

1807 and All That

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As with all Jane Austen's novels, commentators have argued about possible origins for *Mansfield Park*. For instance, some think that the story of a girl transplanted from a poor to a rich to a poor home may be a re-working of Emma Watson's experience, and Frederica Vernon's distress at seeing a good young man fascinated by a corrupt and worldly woman may contribute to the misery of Fanny Price.

I shan't go over old ground. But I've been doing elementary arithmetic, and have noticed something. The *Chronology of Mansfield Park* printed in the Chapman Edition (pp. 554-57) suggests that the almanacs of 1808 and 1809 were used in planning the scheme of events. The novel did not come out until 1814, and there are references to things that happened after 1809. But JA may have had some of the plot of *MP* in mind as early as 1808, and kept the calendars, with an outline, until she was ready to proceed.

Suppose that the story was to concern a rich family with several children and an indigent niece. The father is the only one of the elders who is seriously concerned with the moral development of the young persons. He is not wonderfully efficient (the heir gets out of hand)—but at least he

tries. Then he has to go away for about two years, and bad things happen. How to remove him for such a long time?

In 1807, after years of agitation by Quakers, Evangelicals and such, the Parliament of Great Britain enacted the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire. Anyone with a long view could expect that total abolition of slavery would follow, and this was achieved in 1833. Meanwhile, slave-owners were faced with a problem. No longer could they starve or beat or work their slaves to death, and then import more as they needed them. It would be necessary to provide conditions which would permit them not only to labour, but to breed: adequate food, clothing and shelter would help. So, Sir Thomas Bertram goes off to Antigua.

It was not usual for a Northamptonshire squire to be a sugar-planter; these were more commonly west-country magnates. I suppose that an earlier Bertram married a lady who brought an estate in Antigua as her dowry. What Sir Thomas thought about slavery I don't know; it would be like him to disapprove, but to accept the institution because it was legal, and he enjoyed the income. Similarly, he acquiesced in the engagement of Maria to a stupid rich bore, because it was politically and socially advantageous. That Fanny was opposed to the very idea of slavery is more than possible, but she is afraid to pursue a discussion of the subject. (MP, 198)

We can't think that JA was other than hostile to the ownership of "human flesh" (E, 300). But she will also have been alert to an advantage resulting from the abolition of the slave trade. Some day, the wars with France might come to an end, and a good thing, too. How, then would the Navy be occupied? Obviously, in putting down clandestine slave-trading. Which is what happened. "Jobs for the boys"—(Frank and Charles in real life, William Price, Captains Wentworth, Benwick and, if his leg gets better, Harville, in fiction).

I don't want to sound cynical. I am one of those who think that JA was interested in public affairs, but with no vote, and no prospect of having any, and writing for "the market", she was unable to do more than hint at her opinions.

