



Exploring *Mansfield Park*: In the Footsteps of Fanny Price

JOHN WILTSHIRE

John Wiltshire has just retired from teaching English at La Trobe University in Melbourne. He is the author of three books on Jane Austen, including *Jane Austen and the Body* (1992, reprinted), and editor of *Mansfield Park* in the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen (2005).

IT WAS at the JASNA meeting in Boston in 2000 that I first learned, in the foyer of the Boston Park Plaza Hotel, that there was to be a new, authoritative, scholarly edition of Jane Austen's works to be published by Cambridge University Press. I've known *Mansfield Park* since my schoolboy days, and, without its being exactly my favorite novel, it's the work of Jane Austen that I've always found most deeply interesting, challenging, and powerful.

And so, for the next five years I found myself working on *Mansfield Park*. This paper is about the interaction of criticism and scholarship, and how exploring the background (as it's sometimes called) of the novel can contribute to our reading. I'm going to tell the story of my journeys "in the footsteps of Fanny Price" in search of the places in the novel. But behind this story is another kind of journey, or rather exploration: an exploration in search of answers to a series of conceptual issues. So let me preface the story of my journeys with these questions.

The great effort of academic writing on Jane Austen for the last twenty or so years can be summed up in the term or notion of "historicization." Scholars with all sorts of backgrounds have sought to embed Jane Austen's novels within their historical setting—to understand the context of her work, whether the circumstances of her life, the politics and culture of her time, or the practices of publication. Much of this work of historicization is wonderfully clever, making the smallest details yield information, or detecting in Jane

Austen's prose the slightest echo of Shakespeare, the Bible, or references to the contemporary novelists and poets she may well have read. It has resulted in a greatly increased consciousness of Jane Austen's relation to her historical and cultural context.

But this great critical effort of historicization sits oddly with previous academic commentary on Jane Austen—work which undertook to read the novels, more or less, as free-standing, independent, works of art. As works of art, by definition, it was thought that they contained within themselves the knowledge necessary to our understanding. If pressed, this school of critics might suggest that the novels are like trees that certainly draw their life and sustenance from the ground in which they grow, and the atmosphere they inhabit, but are qualitatively distinct from what surrounds them. They cannot be “explained” by their context or reduced to items of history—and so in the last resort, such critics might claim, historical information is largely irrelevant to what makes us enjoy and love the novels. This kind of criticism, which still continues to be written, has contributed some of the most illuminating and enduring “readings” of Jane Austen's novels.

The tussle between these two points of view was in my mind as I was working. For—no doubt about it—I was embarking on a task of historicization; I was seeking information from outside the novel that might throw light on its inner life. How much does a general reader need to know? How much, in the more academic context, *ought* a reader to know? Or, to put the question more exactly: do the novels actually present us with difficulties that need to be solved before we can feel comfortable with them, before we can be said to understand them, before we can enjoy them? If you think the answer to this question is plainly “no” (about *Pride and Prejudice*, for example), then it might be just that ignorance is bliss. As a reader uninformed of the historical context, it might be that one is missing a great deal—and not know that one is missing it. Another way of putting this is to say: “Can we sustain an innocent reading of Jane Austen?”

After I had taken on the editorship, I went three times to England in search of materials. I worked in the British Library, Cambridge University Library, the Bodleian in Oxford, and other libraries too. I also visited most of the places referred to in the novel. I don't know what I expected to find, and I didn't expect to make any discoveries, but this was a task that no previous editor of the novel had apparently undertaken, and it seemed important to actually see the places especially because, living in Melbourne, which is even further from England than Tucson, I couldn't just hop into the car if an idea struck me. Whether I did make any discoveries will be up to you to decide.

But it was certainly true that in the course of working on *Mansfield Park* I felt that, for me, the novel turned from a two-dimensional picture to a three-dimensional object. It was like hearing a piece of chamber music that you're familiar with from recordings played before you in a drawing room. So, to partially answer the questions I've put, I think external or historical contextualization cannot *explain* (perhaps in Jane Austen's case it doesn't need to explain) but it can *clarify*: it can make us see details in the novel more sharply and, therefore, as they accumulate, read the novel differently.



I had assumed, as I am sure most readers do, that, apart from Portsmouth, the locations of the action were fictional, but this assumption turned out to be only partly true. So let's begin this journey in the footsteps of Fanny Price by looking at the name and location of the house that we are introduced to in the first sentence of the novel, the scene of her growing up, Mansfield Park itself. I'm not the first to think that the name must be significant.

One of the first historicizations of *Mansfield Park* was Margaret Kirkham's suggestion in 1983 that the name of the house, and village, was an allusion to the famous judge, Lord Mansfield, whose name Jane Austen would have come across time and time again in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, for example (Kirkham 116). And there is circumstantial evidence for this that Kirkham doesn't mention. Fanny Price twice quotes the poetry of Cowper in the course of the novel. When the talk turns to the avenue at Sotherton, she confides to Edmund, "Does it not make you think of Cowper? 'Ye fallen avenues, once more I mourn your fate unmerited'" (66). At Portsmouth she remembers Cowper's "Tirocinium": "With what intense desire he wants his home." "With what intense desire she wants her home," was continually on her tongue, as the truest description of [her] yearning . . ." (499). The same volumes of Cowper's poetry in which the lines that Fanny has by heart occur contain two poems celebrating Lord Mansfield. Perhaps then, Jane Austen did intend an allusion. But if so, what does it mean? Does it mean, as Kirkham suggested, some reference to a famous judgment of Lord Mansfield in 1772 prohibiting slavery on English soil? Or is it more simply honorific? Mansfield was one of the many Scots who achieved distinction in England in this period. Born William Murray, perhaps he took the title of Mansfield because that confirmed his integration into British society. It's as English a name as Woodhouse or Bennet. And that isn't the only reason for the name. Cassandra Austen once said that Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* was Jane's

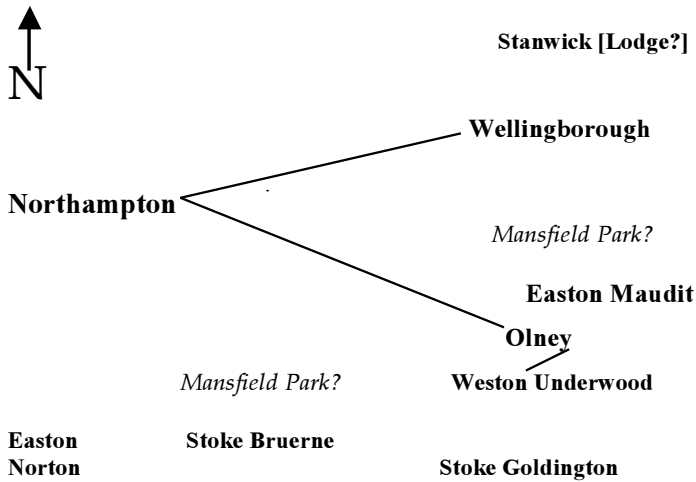


Figure 1: *The possible location of Mansfield Park*

favorite novel. Its heroine, like Fanny Price, lives in Northamptonshire, and if you search, you'll find a Mansfield House there.

The actual English town of Mansfield is north of Nottingham and so about eighty miles northeast from the fictional Mansfield Park (one of my regrets is that I didn't pick up a beer mat for the local brew, "Mansfield Ales"). Mansfield village is in Northamptonshire, somewhere not far away from the county town. Though the estate itself is fictional, we can form some idea of where it is because the novelist provides a few clues. Tom says, for instance, during the discussions about casting *Lovers' Vows*, that he could name "at this moment at least six young men within six miles of us, who are wild to be admitted into our company, . . . so I will take my horse early tomorrow morning, and ride over to Stoke, and settle with one of them" (174). Allowing for Tom's exaggeration, let us assume Mansfield is within ten miles of Stoke—though that's a common enough English place name and there are three Stokes in Northamptonshire. There's another clue to Mansfield's location, though. When Tom, again, is seeking to distract his father, newly arrived in the midst of the theatricals, he shifts the conversation quickly to shooting and says, "The first day I went over Mansfield Wood, and Edmund took the copses beyond Easton . . ." (212). Easton, like Stoke, is a common English place name, but there happens to be an Easton Maudit five or six miles north of Olney and not very far from Stoke Goldingstone. When Henry Crawford

discloses his plan to marry Fanny Price to his astonished but delighted sister he says, “I will not take her from Northamptonshire. I shall let Everingham, and rent a place in this neighbourhood—perhaps Stanwix Lodge” (341). Stanwick is ten or so miles northeast of Easton. So we have three pointers to where Mansfield Park might be (Figure 1).

We can make a guess at where Jane Austen positioned her fictional Mansfield Park—somewhere in the neighborhood of Easton Maudit, not too far from Stoke Goldington, and within traveling distance of Stanwick. She must, at least, have consulted a map. More important, if Mansfield is a bit south of Easton, closer to Stoke, it is very near Olney and Weston Underwood, both places familiar to Jane Austen and to her heroine through Fanny’s reading of the very poet Cowper whose verses celebrate Lord Mansfield. There Cowper wrote and published his Evangelical *Olney Hymns* in 1779 and his best known long poem *The Task* in 1785. So when Fanny Price, hearing Mr. Rushworth’s plans to “improve” Sotherton by “hav[ing] the avenue . . . down” (65) quotes those lines from *The Task*—“Ye fallen avenues! once more I mourn / Your fate unmerited!”—her quotation is the more poignant for being the voice of a local poet. So there’s a cluster of references that associate Mansfield Park with two great men—one a nostalgic religious poet, one a progressive reforming judge—instrumental in the making of modern England.



One of Fanny’s very few outings from Mansfield is to Sotherton Court, which I will talk about in a moment. But first to a place that is not visited, but mentioned early in the novel, when Mary and Henry Crawford arrive on the scene. They have lived with their uncle, the Admiral Crawford, in Hill Street, London. Like many other readers, I expect, I thought that Hill Street was a generic name, for there must be Hill Streets in every city on the planet. But I was wrong.

I had spent a frustrating morning in the British Library, trying to find out what kind of a harp Mary Crawford had played at the Parsonage. I was rather obsessed by this problem because I couldn’t understand how the kind of harp I had seen in concerts, or the harp that is played by the Musgrove sisters in the excellent 1995 film of *Persuasion*—gigantic things that need a removal truck at the least—could possibly have been carried in a farmer’s cart. I got as far as finding that Sebastien Erard was the famous harp-maker of the period and that he introduced a new mechanism that made the instru-



Figure 2: *Hill Street Mayfair in 2003*

ment much easier to play, but nowhere could I find a picture of such a harp. So I gave up and went in search of Hill Street in another part of town—Mayfair, still London’s most fashionable district. Hill Street, Mayfair, runs westwards from Berkeley Square towards Park Lane and Hyde Park. It was the home of statesmen and admirals and leaders of fashion, like the bluestocking author Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu. In Scott’s *Waverley*, published the same year as *Mansfield Park*, Edward Waverley’s unscrupulous politician father lived there. The houses are mostly clubs now, but they still spell out wealth and status (Figure 2). Hill Street, then, would have suggested what the newspapers of the time always called the “Fashionable World” to Jane Austen’s readers: rakish, rich, people with “progressive” ideas—just the place for an adulterous Admiral Crawford to reside.

But the harp: turning south from Berkeley Square, you come to New Bond Street, home of dealers in antiques and old masters. And there, in the



Figure 3: *A harp manufactured by Sebastiaen Erard in 1802*

teenth century, and usually made to order. The young man lifted the harp up and declared, yes, it could easily be lifted by one man into a cart or a barouche, and so my mystery was solved.



Mary and her harp are already seducing Edmund Bertram, before they all travel to Mr. Rushworth's residence, Sotherton Court. Sotherton Court is about ten miles away from Mansfield (122), deep in the countryside, down rough and unmade roads. It is a great house in the midst of rural England, but Jane Austen gives no clues in what direction from Mansfield it lies. Searching for the original, or the model for, Sotherton has aroused intense interest, especially recently because of its apparent resemblance to Stoneleigh Abbey, a large house in neighboring Warwickshire, inherited in 1806 by Thomas Leigh, Mrs. Austen's cousin. Jane and her mother happened to be staying with the Reverend Leigh when he received news of his great inheritance: they immediately packed their bags and went to lay claim to it.

It's not long since Stoneleigh Abbey and its grounds have been opened to the public. I went there in mid 2002, when it was in the midst of prepara-

window of Mallett's antiques, that morning, I saw a harp, a small harp! Standing only about my height, very beautiful, it could well be Mary's. You couldn't just walk into the shop, so I pressed the buzzer and a young man came to the door—I think he was in tails! I explained my business—making clear I wasn't interested in purchasing but mentioning the Jane Austen connection (this always works like magic)—and he, very kindly, invited me in. Stepping around priceless vases and dodging chandeliers, we examined the harp (Figure 3). It had been made for Lady Clive in 1802, one of about 500 manufactured by Erard in the first years of the nine-



Figure 4: *Stoneleigh Abbey: the West Front*

tions for opening, and was lucky to be able to see some of the house in its unmodernized state. Stoneleigh Abbey is a strange amalgam of buildings from different periods: the remains of a Cistercian Abbey, an Elizabethan manor house partly built out of the stones of the Abbey, and, plonked in front of it all, that huge West wing, built in classical style in the early decades of the eighteenth century (Figure 4). Mrs. Austen described the house in a letter:

And here we all found ourselves on Tuesday . . . Eating Fish, venison & all manner of good things, at a late hour, in a Noble large Parlour hung round with family Pictures—every thing is very Grand, & very Fine & very Large—The House is larger than I could have supposed—we can *now* find our way about it, I mean the best part, as to the offices (which were the old Abby) Mr. Leigh almost dispairs of ever finding his way about them. . . . I will now give you some idea of the inside of this vast house, first premising that there are 45 windows in front, (which is quite strait with a flat Roof) 15 in a row—you go up a considerable flight of steps (some offices are under the house) into a large Hall, on the right hand, the dining parlour, within that the Breakfast room, where we generally sit, and reason good, tis the only room (except the Chapel) that looks towards the River,—on the left hand the Hall is the best drawing room, within that a smaller, these rooms are rather



Figure 5: *Stoneleigh Abbey: the chapel in 2002*

gloomy, Brown wainscoat & dark Crimson furniture, so we never use them but to walk thro' them to the old picture Gallery.

(Le Faye 156-57)

It's easy to see why some recent writers have thought that Stoneleigh Abbey must be the original of Sotherton. The massive building, the family pictures, the dark wainscot, and heavy furniture, the numbers of windows, all suggest Sotherton. (Forty-five windows is a sign of great wealth because the window tax leaped at that number.) In *Mansfield Park* the size of the house is apparent as the party drag themselves from room to room, led by that indefatigable bore Mrs. Rushworth: "Having visited many more rooms than could be supposed to be of any other use than to contribute to the window tax, and find employment for housemaids, 'Now,' said Mrs. Rushworth, 'we are coming to the chapel, which properly we ought to enter from above, and look down upon'" (100).

In 2002, the chapel was being used as a storeroom for pictures and other clobber whilst the rest of the house was being cleaned up (Figure 5). I'll con-

tinue the quotation: “They entered. Fanny’s imagination had prepared her for something grander than a mere, spacious, oblong room, fitted up for the purpose of devotion—with nothing more striking or more solemn than the profusion of mahogany, and the crimson velvet cushions appearing over the ledge of the family gallery above” (100). As an architectural critic writes, it’s “an updated version of the old medieval double-decker, in which a gallery at principal floor level is for the use of the family, while the body of the chapel, a floor lower, has a common entrance for servants and those of lower estate” (Gomme 89). This distinction clarifies why the snobbish Mrs. Rushworth feels it necessary to apologize for entering from below: “as we are quite among friends, I will take you in this way, if you will excuse me” (100). “From the moment I went into the Stoneleigh chapel, I knew I was also at Sotherton,” Jon Spence has written. And it’s true: this must be the place, you think, standing there, that Jane Austen had in mind. So is Stoneleigh Abbey the original of Sotherton Court? Let us see.

The Reverend Thomas Leigh had just employed the famous landscape gardener, Humphry Repton, to regig his other house, the Parsonage, at Adlestrop in Gloucester. As Henry Crawford plans to do for Thornton Lacey, Repton had changed the aspect of the building so as to give it “the air of a gentleman’s residence” (282), enlarged a stream, and contrived it so that the extensive grounds of the Rector’s landowner neighbor should appear as if they were his own. Thomas Leigh—presumably thrilled at what Repton had done for him there—was to employ him again in remodeling the grounds of Stoneleigh. Repton duly prepared a “Red Book” of designs (presentation volumes, illustrated with beautiful watercolors and bound in red vellum). Mrs. Austen doesn’t mention it, but in front of the West wing was an enclosed court yard, flanked by stone walls. “I see walls of great promise” (105), remarks Henry Crawford, as they survey the grounds, relishing the thought of their destruction so as to “open the prospect,” as it was called. “I congratulate you on the fall of the wall, and the opening of the prospect,” wrote Horatio Nelson to Lady Hamilton when this fashion was at its height and they were modernizing Merton (qtd. in Coleman 317). The Red Book of Repton’s plans for Stoneleigh is held at the Shakespeare Memorial Library in Stratford-upon-Avon, and I went to look at it. The plans reveal that Repton, like Henry Crawford, planned to pull down the wall, which was accordingly done.¹ So it is certainly possible that much of the discussion in *Mansfield Park* about “improvement,” the modernizing of the estate, might be based on what Jane Austen may have heard discussed at Stoneleigh. For example, Mr. Rushworth, thinking that he’ll have “Repton, or any body of that sort” (65), to do

his landscaping for him, says, “His terms are five guineas a day” (62), and this amount was correct. Five guineas a day, plus expenses, is a considerable sum. Rushworth also says that Repton “would certainly have the avenue at Sotherton down” (65), the occasion of Fanny’s lament and quotation of Cowper.

But there is no avenue on the plans of Stoneleigh, and its grounds did not at all correspond to what Jane Austen tells us of Sotherton. The house faces the opposite way, for one thing. At Stoneleigh, the Lodge is a remainder of the ancient building, in a very different style to the house and quite close to it, quite out of keeping with the west wing. At Sotherton, in the usual manner, the lodge is half a mile away through the park. As I’ve said, Stoneleigh is a strange conglomeration of early and late buildings. Sotherton Court, on the other hand, is described by Edmund as an entirely Elizabethan house:

“I collect,” said Miss Crawford, “that Sotherton is an old place, and a place of some grandeur. In any particular style of building?”

“The house was built in Elizabeth’s time, and is a large, regular, brick building—heavy, but respectable looking, and has many good rooms. It is ill placed.” (66)

No mention of a huge eighteenth-century wing. So how does the elegant, be-stuccoed, box-like eighteenth-century chapel come to be there? The answer is clear: what Jane Austen has done is pop this eighteenth-century chapel into an Elizabethan house, never mind that she’s describing a wholly ancient building. No wonder Fanny is disappointed. She ought to be astonished. Jane Austen was drawing on her own memories of the chapel at Stoneleigh here and not worrying at all about consistency. This surprising but interesting fact has critical implications. Brian Southam and many subsequent critics date the novel’s action from the appearance on Fanny’s table of a volume of “Crabbe’s Tales,” published in 1812 (Southam 13). Thus, they assume, the action takes place in 1812–13. I think Chapman’s earlier dating of 1808–09 is correct. If Jane Austen could insert a chapel with the wrong date in a house, surely she could insert a book with the wrong date in her novel, without worrying about it?

The novel does not bother itself as to *why* this chapel should be there at Sotherton. But the story of the Stoneleigh chapel is fascinating. The Leighs were famous Jacobites, supporters of the Stuart dynasty and known as the “loyal Leighs.” When the Hanoverians came to the throne of England, they were confronted with having to pray for these foreign upstarts at the local parish church. To avoid it, they built their own chapel inside the house and hired their own domestic chaplain. “This chapel was fitted up as you see it in

James the Second's time," Mrs. Rushworth declares (100). This dating doesn't make much sense, either. The chapel at Stoneleigh belongs to the 1720s, during the reign of George I, the Hanoverian, and it was only after 1743, in the reign of George II, that the "fittings up"—the stucco and carvings, which we see today—were added.

So the chapel may be Sotherton, but Stoneleigh Abbey is certainly not the model for Sotherton Court: the two titles "Abbey" and "Court" mark the different periods. Rushworth, flushed with excitement at the "improvements" on his friend's estate, says when he "got back to Sotherton yesterday, it looked like a prison—quite a dismal old prison" (62). I always suspected that Sotherton couldn't just be Stoneleigh, and I was struck with the description in Frances Burney's journals of a visit to another grand house, Knole in Kent, in 1779:

The house, which is very old, has the appearance of an antique chapel, or rather cathedral. Two immense gates and two court-yards precede the entrance into the dwelling part of the house; the windows are all of the small old casements; and the general air of the place is monastic and gloomy. . . . [T]he [more] modern part was finished in the time of Elizabeth. (1.270-71)

Burney also mentions that the park, as at Sotherton, is seven miles round. Could it be possible, I thought, that Knole was in Jane Austen's mind when she created Sotherton Court? Perhaps, just as Fanny was taken to Sotherton, the young Jane Austen was taken to visit Knole. A quick glance at the map soon put paid to that idea. Knole is a long way from Steventon, on the other side of the county, far too distant for a day trip by carriage.

But last year, still following in the footsteps of Fanny Price, we stayed with some friends in Kent. The plan was that they were going to drive us across southern England to Portsmouth, so that I could take there some photos for this paper. We didn't have much time, so we carefully planned our visit for the 21st of October. I had forgotten that the battle of Trafalgar had taken place on the 21st of October 1805! We discovered this coincidence the night before our planned visit. It was from Portsmouth that Nelson had set sail before the battle whose two-hundredth anniversary it was. The Queen would be at Portsmouth, the Admiralty would be at Portsmouth, and no doubt thousands and thousands of patriotic English citizens would be thronging the streets and jamming the motorways. So that put paid to the plan. I said to my friend, why don't we go to Knole instead? It wasn't far, by car. I mentioned my theory that it might have been in Jane Austen's mind, and my doubts



Figure 6: *Knole*

about her ever having got there. My friend went on the internet to find out about visiting hours and came downstairs triumphant.

Jane Austen's great uncle Francis Austen lived in Sevenoaks, Kent. In July 1788, when Jane was twelve and a half, the Austens did take Jane and Cassandra there to introduce them to that side of the family. Crucially, there was something else I didn't know: very unusually for a great house, the entrance to the park at Knole opens off the main street of Sevenoaks. There's an archway, and you're in the park. A few hundred meters into the grounds, and you see the house, a "dismal old prison" (Figure 6).

So I think that Jane Austen was drawing on her youthful memories of Knole as well as on Stoneleigh when she described Sotherton. Well, what does it matter—Stoneleigh or Knole? But I think again that we do get a tiny insight into Jane Austen's creative imagination. She is drawing upon various memories of various houses and their pleasure grounds, not painting a portrait of one, just as, I would think, she drew upon various aspects of various people to create the figures in her novels.

On the other hand, Portsmouth is certainly a real place and, as such, crucially important to the novel. I'll come to this soon. But first I'll mention that Faversham, the little town where we were staying, had—like every other little town in England that weekend—a celebration of the battle of Trafalgar. There was a big model of the *Victory* set up in the market place (it seemed to be made of cardboard), a brass band and a parade of marines. A more decorous part of the celebration was an exhibition, and in the exhibition was a contemporary poster of the line-up of ships at the battle of Trafalgar. One of

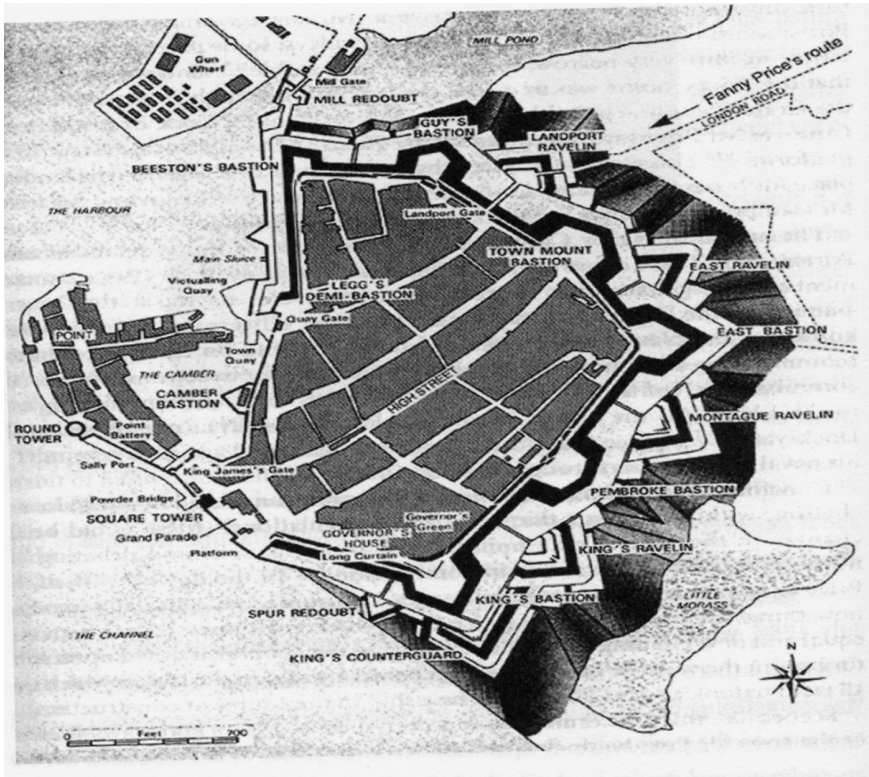


Figure 7: 19th-century map of Portsmouth, showing the ramparts

them, I saw, was the *Minotaur*, under the command of a Captain Mansfield. Now, because of her sailor brothers, we can be sure that Jane Austen took the greatest interest in the battle of Trafalgar. This detail is one more indication that the name Mansfield was chosen for the home of the Bertrams because of its patriotic and honorable associations.



Between that visit to Sotherton in the summer and being shipped off back home to Portsmouth early the next year, Fanny Price never leaves Mansfield. She goes out to dinner at the Parsonage, but otherwise, she simply sits at home, fending off the advances of Henry Crawford. The biggest event is the ball, virtually her “coming out” ball, just before Christmas. After this episode, there’s the confrontation with her uncle in the cold East Room and his resolve to make her see sense by packing her off to Portsmouth for a while.

Jane Austen’s sending Fanny to Portsmouth brings to a head the critical



Figure 8: *Thomas Rowlandson: "Portsmouth Point"*

issues I mentioned at the beginning of this talk. Portsmouth had a significance to nineteenth-century Britain that may be lost on modern readers. It was a port vital to British strategic interests. Its dockyard, where ships for the navy were built and repaired, was the largest in Europe, employing thousands of men, and a great tourist attraction. Joseph Haydn, the famous composer, visited Portsmouth to see it but was refused admission—he was, after all, a foreigner. Because it was so important, Portsmouth was also a heavily fortified town, surrounded, like a huge medieval castle, with ramparts and a moat. There were forts overlooking the sea, patrolled by soldiers or marines constantly on the watch for an enemy fleet. The Price family lives in one of the lanes off the High street, which runs through this tightly concentrated and fortified area. When Fanny and William arrive that cold February evening, their carriage has to pass through the Landport gate, which, as it happens, is the only surviving example of the gates in the ramparts that once surrounded the city (Figure 7).

Because of the huge dockyards and the ships always anchored in the Solent estuary, Portsmouth was a notoriously rowdy and dangerous town. It's "a sad place" (466), says Mrs. Price to Henry Crawford, and "sad" is a euphemism. Sailors on leave, workmen at the dockyard, marines and prostitutes would have thronged the High street, which had at least four public houses or Inns, some with better reputations than others (Figure 8). Thus



Figure 9: *Portsmouth: the Garrison Chapel*

Fanny has to send one of her brothers out to the baker's to purchase biscuits and buns when she can't face Rebecca's cooking. Portsmouth was also unhealthy. Described by a contemporary as "low and aguish," the streets "uncleanly" (which might mean vomit as well as rubbish), near the sea, in the winter months of Fanny's stay it would have been miserable indeed (*Journal of a Tour* 11). None of this detail is actually spelled out in the novel. But Jane Austen's first readers might have had a much keener sense than we do of just how confined, virtually imprisoned, Fanny would have been there. They would thus have felt more keenly than we do the force of the narrator's dry remark that Fanny might well have died under her uncle's "cure" (479).

But when I was in Portsmouth in the summer of 2002, the weather was splendid. On Sundays, the Price family goes to church at the Garrison chapel (Figure 9). The chapel, now mostly a ruin, is on the right. A flight of stone steps leads directly from the chapel to the ramparts walk, which runs across the middle of the picture. On the left of the walk is the Solent estuary. From the Prices' home to the chapel and the ramparts walk could not be more than a few hundred yards or meters: they would be constantly aware of the ships moored in the estuary or setting sail to do battle against Napoleon's fleets.



If Jane Austen takes for granted that her readers know about Portsmouth, such an assumption would certainly suggest that this historical knowledge

can sharpen and clarify our present-day reading of these chapters. So I will now return to the question I raised near the opening of this paper. How much does Jane Austen expect her readers to know? How much does she take their knowledge of England or of English history for granted? Does she expect her readers to understand what the address of Hill Street means? Almost certainly yes, I would say. Does she expect them to associate Mansfield in Northamptonshire with Cowper? It would depend on whether they knew *Olney Hymns*. Did she assume they would think of Stoneleigh or Knole in the extended chapters on Sotherton? Almost certainly not: Sotherton is a big unmodernized house in rural England, that's all. Did she expect them to recognize the significance of Portsmouth? Yes: and they would have understood how difficult life would be for a sensitive young lady there. So there can be no hard and fast answer: it depends.

There are however some matters on which it is, unequivocally, necessary to be informed. One of these in *Mansfield Park* is the status of cousin marriage. Many twenty-first-century readers (and some critics) seem to regard the idea of Fanny falling in love with and marrying her cousin with distaste. They need to know that marriage between cousins was perfectly legal in England since Henry VIII broke away from Rome (1533-40) and that Jane Austen's family included many examples. Cousin marriage seems to have been especially common among the clergy. Because it was forbidden in Catholic countries, it signified commitment to a specifically British institution—the Established Church of England. This association is interesting because it shows how political matters infused even the private commitments of the affective life. Once we accept this connection, we can understand how nationalism and patriotic sentiment are present even in the broadest organizing structures of the novel.

But perhaps we can take the more complex epistemological issues a little further. They really bear upon the whole question of Jane Austen's art. There is a scene in Hannah More's *Cælebs in Search of a Wife* (1809)—which had a great success in the years before the composition of *Mansfield Park*—that parallels a scene in Jane Austen's novel. Let us compare them. Lucilla, the heroine of *Cælebs*, is praised by a gentleman for her attention when he is reading aloud and contrasted with other ladies.

[W]hile I have been reading, as has sometimes happened, a passage of the highest sublimity or most tender interest, I own I feel not a little indignant to see the shuttle plied with as eager assiduity as if the Destinies themselves were weaving the thread. I have known a lady take up the candle-stick to search for her net-

ting-pin . . . or stoop to pick up her scissors, while Hamlet says to the ghost, "I'll go no further." I remember another who would whisper across the table to borrow silk, while Lear has been raving in the storm, or Macbeth starting at the spirit of Banquo. . . . Nay, once I remember, when I was with much agitation hurrying through the gazette of the battle of Trafalgar, while I pronounced, almost agonized, the last memorable words of the immortal Nelson, I heard one lady whisper to another that she had broken her needle. (105)

Such an ass! One of those ladies should have stuck her netting-pin right into his pompous chest. But perhaps this passage gave Jane Austen a hint for her description of the Bertram family's listening to William Price's stories of his naval life:

Young as he was, William had already seen a great deal. He had been in the Mediterranean—in the West Indies—in the Mediterranean again—had often been taken on shore by the favour of his Captain, and in the course of seven years had known every variety of danger, which sea and war together could offer. With such means in his power he had a right to be listened to; and though Mrs. Norris could fidget about the room, and disturb every body in quest of two needlefulls of thread or a second hand shirt button in the midst of her nephew's account of a shipwreck or an engagement, every body else was attentive; and even Lady Bertram could not hear of such horrors unmoved, or without sometimes lifting her eyes from her work to say, "Dear me! how disagreeable.—I wonder any body can ever go to sea." (275)

In the passage from Hannah More the reference to Nelson and the battle of Trafalgar is suddenly thrust into the foreground of the text and the reader's attention. And a reference it plainly is—the modern reader has to supply some historical knowledge to see the point. In the passage from *Mansfield Park* the war against Napoleon is also brought to bear on the domestic lives of ladies, but it is kept in the background. William Price, says the narrator, "had been in the Mediterranean—in the West Indies—in the Mediterranean again." The sentence's boomerang construction could suggest to the contemporary reader an allusion to Nelson's chase across the Atlantic and back between May and July 1805. Early in 1805, Napoleon conceived a plan to decoy the British fleet to the West Indies while the combined French and Spanish fleets invaded England. Vice-Admiral Nelson, in command of the British Mediterranean fleet, set off in pursuit of the French fleet across the

ocean to Barbados and Antigua. But he failed to engage them and had to return, limping behind the French fleet, to the Mediterranean. What makes this allusion more likely is that Jane's brother Frank Austen, in the *Canopus*, had been on this expedition.

The epistemological problem is buried within the term I have been using: "allusion." Does the reader "know" this? At what level of realization is this "knowledge" present in the reader's mind? There's no epistemological problem about Hannah More's reference to Trafalgar—what point it has depends upon its being blatant. But if, as I have suggested, "a contemporary reader"—a reader in 1814—might pick up the allusion, does it behoove a modern, twenty-first-century reader to pick it up too? In which case, the allusion ceases to be fleetingly acknowledged in the reader's mind, and instead starts to occupy the forefront of our attention. The modern reader cannot "know" this allusion in the same way that a contemporary reader might. The modern reading might be more scholarly, more complete, but, like Mrs. Norris scrabbling about in the midst of William's stories, it distracts from—it fails to acknowledge—Jane Austen's narrative art.

Which is to keep historical material recessed. William, says the narrator, has "seen every variety of danger, which sea and war together could offer." Nothing more specific is indicated, and even when there is a slight increase in particularity—"a shipwreck or an engagement"—it is still kept general, airy, low-key. There is a slight increase in intensity with the phrase "such horrors" but only enough to set off the two ladies' responses. Instead, the narrative's attention is on Mrs. Norris's madly parsimonious and interfering search for a second-hand shirt button. The effect is to sweep the reader through the sentence describing Mrs. Norris's fidgeting, towards the phrase "every body else was attentive," and then up to the great comic *coup*—that the audience's spell-bound listening should lead not to a dramatic climax but to the absurd bathos of Lady Bertram's remark. The narrative's awareness of history, of the battle to keep England free of invasion, of the wider world outside Mansfield Park, is thus conveyed indirectly—through mockery of Lady Bertram's and Mrs. Norris's cozy and ignorant parochialism.

But there must be another twist to the argument here. If modern readers of *Mansfield Park* are ignorant of history, are they not putting themselves, unwittingly, in the position of Lady Bertram? Is the text not hinting, with all the narrative skill and comic genius at its command, that the reader of this novel should be in possession of some knowledge, some awareness, to which Mrs. Norris and Lady Bertram are blind?

In a wonderful paper called "To Rouse and Fortify the Mind: Austen's

Enduring Legacy,” given earlier this year to the Chicago chapter of JASNA, Marcia McClintock Folsom suggested that the continuing power of Jane Austen lies not in her offer of escape and consolation but in her novels’ “extraordinary invitation to active reading.” I think she’s absolutely right: these apparently innocent texts actually entice a reader into the most engaged imaginative and intellectual attention and therefore (her phrase again) “engage the mind and heal the heart.” Jane Austen’s writing in *Mansfield Park* does offer us an invitation to active reading—to the controlled application of our imaginations and our minds. I hope to have shown you through this exploration of the novel’s places that historical knowledge too has a role in helping us better understand Jane Austen’s art.

NOTE

1. Mavis Batey’s book contains lovely full-color illustrations of Repton’s watercolors from the Stoneleigh Red Book (78-93), including Stoneleigh with and without its wall (92-93).

WORKS CITED

- Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park*. Ed. John Wiltshire. *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen*. Cambridge: CUP, 2005.
- Batey, Mavis. *Jane Austen and the English Landscape*. London: Barn Elms, 1996.
- Burney, Frances. *The Diary and Letters of Madame D’Arblay*. 6 vols. Ed. Austin Dobson. London: Macmillan, 1904.
- Coleman, Terry. *Nelson: the Man and the Legend*. London: Bloomsbury, 2001.
- Folsom, Marcia McClintock. “To Rouse and Fortify the Mind: Austen’s Enduring Legacy.” JASNA Greater Chicago Region Gala. 13 May 2006.
- Gomme, Andor. “Abbey into Palace: A Lesser Wilton.” *Stoneleigh Abbey; The House, Its Owners, Its Land*. Stoneleigh, Warw.: Stoneleigh Abbey, 2004.
- _____. *Journal of a Tour to the Western Counties of England, Performed in the Summer of 1807*. London, 1809.
- Kirkham, Margaret. *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction*. Brighton: Harvester, 1983.
- Le Faye, Deirdre. *Jane Austen: A Family Record*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: CUP, 2004.
- More, Hannah. *Cælebs in Search of a Wife*. 1809. Introd. Mary Waldron. Bristol: Thoemmes P, 1995.
- Southam, Brian. “The Silence of the Bertrams: Slavery and the Chronology of *Mansfield Park*.” *TLS* 17 Feb. 1995: 13.
- Spence, Jon. “The Leighs: The Revelations of Stoneleigh Abbey—Seeing a Great House.” *JASA Newsletter* 25 (2003): 20.