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Austen, Antigua, and Marriage:

*A close reading of Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park*

 *Mansfield Park* is not only a classic but the most controversial of Austen’s novels. The novel is actually a critique of the role of Antigua and the use of slave labor disguised as one that simply centers on the Domestic space: the country home of Sir and Lady Bertram. The home in Mansfield Park only survives directly because of Sir Bertram’s nefarious activities in Antigua, and the family rarely acknowledges how they are capable of living so lavishly. Fanny Price, niece to Lady Bertram, the daughter of her sister Frances, who married below her family’s standards just for love: Fanny is the only character in the novel that seems to want to know more about Antigua and Sir Bertram’s plantation there. In the Norton edition of the novel, critic Edward Said discusses Austen’s “Antigua” and how the novel “opens up a broad expanse of domestic imperialist culture without which Britain’s subsequent acquisition of territory would not have been possible” (Said 492). There may only be one moment in the novel where the slave trade is mentioned, but its importance to the plot is undeniable. Consequently, I will argue that *Mansfield Park* can be read as a novel about the domestic space, but the role of Antigua in the West Indies as the source of Sir Bertram’s wealth is what Austen is most attempting to critique. Through the use of silly trifles and flowery language (hated by Wollstonecraft) in order to disguise her real critique, Austen created a novel that seems to fit into her usual style of discussing the domestic sphere, but her protagonist Fanny is not as likable as the other strong female character we had come to expect from Austen.

 In the introduction of *The Vindications of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft lays down the foundation her argument: equality of the sexes through education, etc., and says “I shall try to avoid flowery diction which has slided from essays into novels...” (Wollstonecraft 112). I believe the difference between Wollstonecraft and Austen is that M.W. wants to be taken seriously and appeal to the “enlightened” male reader directly, while Austen also wants to be taken seriously, but in a more discrete way that is hidden behind her use of flowery diction and appeals more to women of the upper class. Wollstonecraft wants women to improve and be educated to the same degree of men, but she does not like the upper-class women whose education “tends to render them vain and helpless” (Wollstonecraft 111). Austen in a sense is appealing to the women that Wollstonecraft is writing against. These women are the ones that believe their only purpose in life is to find a rich husband to take care of them. Wollstonecraft says:

The education of women has, of late, been more attended to than formerly; yet they are still reckoned a frivolous sex… It is acknowledged that they spend many of the first years of their lives in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments: meanwhile, strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves, the only way women can rise in the world—by marriage. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry, they act as such children may be expected to act: they dress; they paint, and nickname God's creatures. Surely these weak beings are only fit for the seraglio! Can they govern a family, or take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world? (Wollstonecraft 113)

The type of women Wollstonecraft despises are the type of women Austen is trying to educate. These vain upper-class women would be similar to Austen’s character Lady Bertram, who embodies all that Wollstonecraft has said to describe these women. Lady Bertram dresses elegantly, doesn’t move much from her place on the sofa, and nickname’s her dog “pug.” This is the vain, educated upper-class woman that needs to know the realities of how she is able to live so comfortably. Women like Lady Bertram who only trouble themselves with silly trifles are Austen’s target audience. “In vain did Lady Bertram smile and make her sit on the sofa with herself and pug, and vain was even the sight of a gooseberry tart towards giving her comfort; she could scarcely swallow two mouthfuls before tears interrupted her, and sleep seeming to be her likeliest friend, she was taken to finish her sorrows in bed” (Austen 12). She, and women like her, are the perfect targets for Austen’s inception. They will have read her novel and without having had many previous thoughts of Antigua, they would soon begin to feel the same embarrassment that the Bertram’s felt when Fanny bravely asked her uncle about the slave-trade.

“Did not you hear me ask him about the slave-trade last night?”

“I did – and was in hopes the question would be followed up by others. It would have pleased your uncle to be inquired of farther.”

“I longed to do it – but there was such a dead silence!” (Austen 136)

 *Mansfield Park* is not one of Austen’s typical novels of the domestic sphere. In *The Progress of Romance (1785,)* Clara Reeve defined the novel as:

A picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it is written. … The Novel gives a familiar relation of such things, as pass every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friend, or to ourselves, and the perfection of it, is to represent every scene, in so easy and natural a manner, and to make them appear so probable, as to deceive us into a persuasion (at least while we are reading) that all is real, until we are affected by the joys or distresses, of the persons in the story, as if they were our own.

I believe Austen brilliantly developed her version of the novel and very closely followed Reeve’s definition. *Mansfield Park* does a very good job of capturing a real life picture of upper class living in the Regency Period; all the extravagance, ignorance, the focus on improving one’s estate, and maintaining wealth through marriage. Austen’s novel also “connects the actualities of British power overseas to the domestic imbroglio within the Bertram estate” (Said 492). This connection reveals to us, the readers, that wealth in the British Empire was gained through cruel means, and these other trifles that the upper class concerned themselves with helped to shield them from the embarrassment of this reality. Austen’s novel helps us to understand this, and also would have caused a bit of controversy during her life. Hopefully, the upper-class wives who spent their days drinking tea and reading books would have read her novel and begun to really think about where their wealth came from.

 If a word search is conducted of the entire novel, one will find that the word Antigua only appears 9 times, while words like Marriage appear 32, Married appears 20 times, and the word Love appears 218 times. This helps us to understand how the novel was once read entirely as a novel of the domestic space. If read through only once, one might not even begin to think that the novel had much to do with Antigua or Austen wanting to start a controversy among readers. The domestic space, the home in Mansfield Park, does appear to be the main focus of the novel, but one cannot forget that without the money coming in from Sir Bertram’s plantations then the home could never be maintained. There is this idea that the house can stand as a separate social space, one that exists outside of the realities of the British Empire, but that is just wishful thinking. “Sir Thomas’s infrequent trips to Antigua as an absentee plantation owner reflect the diminishment in his class’s power” (Said 491). In 1807, the abolition of slave trade becomes a reality, and with it, the diminishment of power in the upper classes as their source of main income has become stagnant. Even Sir Bertram, a fictional character belonging to the upper class, cannot escape the real world influences of Austen’s time. “His business in Antigua had latterly been prosperously rapid, and he came directly from Liverpool, having had an opportunity of making his passage thither in a private vessel, instead of waiting for the packet” (Austen 123). Sir Bertram’s plantation eventually stabilized again once he traveled there to see to its survival, and his family could not be more unconsciously happy that everything went well. They do not like to acknowledge the reality of their wealth, and when the subject is brought up they all feel quite embarrassed.

 We can easily believe that the novel is simply about the domestic sphere because of the internal focus of Mansfield Park. The business of marriage and maintaining wealth acts as the main focus of the novel in order to disguise the true critique of Antigua, and to show how the people of the upper class choose to distract themselves from the horrific realities of the British Empire and its involvement in the slave trade. Marriages like that of Maria and Mr. Rushworth were more discussed in the novel than Antigua. “It was a very proper wedding. The bride was elegantly dressed; the two bridesmaids were duly inferior; her father gave her away; her mother stood with salts in her hand, expecting to be agitated; her aunt tried to cry, and the service was impressively read by Dr. Grant… It was done, and they were gone” (Austen 139-140). The business of marriage is also very mundane. We can see that the people of the upper class do not tend to marry for love, but for money, prestige, and power. Even Fanny cannot escape the mundane business of marriage, but she does get to marry for love in the end. Fanny also cannot escape the comforts of Mansfield. Even when sent to Portsmouth by Sir Bertram, Fanny cannot adjust to poverty, and we come to see that she is not above or better than her cousins. “In a review of the two houses, as they appeared to her before the end of a week, Fanny was tempted to apply to them Dr. Johnson's celebrated judgment as to matrimony and celibacy, and say, that though Mansfield Park might have some pains, Portsmouth could have no pleasures” (Austen 267). She loves the comfort and quiet that comes with wealth, and in the end, she falls into the same trap as her rich family members. She knows where the money comes from in order to afford these luxuries, and yet she completely distracts herself from reality by focusing on her love for Edmund.

 In the end, Fanny has become one of the upper-class women that Wollstonecraft looks down upon. Fanny has always been the most unlikable of Austen’s female protagonists, and I believe she is written this way on purpose. If she is already unlikable, then we as the readers will not care much about her decisions. In this way, we are also being distracted from the realities of the influences of the empire. It can be argued that Austen’s flowery language and great appreciation for mundane and trivial detail helps to distract the reader and confuse them on what the real purpose of the novel is, and I for one disagree. I believe everything Austen does is purposeful, and her use of language and detail were all choices made for the type of audience she wanted to educate and affect. If she had simply focused on Antigua and the slave trade, even included images of the horrific realities, then I believe not many people of the upper class would have chosen to read her novel. They would try to avoid what they are most insecure about, and by writing the novel as though it were about the domestic space, she finds a way to reach the upper class that is discreet and well planned.

Word Count: 1,997

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