomas’s tacit approval. In their treatment of Fanny, they disregard More’s caution that discipline should be tailored to the “individual character of each pupil... [that] we must strengthen the feeble, while we repel the bold” (*Strictures* 338). Though harsh treatment teaches Fanny self-sacrifice, humility, and industry, she learns her lesson at great psychological cost.

No female character in *Mansfield Park*, then, fully embodies More’s ideal, for the novel examines the contrasting effects of an education marred by indulgence and frivolity, and one marred by snobbish denigration and draconian discipline. Looked at from this angle, it is the story of a well-intentioned, but monumentally unsuccessful pedagogue: Sir Thomas Bertram. He deserves little credit for Fanny’s intellectual and moral achievements. Edmund is responsible for the most successful aspects of her education, her uncle for the psychic damage she sustained. In fact, Sir Thomas’s failures as a parental guide drive the plot: the union he permits between Maria and Mr. Rushworth ends in divorce; the matches he promotes never occur; and the marriage between Fanny and Edmund that concludes the novel is the very marriage that he had determined to prevent when he agreed to adopt his niece.

Her pedagogical aims prevented More from writing a novel that focuses upon a defective patriarch like Sir Thomas. Because she does not trust readers to draw correct inferences from morally complex fictions, More both eschews and attacks the common novelistic practice of mixing good and bad qualities in characters occupying positions of social or moral authority. Protesting the many portrayals of clergymen in whom piety and foibles coexist, More argues that such a presentation, “by diminishing the dignity, weakens the influence of the character. . . . A *comical parson* is no respectable or prudent exhibition” (*Coelebs* 281). The exhibition is imprudent because it diminishes respect for authority figures in general and so undermines the social hierarchy instituted by God.

Coelebs opens as its narrator hero, Charles, leaves home to seek a suitable wife. Though he sojourns in London, he is in no danger of falling in love with the girls he encounters there, for he has promised his recently deceased father that he will not select his wife before visiting Mr. Stanley, an old family friend. The product of a Christian upbringing, Charles regards parental commands as “law”; so his father’s injunction actually “operate[s] as a sort of sedative” in his “intercourse” with the opposite sex (18-19). At Stanley Grove, Charles falls rationally (and tepidly) in love with Mr. Stanley’s daughter Lucilla, whose education conformed, point for point, to the model advocated in the *Strictures*. After Lucilla accepts Charles, Mr. Stanley reveals that he and Charles’s father had planned the match many years earlier. Wishing to leave their children “perfect freedom of thought and action,” however, they kept their project a secret (488).

To shore up authority, More must place fathers who are utterly successful, as well as utterly exemplary, at the center of *Coelebs*. To demonstrate that a judicious upbringing can smooth a child’s path through life, she omits the wrenching conflicts and exciting adventures that the imperfectly educated or protected protagonists of other novels experience. Skilled pedagogues like Charles’s father and Mr. Stanley can script their children’s development so thoroughly that the choice of a particular marriage partner is a foregone conclusion. Along with incident and suspense, then, romance also disappears from a work whose main action unfolds under the supervision of omniscient parents. If Sir Thomas’s failures as an educator and a matchmaker drive the plot of *Mansfield Park*, the ideal fathers of *Coelebs* ensure an

almost plotless work— a sort of “anti-novel.” After justifying the ways of authority to her readers through a static central story, More does permit herself to create several entertaining minor characters who embody her negatives and whose fates are occasionally in doubt. Though these characters necessarily remain on the periphery, they provide *Coelebs* with some much-needed humor and dramatic tension.

More knew that she was taking a risk by marketing her “anti-novel” as a novel. “I fear,” Charles writes in the preface to his tale, “[that] the novel reader will reject it as dull . . . [and] accuse it of excessive strictness” (ix). More stuck to her Evangelical guns, however, and her gamble succeeded. *Coelebs* presented her educational theory in a form that attracted thousands of readers. In an age when books on religious subjects were widely read, its relentless didacticism probably did its sales more good than harm.

When Cassandra Austen sent her sister a letter praising the book, her description impressed Jane unfavorably. “My disinclination for it before was affected, but now it is real,” she wrote in reply (24 January 1809). No wonder. Though she shared many of More’s views about education, Austen dissented violently from the theory of fiction that *Coelebs* exemplifies. Her own goals as a writer were artistic, rather than religious. And she trusted her readers. “I do not write for such dull elves/As have not a great deal of ingenuity themselves,” she quipped—and she meant every word (29 January 1813). Austen’s respect for her audience gave her the courage to write *Mansfield Park*, a subtle, dark, and difficult book. In her own day, these characteristics were something of a liability. But posterity has justified her faith in the power of art.

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