



Jane Austen and the Enclosure Movement: The *Sense and Sensibility* of Land Reform

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“NOT SO LARGE, I DARE SAY, as many people suppose,” John Dashwood tells his half-sister, Elinor, in *Sense and Sensibility*, when she comments that although it is expensive for him to maintain households both in town and in the country, his income is “a large one.” He hopes to increase his wealth by making improvements in his country estate—her former home—but his investment has required considerable capital outlay:

“The inclosure of Norland Common, now carrying on,” he notes, “is a most serious drain. And then I have made a little purchase within this half year; East Kingham Farm, you must remember the place, where old Gibson used to live. The land was so very desirable for me in every respect, so immediately adjoining my own property, that I felt it my duty to buy it. I could not have answered it to my conscience to let it fall into any other hands. A man must pay for his convenience; and it *has* cost me a vast deal of money.” (SS 225)

Readers who know little about the enclosure movement in Georgian England will nevertheless distrust John Dashwood's motives in land improvement and acquisition. This conversation occurs more than halfway through the novel; John Dashwood's self-centeredness and ungenerous nature have already been scoured by Austen many times over. Rather than explicitly criticize their selfish moral choices, Austen lets characters like John

Dashwood reveal the darkness of their own souls through their compulsion to relate self-serving ideas and indifference to their listeners' reactions. Enclosure and land expansion, actions that require considerable legal operations as well as financial investment, are admittedly somewhat abstract. In case we miss their point, however, John Dashwood's vulgar attitude toward "the land" is expressed concretely through his rejection of romantic sensibility when he explains that he and his wife have had all the old walnut trees behind the house taken down to make room for a greenhouse. Elinor is silently grateful that her sensitive sister Marianne has not heard this conversation. Her brother is replacing Marianne's beloved, old, gnarly trees with a cold and modern building.

John Dashwood's news about the construction of Fanny's greenhouse is directly related to his motivations for enclosing Norland Common and acquiring an adjacent farm. Plants, trees, and flowers enhance the aesthetic presentation of one's home, but nature is unreliable. Tree roots creep into pathways; shade blocks tidily planted annuals; perennials return to each year's garden on their own schedule in scraggly disarray. The artificial climate of a greenhouse, in contrast to the land's natural environment, promises an efficient production of plants at a time and place most convenient for the gardener. A greenhouse is more valuable than the land it occupies because it makes the land more productive. Throughout England during the Georgian era, especially in the midlands during the reign of George III, many landowners like John Dashwood sought ways to make their land more productive. As in the building of greenhouses, the purpose of enclosing agricultural fields and former commons and wastes was to enhance the value of the land by increasing its efficiency and profitability. The moral and social effects of enclosure were, during this period, decidedly secondary.

The question a reader of *Sense and Sensibility* must ask is, "Were they also secondary for Jane Austen?" Nearly all acts of enclosure in England from the fifteenth century through the nineteenth can be justified economically. They were a significant part of agrarian reform movements dedicated to improving land use. Even from a position of "sensibility" like Marianne's, we can commend many acts of enclosure for restoring exhausted soil and preserving land that had been over-farmed. Irene Collins, in *Jane Austen and the Clergy*, has called land enclosure "the outstanding economic development" of Jane Austen's day, asserting that Austen views enclosure as a "symbol of hope" when *Persuasion's* Anne Elliot thinks wistfully of her youth as she walks through an enclosed farm field (175). Maggie Lane, in *Jane Austen's England*,

points out that enclosure transformed the landscape of England during Jane Austen's lifetime, tidying up fields with handsome frames of hedges (19–20).

Yet hand-in-hand in every generation that petitioned to change the way land is used came objections that enclosure ignored the rights of the poor, favored the individual over the community, and destroyed the employment of large segments of the working class. During the Georgian period, several significant changes in the history of enclosure took place. The first was a formal change: after 1760, almost all petitions for enclosure were requests for a private Act of Parliament. The second, financial change is related to the first: petitions to Parliament objecting to proposed enclosures had to be made through lawyers, whose fees were too great for small landholders, to say nothing of tenants and cottagers who merely leased their fields and garden plots. The third change is in the nature of the propaganda regarding enclosure and the response to enclosure made by lawyers, landholders, and members of the clergy. Throughout the seventeenth century, pro-enclosure pamphlets claimed that enclosing land served the greater good of the national economy, but care had to be taken to compensate those displaced from farms and villages. In the late-eighteenth century, propagandists asserted instead that enclosure was actually good for the poor. Additionally, Georgian clergy were easily won to the side of enclosure by small legal insertions in the Parliamentary Act guaranteeing them their tithes or corn rent, or a portion of land in lieu of the tithes they had received under open-field agriculture. Land-owning clergy, moreover, eagerly petitioned for their own enclosures when they had an opportunity to enhance their property's profitability.

"Enclosure," quite literally, is just what it sounds like: putting a wall or fence or hedge around land to separate it from neighboring property. That such an action is controversial sounds odd to many twenty-first-century homeowners, who regularly mark the boundaries of their real estate. At the most, we need a fence permit and proof that we own the property within the marked bounds. But the history of enclosure in England is the history of agricultural change, from open-field subsistence farming to enclosed, market-driven farming and pasturage. It marks the change from thinking of land in terms of community use to designating land for individual use. Enclosure demarcates private property.

When a landowner proposed enclosing land that had once been devoted to open-field agriculture, he affected a great many people. Because of the need to allow fields to lie fallow every few years, many land-holdings were not contiguous, and someone had to decide how scattered fields should be reappor-

tioned so that a large farm could be enclosed. Most enclosure acts required that land be held free and clear, so small landowners with mortgaged farms were frequently forced to sell their property. Enclosure permitted owners of land that had been leased to tenant farmers to convert arable land to pasturage, a practice that was increasingly profitable as the market for wool developed and the infrastructure of roads for its transport and trade improved. Former tenant farmers lost their livelihoods when the land their family had leased for generations was enclosed. Other agricultural workers, who could not claim such ancestral attachment to the land, were nevertheless displaced by a single shepherd when arable land was set aside for sheep. Finally, some property that was legally owned by the local squire or lord of the manor—the common and the waste—had been designated for many generations for community use. Although a waste was entirely uncultivated, often wild and overgrown, commoners claimed their right to gather fuel or building materials from this land, and to hunt or trap whatever small birds or game might live upon it.

Many landowners viewed enclosure as a method of protecting their investments. Such is the case of Sir Isaac Newton in 1712. In Newton's day, enclosure was generally accomplished through an agreement among landowners rather than Parliamentary Act (Truelson 11). At age 70, Newton wrote a letter responding to a neighboring landowner who had sent him proposals for enclosing their farms and pastures. In the letter, Newton agrees to the proposal, which would greatly reduce access to pasture land in former areas of "Commons." He advocates the enclosure agreement because he hopes it will restrain those who illegally allow their cattle and sheep to graze on his land. But he also uses the agreement to ensure that his poor relations be allowed access to the wastelands, noting in a postscript, "I have given John Newton the bearer one of the two decayed Trees . . . which is most decayed" to be cut down for use as fuel (Truelson 14).

The word "common" refers to a field left open for community pasturage or sheave-gathering after harvest, or to an open, unplanted area of land that is somewhat tamer than a "waste." Cottagers and non-landowners could bring their cattle, horses, pigs, geese, ducks, or a few sheep to graze in the common. They picked berries and gathered nuts there. And even those who did not depend upon it for sustenance would have used the common as a place in which to enjoy fresh air and exercise. With the enclosure of private property, including privately owned commons, members of the community were excluded from practices that they and their ancestors had taken to be theirs

by right (Mingay 44–49). This is the likely consequence of John Dashwood's enclosure of Norland Commons.

During the sixteenth century, sentiment prevailed against the landed nobility who enclosed their land. Prior to the English Civil War, individuals who wished to enclose their land had to have their petitions granted by the monarch. Land reform did take place, but acts restricting enclosure were also passed under both Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth out of concern that enclosures were leading to depopulation of villages when farmland was enclosed for raising sheep (Tate 123). Troubled by the decrease in grain production and the monarch's responsibility to the displaced poor, the government prevented large landowners from enclosing all of their property and enforced regulations to keep a percentage of arable land under the plow. Many clergy sympathized with the poor, citing biblical references to agricultural responsibility, such as not harvesting the corners of fields, leaving gleanings for the poor and hungry, and letting fields lie fallow every seven years.

The most famous objection to the enclosure of land in the sixteenth century is voiced by Thomas More in Book I of *Utopia*. In describing an argument he had with a lawyer in England, More's character Raphael blames enclosures for England's problems with thieves, idle soldiers, displaced populations, corruption, sickness, and hunger. When land is enclosed, Raphael asserts, sheep become devourers of men:

For wherever the sheep yield a softer and richer wool than ordinary, there the nobility and gentlemen, yea even the holy men and abbots, are not content with the old rents which their lands yielded. . . . They leave no land for cultivation, they enclose all the land for pastures, they destroy houses and demolish towns, keeping only the churches, and these for sheep barns. (9)

According to Raphael, enclosures lead to extremes of economic disparity, encouraging idleness among the rich who grow wealthier and leaving the poor with few choices aside from robbing and begging if they want to survive. In contrast, the Utopians described in Book II use land as productively as possible to serve the entire community. No one hoards grain while waiting for its price to increase; surpluses in one region are immediately redistributed in another where there is need.

The open-field agriculture that More regrets losing in the sixteenth century bore little resemblance to land use in Utopia (where there is no private property), but its system included a sense of social responsibility that did get lost when villages were depopulated by enclosure. Although fields of

varying sizes might be owned or rented by different farmers—including noblemen with large estates, small landowners, and tenants who leased fields—they were planted and harvested together. Contiguous fields had to be planted with the same crop, had to follow the same schedule for harvesting, and had to lie fallow together every three to seven years to rest the soil. Although individuals could not make decisions about their own land, the system served small landholders and tenant farmers well, since they farmed primarily for subsistence, rather than with an eye toward harvesting for profit and export. The tenant farmer often farmed the same fields his ancestors had leased for generations. He lived in a cottage he did not own, but to which he was entitled through his leasing of farmland. He could keep his few animals on community property. He had access to mills, bakeries, churches, and other village amenities (Orwin xii, 174, *passim*). The small landowner—such as “old Gibson,” whose farm is acquired by John Dashwood—similarly had access to this social support network. His children could inherit his land, but that was often the extent of his estate. He benefited from improvements made to the contiguous fields—including the manure left by animals permitted to graze in the fields after harvest—but could not afford to make them himself.

Owners of large estates began enclosing their land when the market and transportation infrastructure made an acre of land devoted to raising sheep more valuable than an acre of land devoted to raising barley. Sheep herding had immediate advantages over farming: lower labor costs, less dependency on weather, and easier land management. Extreme climactic events and disease did threaten the main capital investment—the sheep themselves—but large landowners were less affected by these threats than small landowners, since their sheep had access to larger pasturage and shelter from inclement conditions. None of the decisions to enclose land to raise sheep would have been made, however, without a market for wool and the roads on which to transport it. Thomas More recognizes this in the sixteenth century when he decreases the need for wool in Utopia. His population wears leather garments that last seven years, topped with cloth cloaks for public appearances made more often of linen than of wool.

Concern about enclosing land shifts during the period of the Commonwealth in the seventeenth century, when enclosing land also meant a shift from open field agriculture to private farms rather than a loss of arable land to sheep herding. Enclosing land to increase productivity appealed to a Puritan sensibility of gaining rewards through hard work. In his 1649 essay, “The English Improver,” Walter Blith offers practical advice for making the most

out of land. He proffers solutions to anthills, uneven ground, and barren soil. He describes his own successes fighting moss and enriching dirt with muck and dung. All such agricultural experimentation, he insists, depends upon enclosure, so that a man can make the most of his land. Yet Blith is as sensitive as Thomas More to the negative effects of enclosure. He opines, "I am an absolute Enemy to that accursed Depopulation, *of laying House to House, and Field to Field, till the Poore be destroyed*" (Blith's italics). His advocacy of enclosure is paired with proposals to protect the poor, to supply them with employment and to ensure that they do not lose their houses. In his sympathetic acknowledgments, Blith chooses his words carefully, since until this time many writers used the words "enclosure" and "depopulation" interchangeably. Blith argues for the economic advantages of cultivating commons, but he aims to maintain the populations of rural villages.

Adam Moore's 1653 Puritan argument for enclosure advocates land reform as a way of reforming the idle habits of the poor. Although he expresses nominal concern for the nutritional sustenance of the population, he basically holds the hungry and suffering responsible for their own poverty. In his pamphlet, *Bread for the Poor and Advancement of the English Nation Promised by Enclosure of the Wastes and Common Grounds of England*, Moore estimates that there were two million acres of commons and wastes in England and Wales that could be improved for agriculture, increasing the nation's productivity of grain substantially. With more food in the Commonwealth, fewer people, he argues, would go hungry. Adam Moore attacks the poor people who opposed enclosure by asserting that they lazily used the common land he proposed enclosing to gather the leavings of other people's work. God, he says, will never reward them, for they lack industry and ambition.

John Locke echoes Blith, Moore, and other Puritan writers in the chapter on property of his *Second Treatise of Government*. For royalists, the restoration of the monarch after 1660 meant a restoration of economic and political stability. For those more skeptical of the king's authority, however, the symbolic stability needed to be accompanied by a politically weakened monarch. Among the many restraints on executive authority that Locke offers in the *Second Treatise*, he wants to be sure that there will be no return to the Tudor monarchs' antipathy toward enclosure. For Locke and his contemporaries, land use is a matter for individuals, not communities. Rejecting the radical protests of economic fringe groups like the Levelers and the Diggers, Locke argues that the more productive it is, the more land increases in value. No one should stop a man from making his land as valuable as possible. Commons and

wastes, Locke makes clear, may have a tradition of community use, but they are potentially valuable private property. Locke asserts that the right of enclosure is God-given, insofar as God has created human beings with not only the capacity but also the obligation to increase the value of their property by infusing it with their own labor.

John Locke's defense of enclosure fits subtly into his argument for monarchical authority to submit to the will of individuals in a civil society, but his seventeenth-century pronouncements on wastes and commons did not settle the issue. In the eighteenth century, English pamphlet writers and poets continued to complain about the poor being displaced by wealthy landowners. Stephen Addington responded to advocates of individual enrichment in his 1767 pamphlet, "An Enquiry Into the Reasons For And Against Inclosing the Open Fields" by asking, "Can he think this, or any other measure is for the public good, that impoverishes twenty to enrich one?" In 1792, Henry Kett argued that critics of enclosure exaggerated its effects on the poor, noting that when private landowners cultivated their commons, they produced more grain for the poor to eat. The Reverend Luke Heslop's study of land productivity for his parish in his 1801 report on enclosures, however, contradicts Kett's claims of secondary enrichment for the poor. Heslop concludes that while enclosed land can be more productive than open field agriculture, in Bucks, "the increase of inclosures has not increased the quantity of grain" (Heslop iii). In that same county in 1808, Arthur Young reported that since enclosure, "Poverty has very much sensibly increased: the husbandmen come to the parish, for want of employment" (Young 150).

Oliver Goldsmith's 1770 poem, "The Deserted Village," draws a portrait of an entire village depopulated by the selfish interests of a few noble families. By the time Goldsmith's narrator returns to the village of his youth, the land that had served tenant farmers for years—supporting not only agricultural workers but also Auburn's innkeeper, parson, schoolmaster, masons, cobblers, and millers—had been converted into pasturage to generate profit for men who did not even live there.

Goldsmith's nostalgia and passionate disgust at those who destroyed the simple life he remembered would have appealed to Jane Austen's Marianne Dashwood, at least at a poetic level. Contemporary accounts of enclosure, however, suggest that Goldsmith exaggerated the effects of land reform and reallocation. Similarly, Austen suggests that Marianne's romantic sensibility stops short of Goldsmith's embrace of the poor. When pushed by her sister to describe the modest income she could imagine herself needing in order to marry, Mar-

ianne mentions an annual sum double Elinor's entire wealth of £1000. Measuring poetic appeal against the cost of living, even Marianne would reject the impracticality of the simple but impoverished life. Goldsmith's narrator mourns the changes that destroyed the village he knew, but, after all, he abandoned the village many years earlier in pursuit of his own education and career.

When Goldsmith's less romantic contemporaries write in defense of the enclosure movement, however, their rhetoric makes a decided turn away from the compassionate Puritan pamphlet writers of the seventeenth century. The Reverend John Howlett, for example, writing when Jane Austen was eleven years old, calls the poor lazy, worthless, and immoral: "Seldom have I passed over an extensive waste," he writes in his *Enquiry* (1786),

but I have been shocked with the sight of a proportionable number of half-naked, half-starved women and children, with pale meagre faces, peeping out of their miserable huts, or lazing and lounging about after a few paltry screaming geese, or scabby worthless sheep. (80)

If John Howlett had any portion of a clergyman's sense of responsibility to defend and protect the poor, it is over-ridden by his own professional concerns. The enclosure movement affected the manner in which the clergy were paid agricultural tithes, and Howlett and others wanted to ensure that they would continue to get their due. Under open field agriculture, land managers simply set aside a clergyman's portion of the crops harvested from contiguous fields. Although there is a long tradition of farmers resenting the mandatory payments to clergymen, the tithe set aside from the community harvest felt like less of a bite out of an individual's labor and income than cash tithes or corn rent paid by single farmers. Clergymen like Howlett knew that agricultural reform might bring along with it an elimination of the unpopular payments to the clergy. Thus they were highly motivated to cultivate the favor of landowners who wished to increase the profitability of their land, however much the poor suffered by their displacement.

The Reverend John Howlett's defense of land enclosure condemns the poor for indolence, exalts the wealthy for increasing their own worth, and protects the system of church tithes by illustrating their usefulness and fairness. Farmers who must calculate payments to clergy, he maintains, will work harder to assure a greater return for themselves. Landowners who convert arable ground to pasturage, moreover, will be able to pay a percentage to the clergy with greater ease, since they earn money with less labor, lower costs, and fewer risks.

While landowners welcomed Howlett's favorable arguments for enclosure, most wanted to do away with ecclesiastical taxation. The prolific agricultural writer, Arthur Young, as well as many anonymous pamphlet-writing farmers, proposed the elimination of tithes altogether. Georgian-era landowners eager for the Church's support did continue paying cash or corn rent—and guaranteeing it in their Acts of Enclosure—if the holder of a living objected to their offer of land instead of income (Evans 94). It is doubtful that landowners accepted John Howlett's claims that the increased productivity of their land would make payment of tithes less stinging, but many were willing to accommodate the local clergyman to ensure his advocacy of their agricultural projects. A 1796 Parliamentary "Act for Dividing [land] within the Hamlet or Township of Longcot, in the Parish of Shrivenham, in the County of Berks," for example, demonstrates the preferred elimination of this income by converting the value of the vicar's tithes into a portion of land for his own use. A similar Lincolnshire Act includes a clause guaranteeing "Vicars of the said Parish of Caistor, the usual and accustomed *Easter Offerings*, *Mortuaries*, and *Surplice Fees* belonging to the said Vicarage" (13–14).

The Longcot Enclosure Act includes another clause about the responsibility of those affected by the Act to abide by its decrees. People who neglect the Act's requirement to construct post and rail fences, plant "quickset hedges," maintain brooks and rivulets, and manage their allotted land are subject to having their cattle and possessions sold to pay expenses (25). Thus small landowners, like "Old Gibson," frequently lost their farms because of their financial inability to make the improvements mandated by the Act of Enclosure that covered their land. Addington's 1767 pamphlet addresses this specifically: If small landowners "refuse, or have not money, to inclose them, the Commissioners will inclose them, and take them into their own hands till they are reimbursed."

The expense of enclosure also affected the clergy who were either apportioned tracks of land in lieu of yearly tithes, or, more frequently, were responsible for conforming to the mandates of an Enclosure Act for the church land included with their living—land that provided them with an income, but was not personal property that could be inherited by their children. The Reverend Baptist Noel Turner wrote a pamphlet in 1788 expressing concern about the expenses of mandated improvements. His address to fellow churchmen and members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy highlights the new concerns raised by the enclosure movement at the end of the eighteenth century. Under a Parliamentary Act of Enclosure, clergymen had to abide by

the same requirements for drains, ditches, hedges, and fences that every other landowner faced when contiguous fields were divided. Turner calculates that the immediate expenses for such improvements would be amortized by most landowners, either in their own lifetimes or in the course of the next generation's use of the land. The land's increased profitability would more than compensate for the costs laid out in its enclosure, since a landowner's heir would inherit family property whose value had been increased by capital investment. When a clergyman made capital improvements, however, he might as well be dumping his money into his new ditches. A clergyman had to draw from his own cash reserves, or, in many cases, go into considerable debt to conform to the Act's mandates. What happens to his investment, Turner asks his fellow churchmen, if he dies the following year?

It is not surprising in 1788 to find a clergyman more interested in preserving his own financial security than in protecting the interests of the poor under an Act of Enclosure. What is curious about Turner's pamphlet, however, is that his concerns do not make him an opponent of Enclosure. Faced with a threat to his own prosperity, Reverend Turner might have condemned a system that favored the private ownership of land at the expense of clergymen who had supped and socialized with local, prosperous gentry for as many generations as churchmen have held livings. Even without taking a radical position, Turner might have argued for ecclesiastical neutrality, exempting church lands from the mandates of an Act of Enclosure. But Baptist Noel Turner sides with the ruling class, proposing to the Bishops and his fellow clergymen a design for a church-financed program to assist those who held church livings in making improvements on the land they occupied.

Turner's concerns about the expenses of enclosure are legitimate, but his pamphlet downplays the real benefits that churchmen stood to gain from enclosure. The Georgian era marked not only an increase in Acts of Enclosure but also in anti-tithing sentiment. Farmer John Boys, in *A General View of the Agriculture of the County of Kent* (1796), claimed that "tithes in kind, the corn-laws, and the prohibition to export wool in its raw state" worked against land improvement. Farmers let land lie fallow rather than grow crops from which they must pay a tithe, thus decreasing the nation's production of food. While some clergy regretted the loss of annual cash or corn rent, Eric Evans points out in *The Contentious Tithe*, land given in Enclosure Acts in lieu of tithes often represented one-seventh or eighth of a landowner's holdings, because commissioners recognized clergymen's investments of work and improvements needed to earn the equivalent of the previous one-tenth taxa-

tion (98). The clergyman's association with his landowning neighbors generally improved when he too held a portion of land.

The fact that clergymen have a particular interest in land enclosure is evident in Jane Austen's fiction, and probable in her family life. *Northanger Abbey's* Henry Tilney, unlike Edward Ferrars and Edmund Bertram, is already ordained before he meets his future wife. He is also more financially comfortable than Catherine Morland's clergyman father or soon-to-be-ordained brother James, for he holds a valuable family living and, despite his status as a second son, continues to enjoy his father's wealth in part-time residence at Northanger Abbey. When Henry delivers his lecture on the picturesque to Catherine on a hilltop overlooking the city of Bath, she eagerly absorbs a liberal arts education, from agriculture and forestry to economics and political science:

Delighted with her progress, and fearful of wearying her with too much wisdom at once, Henry suffered the subject [of the picturesque] to decline, and by an easy transition from a piece of rocky fragment and the withered oak which he had placed near its summit, to oaks in general, to forests, the inclosure of them, waste lands, crown lands and government, he shortly found himself arrived at politics; and from politics, it was an easy step to silence.
(*NA* 111)

Can we infer from this passage what Henry Tilney's attitude toward the enclosure movement is? We certainly know that those who raise difficult topics in Jane Austen's fiction often receive muted replies, as when Fanny Price observes that her inquiry of her uncle about the slave trade in the West Indies was met by "a dead silence" (*MP* 198). It is clear in *Sense and Sensibility* that the politics of enclosure is a topic usually addressed by men, for at Mrs. Ferrars's dinner party, when the ladies withdraw to the drawing room they have little to talk about: "the gentlemen *had* supplied the discourse with some variety—the variety of politics, inclosing land, and breaking horses" (*SS* 233).

Henry Tilney grew up at Northanger Abbey, whose lands included plantations and orchards as well as many uncultivated acres. When General Tilney insists on taking Catherine Morland out to see his "kitchen garden," she finds that this small section of Abbey land is more extensive than all the land farmed or held by her father and their neighbor, Mr. Allen. Northanger Abbey's "kitchen garden" is walled, and includes numerous hot houses. Catherine believed "a whole parish to be at work within the inclosure" (*NA* 178).

Catherine's use of the word "inclosure" here indicates that the Abbey's

land had undergone enclosure centuries earlier; its hedges, fences, and divisions have lost any political edge. Catherine's observation of the enclosed spaces, however, creates a curious historical blur that suits her imaginative sensibility. Her metaphor for the number of people she observed at work in agricultural labor—"a whole parish"—invokes a time of open fields and community farming. General Tilney's insistence that this is only a "kitchen garden" implies that other sections of his estate support agriculture and pasturage for profit. But Catherine's immediate view romanticizes farm work: here is no depopulation of villages; here are people actively working to grow the food that they—and the lord of the manor—will eat. The enclosed kitchen garden may be blissfully viewed with no evocation of the losses enclosure effected in rural villages.

At the end of *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine and Henry declare their love for each other, but they will not marry without the consent of General Tilney. So Catherine stays with her parents and Henry returns to his parish lands—whose productivity is more important under the likelihood that he will be disinherited by his father. While waiting for General Tilney to change his mind, "Henry returned to what was now his only home, to watch over his young plantations, and extend his improvements for her sake, to whose share in them he looked anxiously forward" (*NA* 250). This is all we are told, since the novel concludes in two more pages, pages densely packed with the marriage of Henry's sister and his father's forgiveness and consent to his own marriage with Catherine. We can infer from the sentence about Henry Tilney's agricultural holdings, however, a positive acknowledgement of the way land became more valuable through enclosure. Nearly all references to agricultural "improvements" by the end of the eighteenth century address changes mandated by Enclosure Acts: better drainage, better irrigation, better soil, etc.¹ What is also clear about this sentence, however, is that Henry is developing farmland, not pastures. He might want to increase its productivity to ensure that he has enough income to support a wife, but he is not pushing people off land to make room for profitable sheep.

There is no sense of irony in the narrative description of Henry Tilney's land improvements, other than a knowing nod regarding what a young man will do for the woman he loves. But Austen is far less sympathetic to the recommendations for land improvement that Henry Crawford makes to Edmund Bertram in *Mansfield Park*. Henry Crawford insists that the farmyard at Thornton Lacy, the living Edmund will hold once he is ordained, "must be cleared away entirely, and planted up to shut out the blacksmith's shop."

Crawford admires the meadows beyond the parsonage, and assumes they are part of the living. “If not,” he tells Edmund, “you must purchase them.” Something must be done, as well, about the stream, but Crawford is not yet sure what (*MP* 242).

Crawford’s improvements are implicitly criticized in Austen’s novel, while Henry Tilney’s are not, because Crawford’s goals are superficial. The farmyard is not to be removed and meadows acquired either to make the living more profitable or to improve agricultural efficiency. Henry Crawford, with his sister’s aspirations for Edmund Bertram in mind, wants to ensure that Edmund’s large parsonage house reflects his class status: “from being the mere gentleman’s residence, it becomes, by judicious improvement, the residence of a man of education, taste, modern manners, good connections” (*MP* 244). Since Mary Crawford can barely bring herself to think of marrying a clergyman, her brother can help matters by creating a façade of something better. With a little help, he tells Edmund, the parsonage house could appear to passersby to be the home of a “great land-holder of the parish” (*MP* 244). Although this passage is not explicitly connected to contemporary enclosure, many clergymen did increase their “social influence” when they received land in lieu of tithes (Evans 106). Austen is clearly satirizing such pretensions in Henry Crawford’s speech, as he erases the religious calling from the “man of education, taste, modern manners, [and] good connections.”

The truly “great land-holder” in Austen’s *Mansfield Park* is, of course, Mr. Rushworth. Henry Crawford establishes his credentials as an “improver,” in part, through suggestions he tosses out on a visit he makes with the Bertrams to Rushworth’s estate, Sotherton. We know that Jane Austen was thinking about enclosure when she wrote *Mansfield Park*. In the same letter in which she tells Cassandra that she will address the subject of “Ordination” in her new novel, she asks her sister to “discover whether Northamptonshire is a Country of Hedgerows” (29 January 1813). But the Rushworth estate is remarkably *unimproved*. Although the grounds are divided, fields and walks separated by locked gates and at least one ha-ha, Sotherton is an estate bound to the past, with fifty-year-old furnishings in the mansion, portraits of long-forgotten family members, and a glut of rooms serving no other use, Austen suggests, “than to contribute to the window tax” (*MP* 85). In spite of the pride they take in their family history, however, the Rushworths have discarded the values of the past. The house’s melancholy, mahogany chapel has been abandoned by the current family, giving the cynical clergy-loathing Mary Crawford the opportunity to observe, “Every generation has its improvements”

(*MP* 86). Equally, Mr. Rushworth is willing to listen to any suggestions for improvements for Sotherton's grounds, less perhaps to improve the estate's profitability than to catch up to modern times.

Jane Austen's family's land dealings prove that one needn't have John Dashwood's moral vacuity to be interested in expanding one's estate, but even Austen joked about her loved ones' potential for exploitative dealings in land acquisition. In 1796, her brother Edward Knight attempted to buy some neighboring property, much as John Dashwood hoped to get "Old Gibson's" farm. "Farmer Claribould died this morning," Austen writes to Cassandra, "& I fancy Edward means to get some of his farm if he can cheat Sir Brook enough in the agreement (*sic*)" (5 September 1796). John Claribould, a farmer in Goodnestone, Kent, died at age 56, and Austen and her brother attended his funeral. But Edward failed to acquire the property. In her next letter to Cassandra, she mentions that Edward's scheme "for taking the name of Clari-bould" had been abandoned for lack of funds. The family joke that Edward's acquisition of another man's farm would necessarily involve a name change also suggests Jane Austen's satirical edge when talking about her brother's fortunate adoption by the Knights and his use of their family name.

Like most clergymen, Austen's father depended upon his land's productivity when they lived at Steventon. When her cousin, Edward Cooper, obtained his first living in 1799, Austen noted that it was "valued at 140£ a year, but perhaps it may be improvable" (21–23 January 1799). Mr. Austen's sheep—raised for mutton—were highly praised (1–2 December 1798), but he often faced financial struggles. Soon after receiving the Steventon living, George Austen also began farming nearby Cheesedown Farm, property belonging to his patron, Thomas Knight I. "My father's feelings are not so enviable," Austen wrote in November 1800, "as it appears the farm cleared 300£ last year" (1 November 1800). In *Jane Austen and the Clergy*, Irene Collins suggests that although Mr. Austen was more of a scholar than a farmer, earning his income off the land was more appealing to him than exacting tithes from his neighbors (52). When Jane's brother James took over the Steventon living, he proved more successful than his father at drawing profit from the farms. In 1808, Austen wrote to her sister, "James means to keep three horses on this increase in income . . . we have now pretty well ascertained James's income to be Eleven Hundred Pounds, curate paid, which makes us very happy—the ascertainment as well as the income" (27–28 December 1808).

Like Catherine Morland, Jane Austen expressed an aesthetic apprecia-

tion of the lines and structures of enclosed fields. In 1800, writing from Steventon, she let Cassandra know about a “new plan . . . concerning the plantation of the new inclosure on the right hand side of the Elm walk—the doubt is whether it would be better to make a little orchard of it, by planting apples, pears & cherries, or whether it should be a larch, Mountain-ash & acacia” (20–21 November 1800). When they lived in the cottage at Chawton, Jane Austen was somewhat less sentimental about the plantings on the grounds than her sister, inspiring her gesture of pseudo kindness in an informative letter to Cassandra, “I will not say that your Mulberry trees are dead, but I am afraid they are not alive” (31 May 1811). Both Steventon and Chawton reflected the grace of Hampshire’s old enclosures without the political stress of lost employment and depopulation.

Like Marianne Dashwood, however, both Jane and Cassandra Austen could be sarcastic about anyone who put land’s profitability ahead of beauty. “[A]fter dinner we all three walked to Chawton Park,” Austen wrote in 1811. Henry Austen’s banking partner, Mr. Tilson, “admired the Trees very much, but grieved that they should not be turned into money” (6 June 1811). On the whole, Austen appreciated her brothers’ ability to make money as much as she enjoyed her own earnings when her novels were sold. In 1813 she wrote to Francis Austen of Edward’s successful haymaking season, noting particularly that “he has had better luck than Mr. Middleton ever had in the 5 years that he was Tenant” (3–6 July 1813). Even Jane Austen’s mother hoped to make money from land: in 1816 she still had title to a field in Steventon that she rented to a Steventon villager for £6 per year—although he often needed to be persuaded to pay his rent (16–17 December 1816; *Le Faye* 530n.).

Jane Austen never explicitly condemned the enclosure movement in either her fiction or her letters. She clearly welcomed whatever profits her family could gain from the land they owned or leased, although she was not beyond teasing Edward Knight when he hoped to acquire a dead neighbor’s farm. Living most of her life in Hampshire (aside from the period in Bath), and visiting Edward Knight in Kent, Austen did not personally witness the effects of enclosure on the rural poor, since these were areas of old enclosure, not recently transformed open fields. She saw poverty among farm workers: the post-Napoleonic war period marked a time of depressed agricultural prices (Melling 147) and the numbers of needy people in both Kent and Hampshire increased. Austen’s sympathy for the poor is expressed in her novels by the charitable visits made by characters like Fanny Price and Emma Woodhouse.

But Henry Tilney’s comments in *Northanger Abbey* prove that Austen

was also aware of the political controversies surrounding the enclosure movement in her time. Like most of her contemporaries, she seems to have regarded the rapid transformation of open fields and commons since 1760 as inevitable and unstoppable. While describing the significance of enclosure in Jane Austen's day, Maggie Lane admits the process included unhappy "social repercussion"; but she believes that they "did not greatly impinge on the England Jane Austen knew" (21). Austen's association of enclosure with John Dashwood and land improvement with Henry Crawford, however, clearly shows that she recognized the negative side of this political issue.

The "inclosure of Norland Common" represents John Dashwood metaphorically: he is self-absorbed and unwilling to address the needs even of his immediate community, his half-sisters and stepmother. Already wealthy from his own mother's estate, and made more so by the inheritance of Norland secured for John's child through his great uncle's will, he pursues every minute line of increased wealth for himself and his wife. Enclosure at Norland is not about transforming open-field agriculture to separately tended fields. It is about turning the Common into profitable land, albeit at the expense of those who for generations had had access to commons for grazing animals, gathering fuel, and picking nuts and berries. In one appendix of Arthur Young's extensive 1808 *General Report on Enclosures*, he notes county-by-county the injury of enclosure on the poor, whether in their decreased access to milk for their children, loss of employment, or loss of their own bits of land. In Kirkburn parish in York, Young describes a situation that might be parallel to John Dashwood's purchase of farmer Gibson's property:

The enclosure has proved of singular advantage to great landowners and their tenants; but the labourer who, previous to the enclosure, had his cow-gate, and from thence derived considerable nourishment to his small family, was deprived of this aid by this inability to enclose, therefore was under the necessity of selling his tenement to his richer neighbour, and deprived his family of a comfortable refuge. (Young 152)

John Dashwood doesn't *need* any more profitable land, but his behavior is consistent with all of his actions in the novel. "Can there be anything more galling to the spirit of a man," John asks his sisters when Mrs. Ferrars chooses to bestow Edward's inheritance on Robert Ferrars, "than to see his younger brother in possession of an estate which might have been his own?" (*SS* 269). Indeed, John made sure as soon as their father died that *his* younger sisters had no share in his estate. It is inconceivable that he might extend

some share of land use to his anonymous neighbors by leaving Norland Common open for community use, much less look out for the children of a poor neighbor who was forced to sell his farm.

Jane Austen left the political arguments about the enclosure movement behind the doors of rooms where gentlemen gathered after dinner. Had she spoken out, she would not have denounced it absolutely. Her clergyman father, cousin, and brothers depended too much on income produced from the land to begrudge them the benefits of improving soil conditions, drainage, and irrigation. Her letters and novels, however, indicate her love for the beauty of old trees over buildings or logging profits. Just as she despised selfishness and greed, we must conclude that Jane Austen also condemned the enclosure movement's historical and contemporary exploitation of the rural poor. Jane Austen lived and wrote at the period of English history in which land enclosure had its biggest impact, and although her references to it are subtle, she did not ignore its consequences.

NOTE

1. For example, Charles Vancouver concludes his *General View of the Agriculture in the County of Essex: With Observations on the means of its improvement* (1795) with "A general statement of the **improvement, which by enclosing** and laying into severalty, may be annually made on the present rent or value of open common fields and waste lands, in this County" (emphasis mine). Vancouver notes that in about 40 parishes there are approximately 1200 acres of common land per parish; this with the wastes and forests and some sea land could produce almost £26,000 in increased revenue (not counting costs for improvements of rough land).

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