Exposing Burkean Masculinity, or Edmund Confronts Modernity

The manners I speak of, might rather be called conduct, perhaps, the result of good principles; the effect, in short, of those doctrines which it is their duty to teach and recommend; and it will, I believe, be every where found, that as the clergy are, or are not what they ought to be, so are the rest of the nation. (Edmund Bertram in Austen, Mansfield Park 84)

Nothing is more certain, than that our manners, our civilization, and all the good things which are connected with manners, and with civilization, have, in this European world of ours, depended for ages upon two principles; and were indeed the result of both combined; I mean the spirit of a gentleman, and the spirit of religion. (Burke, Reflections 129–30)

The aim of the modern art of government, or state rationality, namely, [is] to develop those elements constitutive of individuals’ lives in such a way that their development also fosters the strength of the state. (Foucault, “‘Omnes et Singulatim’” 322)

In Pride and Prejudice, Austen anticipates the emergence of a new class of men of/from trade and points to the diminishing number of grand Burkean men like Darcy; in Mansfield Park, she explores the cause of this decline, as she dramatizes how England’s post-Revolutionary culture exposes contradictions in Burke’s model of aristocratic masculinity. Edmund Bertram desperately attempts to embody both the principle of religion and the principle of the gentleman that Burke presents as essential to a civilized nation, but as Austen’s novel suggests, such a synthesis is becoming more difficult and less functional in the modern world. Burke’s ideal of English maleness is closely aligned with a larger call for nostalgic cultural reformation; he insists that “people will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors” (83). He believes that post-Revolutionary England must recapture the spirit of an earlier civilization regulated by an edifying religious presence and directed by valorous gentlemen like Mr. Darcy. And Burke claims that proper men must be heroic and genteel—dutiful and sensitive. In his famous
discussion of the French revolutionaries’ treatment of Marie Antoinette, he 
claims that “in a nation of men of honour and of cavaliers,” he would have 
expected “ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to 
avenge even a look that threatened her with insult” (127). He admires a 
chivalric code of male conduct, but he is also moved by this memory and 
asserts that “we are so made as to be affected at such spectacles with mel-
ancholy sentiments” (131). Burke charges such sentimental gentlemen with 
the responsibility of securing the nation, and while such a task might have 
prompted males to be both heroic and sensitive in England’s past, Mansfield 
Park presents a modern culture that is no longer conducive to this anti-
quated sexual identity, behavior, or consciousness.

Austen’s tale specifically documents Edmund’s labors and consistent 
failures to meet Burke’s expectations for a gentleman and a religious leader 
in post-Revolutionary England. He is eager to perform the clerical duty of 
serving as a moral exemplar to the nation, and he alternatively displays great 
sensibility and heroism throughout the novel, but he is unable to reconcile 
such duties and behaviors with the modern sensations and experiences that 
Mary Crawford invites him to pursue. Although Edmund initially views his 
responsibilities as a member of the clergy as heroic, he is repeatedly tempted 
by a new mode of valor that seeks sensual exhilaration and pleasure. He 
becomes enamored of the capacity of a modernized masculinity, and Austen 
tracks his attempts to craft such an exciting aesthetic of existence. While he 
is certainly tempted by sensuality, he ultimately chooses to limit his oppor-
tunities to experience such pulsations; he instead clings to Burke’s model of 
masculinity, resolidifies his aristocratic family, and reclaims his vocation as a 
heroic clergyman by marrying his cousin. Edmund discovers that he cannot 
exist as a Burkean man in the modern English nation, so he decides to marry 
internally and remain stable within the atavistic culture of the past. He even-
tually heeds Burke’s warning that “when ancient opinions and rules of life 
are taken away, the loss cannot possibly be estimated. From that moment we 
have no compass to govern us; nor can we know distinctly to what port we 
steer” (129). The pseudo-incestuous union of Edmund and Fanny symboli-
cally does recuperate a sense of cultural direction by halting the collapse of 
the Bertram family, ensuring the continuation of its legacy, and reestablish-
ing the disciplinary function of the clerical gentleman. Edmund’s love for 
Fanny is most certainly not Deleuzian; the hero’s marriage to his cousin is 
neither romantic nor passionate, but it is safe, and as the novel suggests, the 
English aristocracy needs such safeguarding in the early nineteenth century.

The collapse of the Bertram family is symptomatic of the larger post-
Revolutionary cultural demise of the English aristocracy, and Austen’s is not 
the only novelistic treatment of the modern difficulties facing the nation’s
historical elite. Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814), published in the same year as *Mansfield Park*, addressed the tenuous state of England’s aristocracy and specifically documents the hero’s attraction to and ultimate rejection of its treasured chivalric code. Like Edmund, Waverley grows up strongly influenced by his father, but Waverley’s father, unlike Sir Bertram, is no longer interested in maintaining long-established structures. Waverley’s uncle, Sir Everard, however, is still quite invested in atrophying chivalric customs, and he actively attempts to instruct his nephew in the importance of such traditions. Scott notes that Sir Everard spent much time “[examining] the tree of his genealogy, which [was] emblazoned with many an emblematic mark of honour and heroic achievement” (8). Scott emphasizes his hero’s ambivalence toward such training early in the narrative; he “yawned at times over the dry deduction of his line of ancestors, with their various intermarriages, and inwardly deprecated the remorseless and protracted accuracy with which the worthy Sir Everard rehearsed the various degrees of propinquity.” Still, Scott observes that “if . . . he sometimes cursed in his heart the jargon of heraldry, its griffins, its moldwarp, its wyverns, and its dragons, with all the bitterness of Hotspur himself—there were moments when these communications interested his fancy and rewarded his attention” (16). Both Waverley and Edmund are young aristocratic men who, as they develop their sexualized aesthetics of existence within a shifting English culture, must negotiate the long-standing cultural importance of chivalry and its code of masculinity.

Waverley and Edmund likewise become torn between the lure of ancestral systems and the inconsequence of such antiquated machinery in the modernizing world. Alice Chandler argues that Scott’s works “deal with a past that is passing away,” and she notes that “Scott knows that historical change is not to be resisted” (31). The Bertrams are not as receptive to a potential cultural transition, and Austen illustrates how familial and national pressures encourage Edmund to view the regulation of his masculinity as essential to the future of the aristocracy and its chivalric mores. Waverley is likewise urged to continue chivalric traditions cherished by his uncle, and when the hero encounters Charles Edward and his fellow rebels attempting to usurp the English throne, he becomes enamored of the finery associated with the Great Pretender. Scott’s narrator reports, “Unaccustomed to the address and manners of a polished court, in which Charles was eminently skilful, his words and his kindness penetrated the heart of our hero, and easily outweighed all prudential motives” (193). As Edmund is overwhelmed by the sensations associated with the modern urban lifestyle of Mary Crawford, Waverley is overwhelmed by the splendor associated with the Great Pretender’s chivalric performance; but when Waverley “looked closer upon the state of the Chevalier’s court . . . [he had] less reason to be satisfied with it” (250).
Scott’s hero eventually dismisses the relevance of such chivalric traits and traditions and accepts the realities of modern life, while Edmund ultimately reverts to such an archaic model of masculinity to safeguard his masculinity from the dangers of England’s post-Revolutionary culture—including the risks involved with Mary Crawford’s sensuality. Although he pursues the potential of various modern temptations throughout the novel, Edmund clings to a hegemonic social/sexual subjectivity rooted in an antiquated version of chivalric heroism and clerical gentility.

Scott’s novel portrays the increasing inconsequence of England’s ancestral lore as an inevitable result of the modern nation-state, but Austen’s *Mansfield Park* dramatizes the desperate attempts of the English aristocracy to retain its status as the nation’s civic and moral leaders. The text documents many failures to accomplish this end and specifically dramatizes the embarrassments of the Bertram family; moreover, Austen’s work offers Edmund and Fanny as the new (and likely last) hope for the family’s, and perhaps the aristocracy’s, resurgence; Edmund will act as the sacrificial hero who can restabilize ancestral English ideals cherished by Burke, and the heroine will serve as a pure and fecund woman who has the potential to cleanse the current generation of the aristocracy and reproduce the next. Austen may specifically memorialize England’s need for such sacrificial hero(in)ism during the tale’s strange stargazing scene. When Edmund and Fanny wander out on the lawn to engage in some casual stellar viewing, the hero notices the constellation Arcturus in the sky, and Fanny observes the bear, but she announces, “I wish I could see Cassiopeia” (102). Her desire to see Cassiopeia invites us to consider the passive heroine as an Andromeda figure longing for an image of her distant mother. And indeed, Fanny does become a virginal offering of sorts; she is sent to her wealthy family, embodies a feminine innocence unmatched by the other young women of the novel, and accepts her role as the next maternal figure of the aristocracy. Such a mythological reading of this scene also anticipates the emergence of a Perseus figure who will valorously save Fanny from her chains. Edmund is, of course, the ideal individual to fulfill such a heroic role. He will serve as Fanny’s educator, protector, and counselor; in addition, he will become her husband. He learns to value Fanny’s importance to his family and herself, and per Burke’s request he treats her with great sensibility. When Edmund finally accepts the severity of his family’s demise, he quickly reconfigures his sexualized aesthetic of existence to wed his cousin, safeguard the future of the Bertrams, and symbolically preserve the nation’s aristocracy.

Throughout the tale, Edmund, as a future member of the clergy, is invested in the condition of both his family and the nation. It is in and through
this ecclesiastical identity that he endorses a strong sense of social morality and represents a proper mode of conduct for others. As a clergyman he advocates individual responsibility and subservience to a higher authority, whether that be nation, God, or family. He continually deploys what Foucault terms pastoral power—"the individualizing of power" or "the development of power techniques oriented towards individuals and intended to rule them in a continuous and permanent way" ("Omnes et Singulatim" 300). Edmund’s ecclesiastical duties require him to "assume responsibility for the destiny of the whole flock and of each and every sheep" ("Omnes et Singulatim" 308). He exercises such power to ensure that all members of his community behave properly and assume specific and useful social roles. He is a concerned man who, like Knightley, attempts to make certain that each individual is cared for and instructed to support the nation. 3 Austen particularly details Edmund’s consistent anxiety throughout the novel with his family, and specifically with the activities and ideas of young women; he takes steps to protect women, but he also encourages them to sacrifice their bodies and desires for the state. He realizes that the biological and cultural future of the aristocracy depends upon adolescent women’s (re)productions—and hence, the morals and training of women like his sisters and Mary Crawford are of national import. These females are the most likely candidates to bear the next generation of the aristocracy, but they fail to maintain moral values and ancestral principles, and thus the task of reproducing the nation’s future leaders falls on the heroine.

Fanny’s untainted femininity is indeed key to England’s emerging conception of a national community, for as Nira Yuval-Davis points out, “it is women—and not (just?) the bureaucracy and the intelligentsia—who reproduce nations, biologically, culturally and symbolically” (2). 4 McClintock adds that the English nationalistic fervor that developed in response to the French Revolution assigned female citizens a specific duty. She explains that “Britain’s emerging national narrative gendered time by figuring women (like the colonized and the working class) as inherently atavistic—the conservative repository of the national archaic” (264). Fanny may not enjoy high social standing like the Bertram girls and Mary Crawford, but the heroine can still become a vital member of the national community by assuming this conservative atavistic function. Fanny is not lured by the possibilities of the modern urban world; she prefers the nostalgic pleasures of the country and the quiet of the drawing room sofa. The narrator indicates late in the novel that Edmund’s regard for Fanny is “founded on the most endearing claims of innocence and helplessness, and completed by every recommendation of growing worth” (429). Fanny is not a physically impressive specimen, but
Edmund learns to value Fanny for her purity; she has apparently not been adulterated by the complexities and vices of post-Revolutionary culture. Yuval-Davis concludes that women are taught to assume a “‘burden of representation,’ as they are constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity’s identity and honour, both personally and collectively” (45). Fanny embraces such responsibility, as she, rather than the Bertram girls, comes to embody the hope of the aristocracy—physically and metaphorically; still, she is not able to reach her potential without the heroic sacrifices of Edmund, who exercises his pastoral power to direct her development.

Austen’s initial depictions of Edmund and Fanny emphasize both his sensitive concern for the heroine and the potentially overwhelming sensitivity of young English aristocratic men. Prior to Fanny’s arrival at Mansfield, the narrator foregrounds the Bertram family’s anxiety about the latent sensuality of its adolescent boys. Mrs. Norris, in her attempt to dissuade Sir Thomas from bringing Fanny to Mansfield, cautions, “Suppose her a pretty girl, and seen by Tom or Edmund for the first time seven years hence, . . . I dare say there would be mischief” (4). The loquacious aunt’s fear of her nephews’ vulnerability to “pretty girls” reminds us of the cultural unease about male youth that Austen dramatizes in her juvenilia. England’s future aristocratic men, like the Bertram boys, have been preserved in isolated environments, and the introduction of unknown females—especially ones who might be/become physically appealing—is viewed as potentially dangerous. Post-Revolutionary culture was certainly aware of the great peril of undisciplined young men, and Jane West’s Tale of the Times (1799) detailed the great volatility of intemperate aristocratic men like Monteith, whose “passions were naturally very strong; and, never having been taught the necessity of restraining them, they were increased by continual gratification, till they somewhat resembled the impetuous torrent” (III: 193–94). Mrs. Norris’s comment suggests the possibility that the ignorant young Bertram men might follow Monteith’s example, and Austen proves the obnoxious aunt wise with her portrayal of Tom Bertram, who “was careless and extravagant” (17). Tom is not a responsible man, and his decadent lifestyle, replete with debauchery and foolishness, mirrors that of the Prince Regent. The elder Bertram son personifies the impending demise of the traditional aristocratic male leader, and his lavish lifestyle even forces Edmund to relinquish the small living initially intended for him; as Austen suggests, “the younger brother must help to pay for the pleasures of the elder” (19). And because the elder son neglects his duties as both a model of ethical behavior and a future family leader, Edmund must assume these roles—responsibilities that are integral to maintaining an ancestral stock and its hegemonic functions.
Indeed, Austen presents Edmund in direct opposition to Tom. She notes how the hero’s “strong good sense and uprightness of mind, bid most fairly for utility, honour, and happiness to himself and all his connections” (18). He clings to his genteel upbringing, and his training certainly qualifies him to provide valuable civic service, but his loyalty to an archaic model of masculinity leaves him inexperienced with the sensual possibilities of the modern world. This ignorance is not a significant detriment early in the novel, as he successfully employs his antiquated Burkean sensitivity to attend to Fanny within the safe confines of Mansfield. Edmund first meets his cousin when he finds her “sitting crying on the attic stairs” and “tried to console her” (12). He appears as a counselor and comforter who listens to her and attempts to ease her discomfort; he even offers to assist Fanny in writing a letter to her beloved brother William (13–14). The narrator relates that the heroine “felt that she had a friend, and the kindness of her cousin Edmund gave her better spirits” (14). He continues to care for his cousin, acting as a sentimentalized Burkean male who remains sensitive to the pangs of others—especially women; this early encounter, moreover, anticipates Edmund’s activity as Fanny’s advisor who can instruct the heroine to direct her body and talents for the good of the nation. Edmund is an emotional Burkean male whose ancestral heroism is viable at his family’s residence, but when the boundaries of Mansfield are broached, the antiquated nature of the hero’s masculinity is exposed.

And Mansfield’s borders are soon crossed and its security threatened when Sir Thomas travels to Antigua. The departure of Edmund’s father creates a leadership void in the family that compels the hero to accept an early audition as a replacement patriarch. Austen indicates that “in Edmund’s judgment” the departing father “had sufficient confidence to make him go without fears” for the conduct of the remaining children (28). Even Lady Bertram observes “how well Edmund could supply [Sir Thomas’s] place in carving, talking to the steward, writing to the attorney, settling with the servants” (29). He can perform the mundane husbandry of a benevolent Burkean man within a controlled domestic sphere, but he quickly encounters new challenges engendered by the improper conduct of young women. Edmund is critical of modern English women, especially those who involve themselves too greatly with physical and social ornaments. He concludes that “[t]he error is plain enough . . . such girls are ill brought up. They are given wrong notions from the beginning. They are always acting upon motives of vanity—and there is no more real modesty in their behaviour before they appear in public than afterwards” (44–45). Edmund speaks as a confident man of moral integrity who is sincerely concerned with the education and activities of the nation’s youthful female subjects.
While Edmund eventually identifies his sisters as examples of such inappropriate aristocratic women, Mary Crawford initially epitomizes the modern female who both appalls and stimulates the hero. Indeed, Edmund's first conversations with Mary revolve around her overt criticism of Sir Bertram's stern education of his daughters. Austen notes that “Edmund was sorry to hear Miss Crawford, whom he was much disposed to admire, speak so freely of her uncle. It did not suit his sense of propriety and he was silenced” (51). He may be fond of Mary, but he is also nonplussed by her disregard for aristocratic gender training. She seems disinterested in inherited gender identities, and though her attitude clashes with the hero's strong convictions about a woman's national responsibility, he is nonetheless intrigued by this urban woman—especially her charming talent for the harp. He “spoke of the harp as his favourite instrument, and hoped to be soon allowed to hear her”; and even when Mary speaks despairingly of the naval profession, he “reverted to the harp, and was again very happy in the prospect of hearing her play” (53–54).

Edmund is unwilling, and perhaps unable, to discuss rationally Mary's attacks on traditional national structures such as the patriarchal aristocracy or the military, but he does employ his Burkean sensibility to appreciate her music. Mary challenges the contemporary feasibility of Edmund’s archaic sexuality, and the hero soon turns to his innocent cousin for advice. He informs the heroine that “it is [Mary's] countenance that is so attractive. She has a wonderful play of feature!” (56). He knows that Miss Crawford's careless talk of Sir Thomas “was very wrong—very indecorous,” but he nevertheless admires her face, her “warm feelings and [her] lively spirits” (57). And despite her impropriety, Austen informs us that Edmund “was beginning . . . to be a good deal in love” (58).

Johnson evaluates the novel's romantic relations and argues that “the men in *Mansfield Park* are nervous about female sexuality”; she concludes that “Edmund, for example, is alternately spellbound and horror stricken by Mary Crawford” (*Jane Austen* 108). Edmund's traditional training as a Burkean man of sensibility endangers him as he pursues a relationship with this sensual modern woman. He becomes overwhelmed by the sensations Mary produces, and his aesthetic of existence is especially threatened by his emerging amorous desires that tempt him to disregard familial and national responsibilities in favor of pleasure.

Edmund is not an established aristocrat like his father or Darcy, and, hence, Austen's hero struggles to uphold antiquated chivalric traditions in a modern culture replete with new pressures and pleasures. For example, after learning that Fanny is unable to participate in the equestrian activities of the household, he creates a complex scenario by deciding that “Fanny must have a horse” (31). He again acts as a sensitive and heroic protector of this passive
heroine, but he soon offers to provide Miss Crawford with riding lessons, and borrows Fanny’s horse to lead Mary and other members of the Mansfield community on four days of equestrian adventures, leaving his cousin at home (60). When he returns from his exhilarating outing, he inquires, “But where is Fanny?—Is she gone to bed?” (64). He now demonstrates great concern for the heroine, who has developed a headache from walking amidst roses. Edmund promptly chastises Mrs. Norris: “has [Fanny] been walking as well as cutting roses; walking across the hot park to your house, and doing it twice, ma’am?—No wonder her head aches” (65). Edmund “was still more angry with himself” and “was ashamed to think that for four days together [Fanny] had not had the power of riding” (67). He realizes that his undisciplined desire to pursue external stimulation with Mary has led him to neglect his pastoral responsibilities as a future aristocratic patriarch—specifically his familial (and national) duty to protect virginal women like his cousin. His selfish pursuit of pleasure has allowed a young English woman to become literally overheated and physically jeopardized.

Edmund quickly recalls his duties as a future male leader of the atrophying aristocracy and a caretaker of the wholesome heroine, as his insistence that Fanny join the Mansfield party to Sotherton demonstrates (69–70). At Sotherton, Edmund accentuates his Burkean identity by differentiating both his masculinity and his ideas about English culture from the other visitors, many of whom are intrigued by the proposed modernization of Rushworth’s estate. During a tour of the grounds, Mary aggressively challenges Edmund to defend his choice to join the clergy by insisting that “[m]en love to distinguish themselves, and . . . distinction may be gained, but not in the church. A clergyman is nothing” (83). Mary’s comments echo Godwin’s radical assertion that humans are capable of “being continually made better [by] receiving perpetual improvement,” and while Godwin’s anti-hereditary mantra may have fueled aspiring modern men like Bingley and Willoughby, Edmund quickly dismisses such recent cultural thought (I: 93). He immediately responds to Miss Crawford’s assessment by declaring:

A clergyman cannot be high in state or fashion. He must not head mobs, or set the ton in dress. But I cannot call that situation nothing, which has the charge of all that is of the first importance to mankind, individually or collectively considered, temporally and eternally—which has the guardianship of religion and morals, and consequently of the manners which result from their influence. No one here can call the office nothing. If the man who holds it is so, it is by the neglect of his duty, by foregoing its just importance, and stepping out of his place to appear what he ought not to appear. (83)
Edmund insists that the church is essential to the well-being of the nation because ecclesiastical leaders provide models for proper individual behavior and protect the inherited values of the civic community. He concludes that “it will . . . be everywhere found, that as the clergy are, or are not what they ought to be, so are the rest of the nation” (84). Edmund invests his role as a future administrator of the church with great significance to the state, describing his duties with the same national, social, and moral rhetoric employed by Burke in his Reflections. His identity as a clergyman seemingly allows him to merge Burkean sentimentality with Burkean heroism, but Austen’s novel reveals that he is not able to synthesize these masculine traits in modern environments such as the unorganized areas of Sotherton.

In such an unstructured environment, Edmund’s sensitivity to Mary soon prompts him to dismiss again his role as a guardian of Fanny, as he leaves his cousin behind to continue walking and conversing with the modern woman. His career plans still amaze Mary, who reports that his drive reminds her of “some of the old heathen heroes, who after performing great exploits in a foreign land, offered sacrifices to the gods on their safe return” (97–98). She shockingly equates his adherence to duty with an archaic pagan offering rather than Christian national leadership. She completes her critique by adding that a “clergyman has nothing to do but to be slovenly and selfish—read the newspaper, watch the weather, and quarrel with his wife. His curate does all the work, and the business of his own life is to dine” (99).

Mary strips the ecclesiastical profession of its sacrificial heroism, forcing Edmund to reconcile yet again the disparity between Burke’s advocacy of the spirit of edifying religion and the spirit of a gentleman. Austen’s hero must defend a traditionally valued English profession against Mary’s indictment. Edmund confronts this difficult rhetorical challenge within the discursive context of other fictional clergymen such as Matthew Lewis’s Ambrosio and Elizabeth Inchbald’s Dorriforth—men who showcased the failures of the church to maintain its traditional existence in the changing modern world.

Lewis’s The Monk (1796) details the dangers posed by physical sensations to even the most reverent young man, Ambrosio, who despite his public reputation as a “Man of Holiness” and “a present . . . from the Virgin,” recognizes that he is but a man “whose nature is frail, and prone to error” (16–17; 40). Edmund, like Ambrosio, is a renowned young man devoted to the ecclesiastical life who struggles to negotiate physical desires; Ambrosio’s trials are certainly more spectacular, but these promising youth essentially experience the problem of new sensations. Ambrosio’s trial begins when Rosario identifies herself as a young woman named Matilda; Lewis reports that this formerly innocent man now experienced “the full vigour of Manhood. . . . He clasped her rapturously in his arms; He forgot his vows, his sanctity, and his fame:
He remembered nothing but the pleasure and opportunity” (90). Ambrosio’s lascivious involvement with Rosario—who is, of course, the loyal servant of Satan—results in the demise of his ecclesiastical role and the subsequent collapse of society’s religious and moral center. Edmund may not be tempted by the Prince of Darkness, but he is forced to negotiate the sensual charms of Mary Crawford that endanger both his stable clerical identity and the continued prosperity of his aristocratic family. Austen’s hero must also shun the inappropriate example of Inchbald’s Dorriforth, an older clergyman who “[becomes] a hard-hearted tyrant . . . [and] an example of implacable rigour and injustice” after he weds his former ward (A Simple Story 95). Inchbald notes that Dorriforth’s “love to his lady had been extravagant—the effect of his hate was extravagant likewise” (197). Edmund learns to eschew such extreme and unbalanced modern sexualized subjectivities and instead crafts his ecclesiastical subjectivity after Burke’s nostalgic model. He embraces an established clerical identity to deploy pastoral power, but Austen exposes his continued vulnerability to newfound physical pleasures as the Bertram household prepares for the domestic drama that concludes the novel’s first volume.

The desire to stage a small drama, initiated by Mr. Yates and supported by Tom, Maria, and Henry Crawford, becomes Edmund’s most trying challenge as the temporary Mansfield patriarch. Edmund “was determined to prevent it,” and he initially attempts to dissuade the others from acting within an ancestral home by arguing that “if we are to act, let it be in a theatre completely fitted up with pit, box, and gallery” (112). Edmund appreciates the value of Mansfield, and he understands that such a domain cannot be allowed to devolve into a house of “acting”; he does not want homes like Mansfield or Pemberley—the physical foundations of the aristocracy and its inherited ideals—to become mere theatrical settings. And he is severely worried about women acting—or acting women; he is specifically anxious about his sister Maria, whom he considers committed to Mr. Rushworth. Edmund is obsessed with directing the behavior of young females, and as a pastoral figure he is frightened they might assume various “play” identities that could distract them from their familial and national responsibilities as reproducers. Tom, however, rebukes Edmund’s authoritative stance and momentarily reasserts his status as the impending patriarch of Mansfield. He announces, “I know my father as well as you do, and I’ll take care that his daughters do nothing to distress him. Manage your own concerns, Edmund, and I’ll take care of the rest of the family” (114). Edmund defers to the will of his lavish brother, recalling his instability as a temporary aristocratic leader. He may know what is right and proper according to his Burkean training, but this alone does not empower him to defuse the lure of modern drama.
Despite his failure to halt the plans to stage an intimate domestic drama, Edmund initially refuses to join the histrionics himself; he announces, “No, as to acting myself, . . . that I absolutely protest against” (115). His attitude toward the play, of course, takes a notable turn when he learns that Mary Crawford will participate. Austen narrates the scene carefully: “Maria gave Edmund a glance, which meant, ‘What say you now? Can we be wrong if Mary Crawford feels the same?’ And Edmund silenced, was obliged to acknowledge that the charm of acting might well carry fascination to the mind of genius” (116–17). He yet again succumbs to the temptation of an opportunity to experience moments of sensory exhilaration alongside Mary; he is to “play” a young clergyman beloved of Amelia, the character performed by Miss Crawford. Edmund originally dismisses such typecasting, explaining that he “should be sorry to make the character ridiculous by bad acting. . . . and the man who chooses the profession itself, is, perhaps, one of the last who would wish to represent it on the stage” (131). He is both frightened and excited by the prospect of dramatically performing scenarios that might blur the distinction between reality and the stage, but his remarks also suggest his inability to act as both a responsible clergyman—an identity that he has defended despite its recent fictional representations—and a romantic lover. He may be conscious of the failings of ecclesiastics like Ambrosio and Dorriforth to balance their clerical responsibilities with sensual passions, and Edmund may even realize that his involvement in the drama risks his own demise, but he is tempted by the possibility of new and undisciplined sensations.

Edmund, in a scene that foreshadows the novel’s closing wedding, again turns to Fanny for advice in resolving this tension between his heroic duties and his physical sensitivity. He initially adopts a rhetoric of crisis, asserting, “I do not know what to do. This acting scheme gets worse and worse you see. They have chosen as bad a play as they could; and now, to complete the business, are going to ask the help of a young man very slightly known to any of us. This is the end of all the privacy and propriety which was talked about at first” (138). Edmund embellishes his language, à la Burke, to emphasize the frightful consequences of a seemingly innocent and private Mansfield affair that might become public. He presents himself as a heroic figure who must now assume a dramatic role to preserve the integrity of his aristocratic family and its ancestral home. He proclaims, “There is but one thing to be done, Fanny. I must take Anhalt myself. I am well aware that nothing else will quiet Tom” (138). He explains “they will not have much cause of triumph, when they see how infamously I act. But, however, triumph there certainly will be, and I must brave it. But if I can be the means of restraining the publicity of the business, of limiting the exhibition, of concentrating our folly, I shall be
well repaid” (139). He presents himself as a martyr who will perform the part of Anhalt only to contain the ridiculous performance.

His involvement forces him to confront volatile sensations that he is not well trained to negotiate, but Sir Thomas’s return from Antigua on the night of the dress rehearsal halts the dramatic escapades before the hero becomes imperiled by his performance. The restored Mansfield patriarch briefly criticizes all the participants in the play, but Austen devotes special attention to his rebuke of Edmund. She carefully relates this scene through the eyes of her heroine: “Such a look of reproach at Edmund from his father [Fanny] could never have expected to witness; and to feel that it was in any degree deserved, was an aggravation indeed. Sir Thomas’s look implied, ‘On your judgment, Edmund, I depended; what have you been about?’” (166). Austen’s subtle narration of Sir Bertram’s reprimand reminds us of the father’s, and indeed the nation’s, expectation that Edmund would perform appropriate paternal duties; Sir Bertram looked to Edmund to maintain order in his stead, and Edmund has failed to prevent the ills of modernity from penetrating the ancestral family’s domestic realm. Austen emphasizes that Fanny is likewise disturbed by Edmund’s inability to perform as substitute aristocratic patriarch; the hero quickly renews his sense of moral propriety by isolating and upholding his cousin’s behavior. He announces to his father, “We have all been more or less to blame . . . every one of us, excepting Fanny. Fanny is the only one who has judged rightly throughout” (168). Edmund is beginning to grasp Fanny’s value as a pure woman, and she may reciprocate his appreciation as she now becomes more active in (re)constructing Edmund as a heroic male who remains sensitive. She even addresses Edmund’s name, explaining to Mary Crawford that “the sound of Mr. Bertram is so cold and nothing-meaning—so entirely without warmth or character!—It just stands for a gentleman, and that’s all. But there is nobleness in the name of Edmund. It is a name of heroism and renown—of kings, princes, and knights; and seems to breathe the spirit of chivalry and warm affections” (190). Fanny now demonstrates her value to the hero by portraying him as a legendary man who, despite his failings as a substitute patriarch, is still valorous, responsible, and sensitive.

Edmund’s own earnest attempts to resecure his Burkean masculinity lead him to recall the importance of an ancestral home’s integrity, and he voices such sentiments when discussing his own future dwelling. Although Henry Crawford claims that Edmund ought to consider multiple improvements to his living at Thornton Lacey, Austen’s hero endorses the traditional architectural principles of his inherited home. Edmund indicates that he “must be satisfied with rather less ornament and beauty” (219); he upholds the relevance of archaic chivalric culture even to structural design. He adopts the
conservative ideas of Jane West, whose *Letters Addressed to a Young Man on His First Entrance into Life* (1803) praises the importance of such historical precedent and announces that “our ancestors acted upon this plan for a long course of ages, and supported it by various civil and religious injunctions” (I: 56). Edmund greatly values and respects his nation’s legendary customs, and he relates the importance of such practices to the construction and style of his home. He concludes that “the house and premises may be made comfortable, and given the air of a gentleman’s residence without any very heavy expense, and that must suffice me; and I hope may suffice all who care about me” (219). Edmund, like Bingley, realizes that expensive modern updates cannot replicate the ancestral domain of a gentleman. Austen’s hero appears pleased with the antiquated architecture of Thornton Lacey, even though he presents his contentment as something of a sacrifice—that is, he “must be satisfied” with a home inherited from an aristocratic family. Edmund’s comments also suggest that the reconstruction of the Bertrams must begin internally; as a future clerical leader and sentinel of morality, he must first order his own house, remove modern distractions, and marry a woman willing and able to secure his hegemonic identity and reproduce the aristocracy.

Although Austen emphasizes Edmund’s adherence to these ends, she also records his continued struggles to sustain such a dated aesthetic of existence in the post-Revolutionary nation. Austen notes that “Edmund was at this time particularly full of cares; his mind being deeply occupied in the consideration of two important events now at hand, which were to fix his fate in life—ordination and matrimony” (230). Edmund is a serious young man, and despite his prior difficulties as a substitute patriarch, he is committed to a future career as a morally edifying clergyman. And yet, he recognizes that he cannot achieve this clerical identity as an ethical leader of England by himself; he, like the other unmarried men of Austen’s corpus, must acquire a wife to establish the hegemonic male social/sexual subjectivity required to participate fully in the national community. Austen explains that “his duties would be established, but the wife who was to share, and animate, and reward those duties might yet be unattainable. He knew his own mind, but he was not always perfectly assured of knowing Miss Crawford’s” (230). Edmund appears as both a willing servant of the state who imagines his wife as a dutiful partner and a sentimental man who longs to know the true feelings of the sensually appealing Mary. He concludes that “the issue of all depended on one question. Did she love him well enough to forego what had used to be essential points—did she love him well enough to make them no longer essential?” (231). The hero is prepared to abstain from modern allurements, but he is not convinced that Mary is ready to make the same
sacrifice. Edmund, as a well-trained Burkean man and future aristocratic leader, should simply dismiss Mary as a woman of the modern world who does not appreciate ancestral culture, but he is also a sensitive man, and he remains susceptible to Mary’s sensual charms.

Austen carefully observes Edmund’s continued fascination with Mary and treats her hero as she often does her heroines—excited for a ball and anxious about dancing partners. Austen remarks that “in every meeting” Edmund maintained “a hope of receiving farther confirmation of Miss Crawford’s attachment; but the whirl of a ball-room perhaps was not particularly favourable to the excitement or expression of serious feelings” (232). Edmund becomes frustrated and desperate, and while he manages to reserve a dance with Miss Crawford, he explains to his passive cousin that Mary “says it is to be the last time that she ever will dance with me. . . . she never has danced with a clergyman she says, and she never will” (243). Edmund’s future ecclesiastical duties again clash with his exploration of the sensual experiences Mary affords; she will not tolerate the hero’s religious seriousness at a ball, and Edmund’s clerical role precludes his reckless pursuit of pleasures beyond the controlled environment of a Mansfield dance floor. Austen’s hero is anxious about the conflict between his heroic masculinity and his physical attraction to Mary, but he concludes, “it will all end right. I am only vexed for a moment” (243).12

Edmund also remains anxious about the current sexual vulnerability of young English females, and he now rededicates himself to the pastoral task of securing the cultural utility of the nation’s unmarried women. He is especially concerned with Fanny, and he surprises his cousin by strongly advocating her marriage to Henry Crawford. After Sir Thomas fails to convince his niece of the beneficence of such a union, Edmund “came to [Fanny], sat down by her, took her hand, and pressed it kindly.” The narration closely parallels their initial encounter when the hero comforted and consoled the frightened heroine; Edmund now exercises his ostensibly compassionate pastoral power to encourage Fanny to accept the identity of a well-married woman. Austen indicates that he “was, in fact, entirely on his father’s side of the question,” supporting Henry as a man and the potential benefits of the heroine’s marriage to him (303). Edmund later explains to Fanny that Crawford “will make you happy, Fanny, I know he will make you happy; but you will make him every thing” (319). Edmund’s comments reveal both his concern for his unmarried and dowryless cousin and his own understanding of the cultural value of such an innocent young woman. He recognizes that Henry will provide Fanny with the financial and domestic security she presently lacks, but it is Fanny who can provide Henry with an atavistic connection to an ancestral English culture and its aristocratic values. Edmund
knows that Fanny’s purity can cleanse Henry of the modern stains that hinder him from crafting a proper masculinity and obediently serving the nation.

Fanny’s resistance to Edmund’s advice indicates both her strong individual will and her adherence to ancestral rather than modernized ideals. She knows that the Crawfords are essentially altered by modernity, and Austen’s heroine refuses to make such a cultural transition—or merge her purity with the perversity of outsiders. Sir Thomas, who does not yet understand Fanny’s importance to his own aristocratic domain, chastises his niece and promptly returns her to her family at Portsmouth; the subsequent demise of the Bertram family allows the patriarch and his son to develop an appreciation for the heroine’s vital role in sustaining the aristocratic realm, its ideals, and its inhabitants. Edmund, for instance, continues to discuss his volatile feelings for Mary with Fanny, and in one of his letters to the heroine he reports that after a trip to London—the world of Mary—he “returned to Mansfield in a less assured state.” He relates that his “hopes are much weaker,” but he admits: “I cannot give her up, Fanny. She is the only woman in the world whom I could ever think of as a wife” (382; 384). He knows that he cannot exist as a responsible ecclesiastical figure alongside Mary’s “influence of the fashionable world” and her “habits of wealth,” but he is clearly still enamored of the modern woman. He reverts to a perverted version of chivalric heroism and announces, “I must bear it . . . I can never cease to try for her. This is the truth. The only question is how?” (384). He acts as a hopelessly devoted lover who will persist in his efforts to acquire the affections of a disinterested lady. John Wiltshire argues that in this lengthy letter, “Austen adopts, or rather adapts, the convention of the sentimental novel and Edmund . . . expos[e]s his heart, his bleeding heart, to his correspondent . . . by revealing with such naked sincerity the helplessness of his passion for Mary” (Jane Austen and the Body 104). Edmund’s behavior is sentimental and seemingly heroic, reminding us of his Burkean training, but Austen again exposes the incompatibility of this masculine sexuality with modernity. Edmund constructs his sentimental pursuit of Mary as heroic, but Mansfield Park reveals that his heroic sensitivity actually endangers the stability of his family and the nation.

The impending collapse of the Bertram family reminds Edmund of the great peril of sensations produced by erotic desire, the vulnerability of the aristocracy and its values, and Mansfield’s specific need of Fanny; in addition, the crises of Mansfield prompt Edmund to reassume his function as a familial savior. Lady Bertram tells Fanny of Tom’s alcohol-induced illness and informs the heroine that “Edmund kindly proposes attending his brother immediately” (388). Lady Bertram’s account echoes earlier depictions of her son as a hero, and Austen now overtly announces both the aristocratic
family’s and the heroine’s desperate need for Edmund’s valor. The narrator suggests that “Edmund was all in all. Fanny would certainly believe him so at least, and must find that her estimation of him was higher than ever when he appeared as the attendant, supporter, cheerer of a suffering brother” (391). Fanny is aware of Edmund’s great importance to her, and she now also knows his significant role as a protector of the Bertrams and their ancestral cultural values. Mary Crawford is likewise conscious of Edmund’s valiant position in his family, but she playfully constructs him as “Sir Edmund” and crassly questions whether Edmund “would not do more good with all the Bertram property, than any other possible ‘Sir’” (396). Mary redefines Edmund’s heroism as an indispensable practical skill for a modern man seeking to maximize possible improvement and advancement. Fanny, however, conceptualizes her cousin as an ancestral hero who can right wrongs, uphold a chivalric sense of duty, and remain sensible; and Edmund appears up to the task, as he willingly cares for his lavish brother who has tarnished the family’s aristocratic legacy.

The next Bertram family scandals that Edmund must resolve involve the embarrassing escapades of his sisters; when he learns of Maria’s improper relations with Henry Crawford and Julia’s elopement with Yates, he quickly writes his wholesome cousin to discuss the affairs. He sounds like a vanquished knight who has failed in his quest, as he reports that “there is no end of the evil let loose upon us” (404). Edmund’s rhetoric suggests that Burke’s nightmare vision has come true, and the English nation now has “no compass to govern us” and consequently, can no longer “know distinctly to what port we steer” (129). The degeneration of England’s aristocracy is metonymically represented by the errors of Edmund’s family, whose individual members have failed to perform as dutiful and selfless participants of a larger cultural unit. And the ultimate breakdown of the Bertram aristocratic tradition is attributed to the public shame of young aristocratic women who could have culturally and biologically reproduced the nation. Edmund has failed to protect these members of his flock, and although he has consistently redefined himself as a sacrificial hero whenever he has encountered prior difficulties or dilemmas, he now acts as a Burkean man of feeling. When he arrives at Portsmouth to transport the heroine back to Mansfield, he proclaims, “My Fanny—my only sister—my only comfort now” (405). He emotionally announces his new appreciation for Fanny;¹⁴ she may not be an adventurous heroine, but like Andromeda, she appears eager to offer her body for the good of her family and its culture. Edmund, however, is still not fully prepared to abandon his fascination with Mary.

When Edmund and Fanny finally arrive at Mansfield, he appears extremely confused, and Austen depicts the sensitive hero as “sunk in a
deeper gloom than ever . . . with eyes closed as if the view of cheerfulness oppressed him, and the lovely scenes of home must be shut out” (408). As soon as he encounters Mary, he attempts to anesthetize his senses, preferring “to bury his own feelings in exertions for the relief of his brother’s” (409). He can exist safely as a valorous yet sentimental man alongside Fanny, but he knows Mary threatens the stability of his identity as an impending leader of the aristocracy. Edmund instead numbs his senses and, much like the heroine, assumes a sacrificial role for the good of his family and the nation. Still, he is able to renounce Mary Crawford only after her casual response to the news of his family’s scandals. Edmund explains, “She rep-robated her brother’s folly in being drawn on by a woman whom he had never cared for. . . . To hear the woman whom—no harsher name than folly given!—So voluntarily, so freely, so coolly to canvass it!—No reluctance, no horror, no feminine—shall I say? no modest loathings” (414–15). Edmund is again nonplussed by Mary, but it is no longer her verbal impropriety that overwhelms the hero; he cannot stomach Mary’s restrained reaction to the impulsive and irresponsible activity of his sisters.

Edmund realizes that Mary is not able to serve as his wife and partner, but he does not immediately forget her. Indeed, he actively attempts to represent her as an enjoyable illusion of his mind, claiming that it was not the physical person of Mary that excited his interest, but “the creature of my own imagination . . . that I had been too apt to dwell on for many months past. . . . [C]ould I have restored her to what she had appeared to me before, I would infinitely prefer any increase of the pain of parting, for the sake of carrying with me the right of tenderness and esteem” (418). Edmund’s reflections echo the poetic speaker of Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” who imagines what might happen if he were able to revive the vision of an Abyssinian maid; like Coleridge’s narrator, Edmund is obsessed, even though he recognizes the dangers of his obsession. Austen indicates that “time would undoubtedly abate somewhat of his sufferings, but still it was a sort of thing which he never could get entirely the better of; and as to his ever meeting with any other woman who could—it was too impossible to be named but with indignation” (420). Austen explicitly notes Edmund’s continued fascination with Mary, but Austen has also shown that he is unable to reconcile his antiquated sexuality with the modern woman’s lifestyle. And since no other woman could possibly fill the void her absence has left, Edmund is forced to abandon his desires for sensual exhilaration and instead accept the safety and reliability of an atavistic and benevolent marital union. The narrator indeed declares that “Fanny’s friendship was all that [Edmund] had to cling to” (420).

Austen opens her final chapter by assuring her readers of satisfactory
closure. She proclaims, “Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest” (420). Austen self-consciously announces her intention to lighten this dark tale of the aristocracy’s embarrassing demise; she promises to offer an ending replete with conjugal ceremonies, the necessary punishments, and “tolerable comfort.” The heroic Edmund is, of course, unpunished, but he may be disciplined; or perhaps Austen’s concluding remarks bespeak the requisite regulation of Burkean masculinity in modern England:

Scarcely had [Edmund] done regretting Mary Crawford, and observing to Fanny how impossible it was that he should ever meet with such another woman, before it began to strike him whether a very different kind of woman might not do just as well—or a great deal better; whether Fanny herself were not growing as dear, as important to him in all her smiles, and all her ways, as Mary Crawford had ever been; and whether it might not be a possible, an hopeful undertaking to persuade her that her warm and sisterly regard for him would be foundation enough for wedded love. (428–29)

While Austen usually employs indirect speech to reveal the complex thought processes of her heroines, she uses this narrative strategy here to portray her hero’s change of heart. She presents Edmund’s burgeoning “romantic” interest in his cousin as a natural progression, but it is also essentially limited; his brotherly affection for Fanny may provide “foundation enough” for marriage. Edmund has learned that his archaic Burkean masculinity simply cannot handle the excitement of modern women, and his cultural duty as a moral exemplar requires him to manage his sensitivity to their charms. He needs to marry a woman who is willing and able to reproduce both the next generation of the Bertram family and its aristocratic ideals, but his wife must also solidify his hegemonic social/sexual identity. Austen indicates that his regard for Fanny was “founded on the most endearing claims of innocence and helplessness, and completed by every recommendation of growing worth” (429). As a pure and willing woman, Fanny has all the traits Edmund now requires in a wife; she holds the latent potential to cleanse the aristocracy of its recent stains, bear and rear its future members, and secure Edmund’s status as a future leader of the nation.

Austen reports that Edmund’s marriage to Fanny permits the hero to continue “[l]oving, guiding, protecting her, as he had been doing ever since her being ten years old.” These disturbing comments suggest that Edmund views his marriage to Fanny as an extension of his closely monitored adolescent regard for the frightened girl; he reestablishes himself as her heroic
guardian, and she, likewise, will remain his advisor and champion. Edmund renounces romantic sensibility in favor of innocent juvenile emotions, but his immature aesthetic of existence allows him to perform as a chivalric hero from bygone days, despite the turbulent culture of post-Revolutionary England. The narrator can only tersely observe, “what was there now to add, but that he should learn to prefer soft light eyes to sparkling dark ones” (429).

The shift in Edmund’s amorous interest appears shockingly casual and rather humorous, as he must simply eschew the “dark lady” for the subservient heroine who, not coincidentally, possesses the light eyes associated with England’s supposed historical people. Austen adds one final discomforting note to the narrative, as we learn that with the death of Dr. Grant, Edmund acquires the Mansfield ecclesiastical living (432). The narrator indicates that the hero and heroine “removed to Mansfield” to live “within the view and patronage of Mansfield Park” (432). Edmund now physically and symbolically merges his marital union with both his clerical duties and his familial/national responsibilities as a future aristocratic patriarch. His marriage to Fanny stabilizes his masculinity, but it also enables him to ensure and direct the biological and cultural reproduction of the English aristocracy. He fulfills his role as a Perseus figure, coming to the rescue of the sacrificed heroine; and Fanny, as an Andromeda figure, fortifies the hero’s masculinity. Edmund needs her feminine innocence and integrity to accomplish his Herculean task of maintaining the ancestral culture of England’s past in the modernizing nation; moreover, Austen’s corpus continues to suggest that English culture cannot risk the potential volatility of Deleuzian love or male lovers.