

Traipsing into the Forest: Landscapes and Rivalry in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*

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Introduction

Forests, as René Girard sees them in Shakespeare's comedies (the gentle, pastoral Forest of Arden in *As You Like It* or the enchanted wilderness in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), are places to which young people flee in order to escape parental oppression. The lovers flee the cruel, artificial obstructions imposed by dictatorial parents in order to live out their idyll in unobstructed, primal innocence (*A Theater of Envy* 97-98, 37-38). Of course, Shakespeare and Girard cast a rather jaundiced eye on these ever-obligatory parental obstructions-uproariously satirized in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* through the character "Wall," whom the artisan players contrive to stand between Pyramus and Thisbe. Shakespeare and Girard are even more cynical when it comes to the youthful idyll in the forest. What the young lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* really do when they get to the forest is to create monstrous obstructions of their own. The forest becomes an arena for raw mimetic rivalry. As Girard observes, it is only the restrictions of genre that prevent the lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from killing each other (*A Theater of Envy* 49).

Jane Austen does something very similar to Shakespeare in *Mansfield Park*. In many ways, *Mansfield Park* really is Austen's version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, at least up to Sir Thomas' return to Mansfield.⁽¹⁾ Like Shakespeare, Austen removes parental authority (Sir Thomas' prolonged trip to Antigua) to give the young lovers an unregulated romantic playground. She arranges for some disorienting, jealous wanderings in the forest (the outing at Sotherton). Finally, she stages a play-within-a-play (the ill-fated amateur production of *Lovers' Vows*, which ultimately leads to an ugly and destructive sexual scandal). For the "cruel wall" that separates Pyramus and Thisbe, Austen substitutes a gate in the woods at Sotherton. Far from

oppressing the lovers, the gate presents (like the forbidden fruit in Genesis) an easily surmountable obstacle that invites transgression. Further innovations of Austen's are having the lovers themselves undertake the theatricals (a "slumming" exercise in collective egoism that greatly exacerbates the romantic self-deceit) and the return of Sir Thomas to Mansfield, which puts a panicked end to rehearsals and brilliantly synthesizes two unlikely dramatic motifs: Bottom bursting upon his terrified fellow thespians with the head of an ass, and Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai to find the Israelites engaged in a pagan orgy.[\(2\)](#)

In this study, I propose to explore some of the "natural" spaces in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, following the lead of Girard's Shakespeare criticism. Austen's treatment of land is significant in *Mansfield Park*, both for the way she examines the re-shaping of grounds itself as a form of feverish competition among peers, and for the way the land serves as a stage for ferocious rivalry among young romancers.

Yet *Mansfield Park* is an onion with many layers. To see how Austen treats outdoor spaces, it is necessary to understand more broadly how and why she is reworking material from *Pride and Prejudice*. This is the subject of the next section. In the three sections that then follow, I examine respectively the treatment of landscape design in *Mansfield Park*, the aggressive outdoorsmanship of its young people, and finally, their misadventures in the woods at Sotherton.

Oppositions Attract

In *Mansfield Park*, Austen uses a play-within-a-play to challenge the romantic assumptions aroused in her previous work, *Pride and Prejudice*, precisely the way Shakespeare uses the amateur production of *Pyramus and Thisbe* to parody the romantic assumptions his audience had for *Romeo and Juliet* (*Theater of Envy*, 271).[\(3\)](#) Specifically, Austen targets the commonplace intuition that "opposites attract." Austen's play-within-a-play is *Lovers' Vows*,[\(4\)](#) which has as its chief love interest a stereotypical presentation of the "opposites attract" bromide (Anhalt and Amelia), paralleling on the one hand the attraction between Darcy and Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, and on the other, the pairings that are anticipated in *Mansfield Park* (Edmund-Mary, Henry-Fanny). Austen knows that it is not opposites but rather (as also with Shakespeare) *oppositions* which attract.

Austen's treatment of oppositional attraction in either novel cannot be developed here in any completeness but can be sketched in outline. In *Mansfield Park*, Austen does not seek to "deconstruct" Darcy and Elizabeth's relationship, movingly depicted as a process of antipathy growing into love through mutual understanding and sympathy. Austen seeks instead to engage misinterpretations. From all appearances, Darcy and Elizabeth seem to distill the essence of the "opposites

attract" principal: Darcy is tall, intimidating, and reserved; Elizabeth is petite, personable, and vivacious. Yet the attraction is not founded on these contrasts, nor does it develop around them in any fundamental way; the relationship is mimetically directed. Though Elizabeth is genuinely put off by Darcy (as Fanny will be by Henry in *Mansfield Park*), Darcy, like an inadequately coached Girardian, comes to interpret her resolute hostility as the strategy of a saucy coquette, or in Girard's terms, as "pseudo-narcissism" (*Deceit*, 105-106; *Things Hidden*, 370-371). Darcy is further provoked by Elizabeth's engaging manner with other men, especially (in my opinion) Colonel Fitzwilliam, a plausible romantic rival. Against his own better judgment, Darcy allows himself to fall victim to Elizabeth's "strategy" (i.e., she must be repulsing him because she wants his attention, and she must be receiving attention from other men because she wants to make him jealous), and makes his disastrous first proposal. "What will you think of my vanity?" he confesses later. "I believed you to be wishing, expecting my addresses" (434). Elizabeth's sharp rebuff, and Darcy's subsequent letter, serve to clear both of their misconceptions.

However, the relationship does not stop being mimetic, it simply stops being oppositional. Both begin to *conform to the merits seen in the other*. Darcy begins acting in a way that would please Elizabeth (even when it seems they will never meet again) and Elizabeth begins to sound, even syntactically, like Darcy (as when she unsuccessfully opposes Lydia's trip to Bath). This "good mimesis" is further developed in *Mansfield Park*. It is a strong though imperfect factor in Fanny and Edmund's relationship, and a tragically unrealized potentiality for Henry and Mary Crawford in their respective relationships with Fanny and Edmund.[\(5\)](#)

To pursue these issues would go beyond the scope of this study. For present purposes, the essential point is Austen's calculated missdirection, in *Mansfield Park*, regarding the "opposites attract" myth. Austen is not content to simply disabuse readers of the idea. Rather, she lures them further into their own error. With Anhalt-Amelia (in the play), Mary-Edmund, and Henry-Fanny, the stakes are raised threefold with regard to the "opposites attract" principle. Yet, as the novel proceeds, the eternal romantic truth that like is drawn to unlike gives way to the prosaic truth that resistance is arousing: *opposition* attracts. Opposition animates nearly all of the romantic activity in the novel. Yet nothing comes of any of the promised pairings, which, like the theatricals themselves, are shattered, interrupted, frustratingly unconsummated. Many readers, and a substantial number of critics, have never forgiven Austen for this. Yet, since Austen has stoked these romantic expectations so thoroughly herself, it is very difficult to believe she did not anticipate this reaction, and not at all difficult to surmise that she deliberately provoked it.[\(6\)](#)

Understanding how Austen treats oppositional attraction in *Mansfield Park* is crucial to understanding how Austen treats her “natural” spaces as well. Specifically, we should remember that Austen is revisiting material from her previous novel, and thus Austen’s treatment of landscapes and outdoor activity in *Mansfield Park* should not be considered apart from their treatment in *Pride and Prejudice*. These are two of the many areas where Austen sets out to overturn what we thought we knew from her previous novel.

Landscape Design and Mimetic Rivalry

Like so much else in *Mansfield Park*, the treatment of landscapes should be considered as co-extensive with *Pride and Prejudice*. In that novel, the grounds of Darcy’s Pemberly estate are depicted uncritically as a perfectly realized harmony of art and nature. Pemberly possesses the ideal placement of human structures upon the land, the minimal adjustment of natural assets so as to bring out their grace and grandeur without imposing artifice (for instance, the stream that flows in front of the manor), and the careful preservation and maintenance of woods, grounds, game, and so on. Darcy is the perfect landowner, exercising his stewardship with pride but without pretence, and Elizabeth Bennet, who loves long, rambling, contemplative walks in the country, will likewise make the perfect Mistress of Pemberly.

When Charles Bingley is urged by his sister to build his own future estate in the same manner as Pemberly, he can only reply with amused incredulity that it would be easier to simply buy it: “I should think it more possible to get Pemberly by purchase than by imitation” (245). Obviously, Darcy could never sell his ancient family estate, yet it is equally impossible for Bingley to emulate it by other means. Where great estates are concerned, Pemberly (like Darcy himself) is an “external mediator”; it can be admired, but not aspired to.

In this light, the shift Austen makes in *Mansfield Park* must be seen as quite radical. The shift, in mimetic terms, is from external to internal mediation.[\(7\)](#) Austen is not rejecting the *idea* of Pemberly so much as the *plausibility* of Pemberly. Mansfield, though smaller in extent, is another grand estate with all its carefully maintained natural beauty and symbiotic reciprocity with the local farming community. Yet Mansfield is a troubled home, and its outward placidity appears in increasing and finally implausible isolation from a surrounding world of energetic status seekers. Landscaping is one area in which this intense competition is played out.

Home “improvement” is all the rage, and quite a few properties aspire to “be a Pemberly” (though without the symbiotic relation to the community). Six locations (two parsonages, one summer cottage, three large estates) are either shown or

mentioned in connection with “improvement,” which seems to involve eliminating Euclidean geometry to get a more “rustic” effect, cutting down trees to open up prospects and dramatize approaches to dwellings, and shutting out from view ploughed fields, penned up animals (though free range herbivores are desirable), and other signs of profit or methodical industry, either by removal or by judicious placement of greenery.[\(8\)](#)

Thus, it does indeed seem possible (contra Charles Bingley’s assertion) to “get Pemberly by imitation.” Internal mediation is transforming grounds into Arcadian showcases. Sotherton is by far the largest and oldest of the properties considered for “improvement,” but—in a striking reversal of the situation with Darcy and Bingley—it is in fact Sotherton’s owner, the dimwitted Mr. Rushworth, who becomes mimetically fascinated by the “improvements” made on the much smaller property of his friend Smith. Once he sees Smith’s “improved” Compton estate, Rushworth suddenly feels that his huge but rather staid familial holdings are bleak and confining, and he becomes obsessed with imitating Smith. He must have Repton (the famous, and famously expensive, landscape designer) to keep up with his friend.

Luckily (or, as it turns out for Rushworth, unluckily) Henry Crawford has appeared on the scene. Henry is the world’s greatest authority on anything that engages his attention, and “improvement” is no exception. Henry has effected improvements on his own property, Everingham, and the gentleman adept is now enlisted to “improve” Sotherton in lieu of a paid professional. This project becomes a group outing wherein the young people can all take part in formulating a plan to reshape the grounds of Sotherton. They collectively assume the roles of impromptu experts—as they will later with their amateur theatricals.

By now it should be clear that the re-shaping of landscapes in *Mansfield Park* has little to do with people’s relation to the earth but quite a bit to do with their relation to other people, or in other words, with internal mediation, with mimetic fascination. For extended periods, the privileged will retreat from the fashionable bustle of London and repair to their equally fashionable country homes, where they can show off their pastoral paradises to envious peers. The desire to be “modern” is mixed with a desire to be aristocratic. A stylish Arcadian rusticity is sought that shields the eye from anything so distasteful as profitable farming or methodical industry, even as it rather aggressively advertises wealth, yet, at the same time, vies for the kind of prestige where money doesn’t matter.

This landscaping as a form of social positioning becomes more blatant later in the novel, when Henry casts his improver’s eye on Edmund’s future parsonage, Thornton Lacey, and offers his unsolicited advice in voluminous detail:

"The farmyard must be cleared away entirely, and planted up to shut out the blacksmith's shop. The house must be turned to front the east instead of the north—the entrance and principal rooms, I mean, must be on that side, where the view is really very pretty; I am sure it may be done. And *there* must be your approach, through what is at present the garden. You must make a new garden at what is now the back of the house; which will be giving it the best aspect in the world, sloping to the south-east. The ground seems precisely formed for it. . . . The meadows beyond what *will be* the garden, as well as what now *is*, sweeping round from the lane I stood in to the north-east, that is, to the principal road through the village, must be all laid together, of course; very pretty meadows they are, finely sprinkled with timber. They belong to the living, I suppose; if not, you must purchase them. Then the stream—something must be done with the stream; but I could not quite determine what." (585-586) Henry's deliberating over the stream is almost certainly a clue from Austen to remind us of the stream at Pemberly in *Pride and Prejudice*, "a stream of some natural importance . . . swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance" (362). Henry proposes very Pemberly-like properties for this modest but respectable parsonage—and anticipates something of the spirit of home and garden glossies that come down to us in the present day.

Quite some distance has been traveled from *Pride and Prejudice*, not to mention the placid Forest of Arden in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Or rather, the Forest of Arden has come closer to us, since in *Mansfield Park* such fashionable rusticity is now literally reproduced in everyone's backyard, providing they have sufficient means to execute it. The mania for "improvement" now transforms the stylized Arcadian landscape into a commodity, a much sought after status symbol. As Henry continues his surprisingly modern sales pitch, the real point of all of this proposed improvement becomes clear. He is not really interested in the natural assets or beauty of the property; instead, he wants Edmund to use it to "make a statement" about "who you are":

"[The parsonage] is not a scrambling collection of low single rooms, with as many roofs as windows; it is not cramped into the vulgar compactness of a square farmhouse: it is a solid, roomy, mansion-like looking house, such as one might suppose a respectable old country family had lived in from generation to generation, through two centuries at least, and were now spending from two to three thousand a year in. . . . The air of a gentleman's residence, therefore, you cannot but give it, if you do anything. But it is capable of much more. . . . By some such improvements as I have suggested (I do not really require you to proceed upon my plan, though, by the bye, I doubt anybody's striking out a better) you may give [the house] a higher character. You may raise it into a *place*. From being the mere gentleman's residence, it becomes, by judicious improvement, the residence of a man of education, taste, modern manners, good connexions. All this may be

stamped on it; and that house receive such an air as to make its owner be set down as the great landholder of the parish by every creature travelling the road; especially as there is no real squire's house to dispute the point. . . ." (586-587) In other words, the purpose of the "improvement" that Henry proposes for the surrounding land is to augment the house itself with hyper-inflated status markers. An extraordinary volume of information is to be conveyed to anyone who happens to pass by, and all of it has to do with prestige, with comparative positioning in property, income, expenditure, manners, fashion, education, connections, and the like.

It is Mary Crawford, imagining herself as the future wife of Edmund, who is most excited by the mental picture created here by her brother, and most resentful when Sir Thomas and Edmund quash it all by making it known that Edmund plans to be a plain-living, full-time clergyman. Mary is "startled from the agreeable fancies she had been previously indulging on the strength of her brother's description" and "no longer able, in the picture she had been forming of a future Thornton, to shut out the church, sink the clergyman, and see only the respectable, elegant, modernised, and occasional residence of a man of independent fortune. . . ." (589).

Mary thinks very much like her brother. In fact, Henry's projection matches the picture she has already formed sometime earlier, when she tells Fanny, "I can even suppose it pleasant to spend half the year in the country, under certain circumstances, very pleasant. An elegant, moderate-sized house in the centre of family connexions; continual engagements among them; commanding the first society in the neighbourhood; looked up to, perhaps, as *leading it even more than those of larger fortune. . . .*" (567, emphasis mine). This is the only way it is tolerable for Mary to imagine herself as the wife of a country clergyman.

Yet Henry and Mary Crawford, though wrong enough in their values, are seldom inaccurate in their observations, and often merely say aloud what other characters will not acknowledge openly. The Crawfords are "fashion leaders," who know how much a little image management can enhance status so that even one's ostensible "superiors" will follow. The trick is to make your own desire so appealing that everyone else wants to make it their own. This has been seen above in Rushworth, who catches the fever for "improvement" from his friend Smith, so the dynamics are not limited to savvy fashion leaders like Henry and Mary, and these dynamics extend even to shaping the earth and fashioning it into a mimetic accouterment.

The reproduction of gentle pastoral landscapes is, ironically enough, the outward expression of a burgeoning mimetic fever that is actually quite red in tooth and claw. The ferocity of this mimetic competition manifests much more nakedly when the young people are set loose in the artificially planted woods at Sotherton.

Nature and Outdoorsmanship

Austen obviously views the expensive, calculated rusticity of “improvement” with a critical eye, as is suggested when Fanny mourns the fate of grand old trees that line an avenue at Sotherton (479), and clearer still when we know a little of Austen’s upbringing. From Claire Tomalin’s biography, we can understand that Austen was herself raised in a parsonage that doubled as a noisy farmyard—far from Henry’s “improved” vision of Thornton Lacey. However, what sort of “love of nature” does Austen regard as authentic?

Though Austen rarely dwells at any length on natural description, she does seem to share a wholesome love of natural beauty with her greatest nature lovers, Elizabeth Bennet, Fanny Price, and Anne Elliot. However, appreciation of nature takes contradictory forms, since it is expressed so differently in the characters, particularly Fanny and Elizabeth.

As with land and grounds, the shift between the two novels is substantial. In *Pride and Prejudice*, everything that is good, wholesome and true seems to find its apotheosis in the vigorous outdoorsmanship of Elizabeth Bennet, whilst her morally repulsive counterparts are over-ornamented and sedentary characters (Caroline Bingley and her sister) who sneer at all this inane *activity* undertaken by inferior woman (dancing, long walks through the mud, acquiring a tan from summer travels). Even the pathetic and sickly Miss De Bourgh is portrayed in a harsh and unforgiving light via her guilt by association with the characters who oppose Elizabeth. Yet the robustly countrified Elizabeth, smiling in blissful indifference at her sedentary rivals, seems to have constituted a dilemma for Austen that she needed to tease apart.

In *Mansfield Park* this scale of values via the outdoors is almost completely reversed. Fanny Price inherits virtually all of Elizabeth’s love of nature, yet it is *she* who is now the frail and sickly one, and usually sedentary. She can only take the outdoors in moderate doses, is the first to be exhausted in any walking party, and is terrified of her first pony ride as a child.⁽⁹⁾ An even more striking shift can be found in the women who stand in contrast to our heroine: Julia and Maria Bertram, and Mary Crawford. These characters (quite unlike Caroline Bingley) are strong, hardy, active-robustly and aggressively athletic. The height of fashion for young ladies of distinction now seems to combine Elizabeth Bennet’s energetic outdoorsmanship with the flagrant boy-chasing (less overtly crass in *Mansfield Park* than in *Pride in Prejudice*, but hardly less intense) that constantly occupies her silly younger sisters Lydia and Kitty.

Whether they express it in word, action, or restless body language, the stylish

young women in *Mansfield Park* always see *activity* as the ultimate virtue, and inactivity the most loathsome of curses. We hear it from Julia Bertram at the supper table, when the subject of improvement is first aired, and she seeks to ingratiate herself with Henry by praising him as an active man. Never one to be outdone, Maria Bertram will show Henry how much *she* values action in her “bold,” taboo-busting leap over the gate in the woods at Sotherton. (The haplessly delayed Julia will leap past the gate soon afterward, and charge off into the woods after them.) Neither can Mary Crawford endure inactivity. She fidgets restlessly as she sits on the bench with Edmund, when Fanny must stop to rest: “‘I must move,’ said she, ‘resting fatigues me’” (503).

Wherever we see Julia, Maria or Mary placed outdoors, they inevitably display their athletic vigor. Except for Fanny, few young people in *Mansfield Park* can endure sitting still for more than a few minutes. Fanny’s love of nature (though often expressed in an awkwardly stilted literary manner) can be judged as sincere simply because it has nothing to recommend it other than the genuine and much needed sustenance she draws from it. None of this is transferrable as mimetic currency in the new fashion for vigorous outdoorsmanship.

The athletically endowed certainly have every right to their gifts, and to enjoy them as much as they wish, but what, for Austen, is the point of all this restless activity? In *Mansfield Park* the point rarely has much to do with athletic ability itself, and it has nothing to do with nature at all. Outdoorsmanship in *Mansfield Park* always boils down to self-exhibition and competition.

We can see this with Mary Crawford who, in marked contrast to Fanny, proves to be a natural and fearless horsewoman. Her quick progress even draws the admiration of the old coachman (who recalls Fanny’s quailing in terror at her first pony ride as a child). Austen editorializes further on Mary’s horsemanship: “to the genuine pleasure of the exercise, something was probably added in Edmund’s attendance and instruction, and something more in the conviction of very much surpassing her sex in general” (486). Here Mary’s outdoor propensities merely factor down to the things that *really* matter: attracting male attention and beating other women.

In this brash, strutting, competitive athleticism, the fierce rivalry of Austen’s young people touches ground with her contested landscapes.

Traipsing into the Forest

In the Sotherton scenes, the differences from Shakespeare are as enlightening as the similarities. When the lovers of *Mansfield Park* make their breakaway into the woods of Sotherton, they are not breaking away from parental oppression in any

reasonable sense. The imposing Sir Thomas is far away in Antigua, and all that is left to escape is the dawdling pace and chattering civilities of an aunt and mother, who waste their morning with a tedious tour of the great house. (Significantly, this tour closely parallels the much more reverent one taken at Pemberly by Elizabeth and her aunt and uncle in *Pride and Prejudice*.) This straining at the bit of restless young people against minimal adult constraints is another constant in *Mansfield Park*. It anticipates the spirit of dozens of youth movies, wherein there is no greater heaven than to escape the half-hearted chaperoning of ridiculous adults and escape into the backyard to imbibe illicit substances or pursue amorous adventures in the bushes.

There is likewise nothing idealistic or lyrically self-dramatizing about these lovers. Like the office romancers of contemporary television, they understand, for the most part, the delicious attractions of jealousy and rivalry. And if the breakaway of Shakespeare's lovers into the enchanted wilderness finds its echo in the "back to nature" movement of the Woodstock generation, Austen's lovers are much more like the cast of *Survivor*. *Survivor*'s participants may be airlifted to exotic wilderness locales, but are hardly there to commune with nature or to reclaim their primal innocence. They are there to grab their fifteen minutes of fame and, above all, to win, to come out on top, to bury the competition.⁽¹⁰⁾ The wilderness serves only as a backdrop, an obstacle course on which they test their mettle against one another through an aggressive athleticism, temporary tactical alliances, deceit, humiliation, back-stabbing, and treachery. In *Mansfield Park*, the spotlight grabbing aspect is seen in the theatricals, which come later, while the competitive aspect is captured in these scenes in the woods, which constitute (like *Survivor*) essentially a brutal elimination contest. But to the extent that Austen's lovers are non-idealistic, less self-deceived about what they are really up to, they are actually more self-deceived-by the idea that anyone can actually "win" such contests and benefit from the victory.

Mansfield's lovers are fiercely, impatiently, aggressively competitive; they are out to make war, not love. Mary begins her determined attack to overturn Edmund's core ideals and prevail on him to conform to her idea of a satisfactory mate. Edmund in turn is roused to counter-attack, to convert her so that she instead will conform to his. Maria Bertram, engaged to the dull Rushworth, is determined to trip up her sister Julia so that she does not gain preeminence in Henry Crawford's attentions. Julia is equally determined not to let her eternally superior elder sister spoil her chance with Henry and steal her shot at a place in the sun. Henry is happy to play the jealous sisters off one another, and prepared to jilt whichever one wins. Rushworth, wanting only to show off his estate and his trophy bride, dimly senses himself losing out to Henry, and runs around fretfully to defer the inevitable.

The romantic misadventures of the young people do not take place in an ancient, enchanted forest with fairies and sprites, but in a few acres of planted woods on the grounds of a staid estate, the grounds themselves being assessed for "improvement." The only person to enjoy the scenery for its own sake is also the only non-belligerent, Fanny Price. Though pleasant to look at—"darkness and shade, and natural beauty"—and "refreshing for its shade" in the hot glare of a summer's day, the wood itself is "laid out with too much regularity" (500), that is, planted in the old style rather than the newer Arcadian mode of calculated irregularity. There is no pretence of this being Eden, yet, strangely enough, this makes Austen's use of the Edenic element especially intense.[\(11\)](#)

The scenes at the gate are loaded with literary and religious significance. Fanny is on a nearby bench, having been abandoned there by Edmund and Mary (who have wandered off to nurture their nascent but impossible romance). However, Fanny is joined after a while by the chief contingent of the "improving" party, Henry, Maria and Rushworth. They want to get through the gate, which leads out of the woods and into the park of Sotherton, where the best vista for "improvement" can be obtained. However, there is no key, and the flustered Rushworth is sent back to the great house to get it. Then, under Fanny's flabbergasted eyes, Henry manages, with a few artful insinuations, to vanquish Rushworth, to indicate his preference for Maria over Julia, and to present himself as Maria's ardent admirer. All of this is child's play for Henry (which makes it so easy for him to dump Maria later). But there remains the symbolic consummation, which Henry proposes as a temptation against authority, an appeal to self-sufficiency and freedom through bold, taboo-busting athleticism:

"Mr. Rushworth is so long fetching this key!"

"And for the world you would not get out without the key and without Mr. Rushworth's authority and protection, or I think you might with little difficulty pass round the edge of the gate, here, with my assistance; I think it might be done, if you really wished to be more at large, and could allow yourself to think it not prohibited."

"Prohibited! nonsense! I certainly can get out that way, and I will. Mr. Rushworth will be here in a moment, you know; we shall not be out of sight." (505)

Here the "cruel wall" which separated Pyramus and Thisbe is reduced to an ornamental and easily surmountable obstruction, yet it also serves as the Tree of Knowledge (a trivial, arbitrary restriction) and as Maria's symbolic chastity belt (with her future cuckolded husband scampering off to fetch the key that nobody actually needs). Additionally, the gate serves as a sort of exit turnstile from Eden, one which

Fanny guards, standing in for the Angel with the Flaming Sword. Comically, Fanny does not seek to bar the fallen from re-entry, but watches in astonishment as the garden empties itself of feverishly preoccupied, self-exiled sinners.

Julia is the next to storm the gate, like an enraged bull, having been held back from the others by the doddering pace of the elder ladies. She fumes impotently at Fanny, then leaps over the gate in pursuit of Henry and Maria, intuiting correctly that she is being edged out. Rushworth soon follows, and after fulminating about how no one waited for him and his superfluous key, he stomps off after Henry and Maria as well.

Most of the battle that occupies the rest of the novel is decided here in the woods. Henry triumphs effortlessly over Rushworth, though the inevitable events that justify Rushworth's fretful jealousy must wait until the end of the novel. Maria triumphs over Julia, though Julia will not discover this until chapter fourteen, in the casting of the theatricals. However, the scope of her seething resentment is already evident. Henry triumphs over Maria, insofar as he penetrates her superior allure and usurps it with his own. *She* will not realize this until he unceremoniously dumps her in chapter twenty, after which *her* seething resentment will come into play. The battle between Mary and Edmund over core values will remain unchanged, neither yielding an inch, both mistaking their fundamental incompatibility for arousing oppositional banter, until the misperception collapses under both of them in an ugly epiphany near the end of the novel. The only young person left standing will be Fanny, an astonished bystander to the misadventures in the woods.

The barest restraints of civility (rather threadbare to begin with) are being methodically breached, and the lovers are in a real sense getting "back to the garden," "getting in touch with themselves," that is, coming completely under the control of internal mediation. The outcome simmers unacknowledged through the rest of the novel and ultimately explodes dismally in the final chapters. The artificial obstructions the young people cast off are as nothing compared to the ones they are creating for themselves.

Conclusion

In surveying the natural spaces in *Mansfield Park*, the focus has continually resolved to mimesis, whether it is the land itself—where the reproduction of Arcadian tranquility has become an aggressive form of social positioning—or the human players that contend upon it, struggling for priority in battles that no-one can win.

All of Austen's six canonical novels are ripe for mimetic treatment,[\(12\)](#) but *Mansfield Park* above all might be considered the summit of her achievement as an

“anthropological” study. It plunges more deeply into fundamental problems of human co-existence. Characters and readers alike are embroiled in the novel’s proliferating scandals, which perpetually spill out from the text, confounding or enraging readers and critics. Reader sympathies are tested as in none other of her novels, yet “bad” characters are treated with surprising depth and understanding (considering the perennial accusations about Austen’s judgmentalism in the novel). Moral conundrums are left unresolved and to some extent unresolvable, while the social dynamics of Mansfield continually threaten to converge toward a sacrificial resolution. Finally, “good mimesis”[\(13\)](#) (so rarely explored in mimetic theory) is treated concretely and poignantly in *Mansfield Park*, either as a good strongly (if imperfectly) nurtured in the relationship of Edmund and Fanny, or tragically unrealized in Mary and Henry.

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Notes

1. A case has been made by Avrom Fleishman that *Mansfield Park* is also Austen's version of *King Lear*, with Fanny being the good daughter to Sir Thomas' Lear. See *A Reading of Mansfield Park: An Essay in Critical Synthesis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970) (62-63). [\(back\)](#)
2. Sir Thomas' subsequent encounter with Yates on the Mansfield stage (551-52) might be seen as a comic extension of this motif, with Yates stealing the role of Bottom from Sir Thomas. [\(back\)](#)
3. Girard does not treat *Romeo and Juliet* in any depth in *A Theater of Envy*, but see "The Passionate Oxymoron in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*" in *Passions in Economy, Politics, and the Media*, ed., Wolfgang Palaver and Petra Steinmair-Posel (Vienna: Lit, 2005) 17-37. The essay is reprinted in the recent collection *Mimesis and Theory*, ed., Robert Doran (Stanford: Stanford University Press) 274-289. [\(back\)](#)
4. *Lovers' Vows*, by Elizabeth Inchbald, is usefully reprinted in its entirety in the Norton Critical Edition of *Mansfield Park*, Claudia L. Johnson ed. (New York: Norton, 1998) 329-75. [\(back\)](#)
5. "Good mimesis" is explicated sketchily by Girard in his interview with Rebecca Adams in *The Girard Reader*, "The Goodness of Mimetic Desire" (James G. Williams ed., New York: Crossroad, 1996) 62-65. Girard grants "good mimesis" fundamental priority over disordered mimesis. [\(back\)](#)
6. Lionel Trilling observes much the same in his seminal essay "Mansfield Park" (Ian Watt ed., *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963) 124-140 (127-129). Trilling's intuitions about the "offence" of *Mansfield Park* are excellent. However, this is one case in which irate readers may be less prone to obscure the truth than the thoughtful critical apologist; they are furious that the Henry-Fanny and Mary-Edmund romances fall apart, and disgusted that the romantic outcome is Edmund-Fanny. Behind all the ponderous critical talk of *Mansfield Park*'s denial of vitality, there is a bad case of *coitus interruptus*. The widespread reaction against *Mansfield Park* indicates that readers find sexual pairings more exciting, at least from a voyeuristic standpoint, when there is resistance, yet this is simply the bottom line of the "opposites attract" myth, which is Austen's point. Far from being a sexual prude in *Mansfield Park*, Austen is a savvy manipulator of erotic expectations. Trilling's elaborate apology for *Mansfield Park* goes astray, I think, because he does not give Austen enough credit. [\(back\)](#)
7. External and internal mediation respectively describe imitation that is non-

rivalrous (e.g., hero worship) and rivalrous (e.g., with peers). Both are described at length in Girard's *Deceit*. The aspects of *Mansfield Park* to be discussed in this section could also parallel artistic developments Eric Gans describes in chapter 10 of *Originary Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 165-187).

Namely, *Mansfield Park* may demonstrate something of the shift from the neo-classical to the romantic aesthetic, up to and including realism. Gans (in what could almost serve as a comparative description of the worlds of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*) perhaps puts it best: "One imitates others, not because they initiate us into the objective norms of the culture [i.e., Darcy and Pemberly], but because their knowledge seems to be one step ahead of ours in the ever-changing marketplace [i.e., the Crawfords and home 'improvement']." I am indebted to Andrew Bartlett (personal communication) for pointing out the importance of that chapter of *Originary Thinking*. [\(back\)](#)

8. The issues and controversies surrounding landscape design in Austen's lifetime are exceptionally well covered by Alistair M. Duckworth in his *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994). See especially the chapter "Mansfield Park: Jane Austen's Grounds of Being," 35-80. The Norton Critical Edition of *Mansfield Park* also provides illuminating background material on "improvement," including excerpts by Repton himself, with accompanying illustrative plates. See the two excerpts, Humphry Repton, "From *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening*," and "From *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*," Claudia L. Johnson ed. (New York: Norton, 1998) 382-387. [\(back\)](#)

9. D. W. Harding suggests that Austen's shifting scale of values with regard to health and hardiness (imbued with virtue in *Pride and Prejudice*, imbued with vice in *Mansfield Park*, then positively valued again in *Persuasion*) reflects both the status of her own poor health and the exhausting care-taking she had to provide for her hypochondriac mother. See *Regulated Hatred and Other Essays on Jane Austen* (London: Athlone, 1998) (149). [\(back\)](#)

10. Eric Gans has noted the sacrificial aspect of *Survivor* in its weekly ritualized expulsion of participants. See Chronicle 275, "Reality TV" (*Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, December 21, 2002) <<http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw275.htm>>. It is worth noting that *Mansfield*'s social dynamics also begin to acquire an increasingly sacrificial cast as the novel progresses. [\(back\)](#)

11. Peter J. Leithart explores the Edenic element in the Sotherton episode from a traditional Christian perspective. See "Jane Austen, Public Theologian" (*First Things*, January, 2004) <<http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0401/articles/leithart.html>>.

Leithart's focus is on the scenes with Mary and Edmund, while my focus is on the scene with Henry and Maria. Avrom Fleishman (see note 1) treats both, and extends the consideration of paradise, fall, redemption, and Christian eschatology beyond these scenes, to major movements in the novel (66-68). [\(back\)](#)

12. See Beatrice Marie's study "Emma and the Democracy of Desire" (*Studies in the Novel*, 17, 1, 1985) 1-13, and my "What Persuasion Really Means in *Persuasion*: A Mimetic Reading of Jane Austen" (*Contagion*, 11, 2004) 105-122. [\(back\)](#)

13. See note 5. [\(back\)](#)