Towards the Ethics of Form in Fiction

Toker, Leona

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Non-Carnivalesque Oppositionality
Jane Austen and the Golden Mean

The poetry of aesthetic reconciliation must seek its own self-consciousness against the prose of alienated reality.

—H.-G. Gadamer, Truth and Method, 83

For a Scholar’s Treasure Trove of the non-carnivalesque oppositional mode one can turn to the fiction of Jane Austen. Though faintly carnivalesque features are present at the crisis points of her novels and sometimes in the dénouement (where declarations of feeling and attitude are set in liminal spaces, observers and participants exchange roles, rigid superordination is modified, and individual minds come ajar to admit considerations that have been resisted), such episodes usually unfold within the constraints of etiquette, with but minor oppositional loopholes. Moreover, it is not to every reader that Austen’s novels give a sense of cultural remission; more generally, they create a reassuring impression of a way of life that continues from generation to generation—in particular, since their one major rite of passage culminates in a judicious channeling of desire to a suitable marriage. This, in addition to Austen’s unforgettable character types, is one reason for the special place of her novels in the culture of her country.¹

Austen’s novels combine features of the comedy of manners with those of the traditional Bildungsroman. The conventions of the former genre underlie

1. As Rudyard Kipling’s short story “The Janeites” shows, amidst the bitter mangling carnival of World War I, to the British officers Jane Austen’s novels represent what they are fighting for (cf. Claudia Johnson 1993: 99–100) and provide a basis for solidarity across class boundaries.
their romantic plots; with the latter, a markedly non-carnivalesque genre, they share stories of the characters’ progress towards maturity, which, when achieved, is rewarded—or confirmed, as if by a matriculation certificate—by a happy marriage. The Bildungsroman pattern observable in most of the novels consists in isolating the potentially dangerous tendencies in the heroines’ dispositions, creating circumstances in which these tendencies grow and lead to the threshold of personal disasters, and then watching the heroines’ reflective anagnorisis and attempts to modify their “disposition” while courageously facing the bleak consequences of their errors. The personal integrity displayed at the latter stage brings the heroine the approbation of the general reader and vindication in the eyes of her hurdle audience—the authorities who stood between her and her target readership. The same pattern can, however, be viewed as oppositional insofar as it suggests that the disabling blow received by a heroine, usually as a consequence of her ethical experimentation, reduces her energies sufficiently for her to give up some of her spiritual independence and, in the words of Congreve’s Millamant (The Way of the World, Act IV), “dwindle into a wife.”

Such an oppositional reading is most appropriate to Austen’s “problem novel,” Mansfield Park, whose heroine, Fanny Price, receives a deenergizing blow early in her life, through no fault of her own: at the age of nine she is transplanted from an impoverished but relatively happy home to the elegant and affluent estate of the Bertrams, where she has to assume the liminal role of a dependent relative. Her docility and retiring disposition seem largely to be a consequence of this blow; her moral integrity is interpretable as a success of an Evangelical upbringing, according to which a young lady’s mandatory compliance and self-effacement in company should, instead of weakening her ethical principles, enhance them by an unobtrusive cultivation of her intellectual and religious inner life.4

2. Robert Polhemus has described Austen’s novels as dreams “of individual integrity in which self-interest and morality coincide” (1982: 39).

3. An alternative description of Austen’s recurrent plot formula is given in Phelan 2003: 67–70. See also Hinnant (2006) for a survey of the ways in which Jane Austen novels rework seven traditional types of “courtship plots” that conventionally involve the characters’ having to undergo “a traumatic experience, a violent shift from innocence to self-knowledge before their union can be consummated” (294).

4. Mansfield Park was written in the period when Jane Austen partly relented towards Evangelicalism, which was, in itself, an oppositional movement within as well as outside the established church. For a relatively recent discussion of the refraction of Evangelical principles in this novel see Waldron 1999: 85–87; for an opposite argument (less convincing) see Monaghan 1978. John Wiltshire notes that the literary innovation of Mansfield Park is the creation of a heroine “whose quiet and acquiescent exterior is matched by an inner life of complex and agitating feeling, a dutiful heroine conceived with an ego, with strong convictions and emotional demands” (2005: lxxviii). Acquaintance with Evangelical literature may have been part of the etiology of this artistic feat.
The end of the traditional *Bildungsroman* usually confirms the end of the adolescent misrule and leaves the protagonist and her (or, most often, his) natural milieu safely adjusted to each other. Though Austen’s protagonists are women, her version of the *Bildungsroman* differs from that of the female model of *Bildungsroman* (such as, in much later versions, Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* or Alice Walker’s *Color Purple*) which stages not the protagonist’s reconciliation with the logic behind absurd social restrictions but, on the contrary, her awakening from social conformity (see Abel, Hirsch, and Langland 1983: 3–14). However, the “male”/“female” dichotomy may be void of gender content—Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* arguably belongs to the latter variety.

As a novel of character development, the *Bildungsroman* is a “biographical” genre that tends to emphasize the movement towards (or away from) the mainstream social standard and that has little space for carnivalesque remissions. This empirical regularity (not invulnerable to counterexamples, especially when the *Bildungsroman* is also a *Künstlerroman*) is usually associated with the ethical system of the author. The cautiously non-carnivalesque character of Austen’s novels corresponds to the rationally limited moderate view of human possibility that they construct, adjust, and refine. For Austen ethical value is, ideally, a version of the Golden Mean, with a tinge of rule-utilitarianism: the stable functioning of the social structure is seen as dependent on civility, the middle-way self-limitation of social groups, and the personal integrity of their members. Yet Austen’s mildly anti-Jacobin or rather “centrist” (Knox-Shaw 2004: 5) agenda of perpetuating the social order involved oppositional liberalization of social routines in the spirit of an idealized cultural tradition that could justify the privileged status of the gentry. I shall here discuss some of the ethical and social implications of Austen’s valorization of the middle way and then, focusing on *Mansfield Park*, turn to different facets of her non-carnivalesque oppositionality.

In Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (II.vi–vii), positive ethical value is presented as the average between the extremes of the same quality: courage, for

5. For a different account of the specificity of the British female *Bildungsroman*, one that emphasizes its responses to courtesy books, see Fraiman 1993: 1–31.

6. The plot pattern in which a “moment of self-discovery and self-abasement” is followed by “the resolve in future to follow reason” constitutes the climax of the majority of anti-Jacobin novels (Marilyn Butler 1990 [1975]: 166). This plot formula is, however, complicated by the sense that the genteel marriage that rewards the practice is somewhat Procrustean.
instance, is a positive value, the mean of the quality that, if insufficient, is known as cowardice and, if excessive, as rashness. This principle of ethical evaluation was eventually developed into the notion of the Golden Mean sung by Horace.

As noted, in Austen’s novel ethical value is a matter of measure (see Tave 1973: 29–30): a little finesse is a mandatory social accomplishment; too much finesse is self-serving manipulativeness (Toker 1993a: 84–104); lack of neighborly attention is shameful neglect, too much of it is officiousness; too much self-confidence is obstinacy, too little is spinelessness; the right amount of attention to class distinctions is sophistication; its excess is prejudice.

Numerous examples of valorized moderation can be found in Mansfield Park—for example, Fanny’s pious and near-morbid introspection is a mean—though not entirely a Golden one—between Rushworth’s comic lack of self-awareness (or Edmund’s self-delusions) and Mary Crawford’s cynicism. Austen’s most sustained exploration of the golden mean is conducted in Sense and Sensibility, where the two title qualities are unequally distributed between the two heroines as well as among the supporting cast. The heroines do not represent extremes of sense or of sensibility. Indeed, Elinor has just the right amount of sense: it is her half-brother John Dashwood whose hypertrophy of “sense” turns into a syndrome of opportunism, stinginess, and covetousness. Occasionally, a slight overstatement of sense on Elinor’s part results in a rigid self-control that not only hides but also distances her feelings (cf. also Copeland 2006: li). And yet it is not Elinor but Mrs. Palmer who is presented as radically out of touch with her real

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7. Austen’s implicit ethical theory does not, however, share the ideals of the Aristotelian heroica; accordingly, the presentation of the development of her protagonists departs from Aristotle’s view that character deteriorates rather than improves with experience—a view that, however, is often applicable to her presentation of the older generation, for example, Mr. Woodhouse in Emma.

8. Odes II.x. I am sometimes tempted to replace the metaphor of the Golden Mean with that of the so-called golden ratio (1.62:1), the mysterious number yielded by the Fibonacci series, which also underlies the aesthetic appeal of, for example, standard rectangular frame proportions.


10. “Between the extremes of selfhood by extinction of feeling and selfhood entirely created by feeling, Fanny stands as a slightly tarnished golden mean” (Fleishman 1967: 50).

11. Austen’s preference for the middle way is to a large extent culturally determined; cf. Kate Fox on the “distinctively English” rule of moderation, according to which “too much of anything” is to be deplored (2004: 32). It may be that her novels not only reflected this social value but actually helped to form and disseminate its practice.

12. Elinor’s reserve should be read against the background of the ideological doctrine of the women’s “passionlessness,” which, as Nancy F. Cott (1978) has persuasively argued, served women’s interests in the late eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth, even if its relationship to reality was tenuous.
feelings, who laughs when she has reason to feel miserable or offended—not out of magnanimousness but because of intellectual deficiency (cf. Humphrey 1991). Nor is Elinor’s antipode sister Marianne a case of maximum emotional self-indulgence: she has, at least, more sense and self-control than the younger Eliza, who is seduced by Willoughby. Indeed, in all of Austen’s novels secondary characters display some of the protagonists’ features in different degrees of intensity. The characters are deployed thematically: each facet of the protagonist is a motif also trailed by several other members of the troupe (see Phelan 1987: 287–92).

Yet the sense and the sensibility are not only character traits in Austen’s novel; they are also ethical commitments. Elinor’s “sense” is a socially oriented version of the cardinal virtue of prudence, combined, as in Fielding, with a commitment to the happiness, or at least the comfort, of those around her. Marianne’s “sensibility” is a Romantic valorization of intensity, sincerity, and spontaneity, as well as a determined Romantic rejection of the encroachments of society on her inner life. This consciously endorsed disposition is not alien to Elinor either; what Elinor objects to in her sister is not the principle itself but exaggerations in its practice: Marianne’s sincerity often means rudeness and inconsiderateness (for which Elinor has to atone); spontaneity gets translated into comic tactlessness (of which Elinor is the victim); intensity slips into morbidness (against which Elinor’s good sense is helpless). The radical change that Marianne undergoes after her illness is all the more credible insofar as it is not only a remolding of the self but also, predominantly, a conscious shift in her practical ideology—from the romantic cultivation of the intense experience to constructive civility.

In Sense and Sensibility, moreover, the preference for moderation has sociopolitical implications. It pertains to the limited social ambitions of the Dashwood sisters (and, by extension, of Edward Ferrars): what both Elinor and Marianne want is not wealth or lofty status but genteel “competence,” though the two define it in different ways. Marianne states that

“money can only give happiness where there is nothing else to give it. Beyond a competence, it can afford no real satisfaction, as far as mere self is concerned.”

“Perhaps,” said Elinor smiling, “we may come to the same point. Your competence and my wealth are very much alike, I dare say. . . . Come, what is your competence?”

13. See also Rachel Brownstein’s discussion of the contrasts between the Dashwood sisters and two other pairs of sisters in the novel—as well as of the associated motif of interchangeability (1997: 45–49).
“About eighteen hundred or two thousand a year; not more than
that.”

Elinor laughed. “Two thousand a year! One is my wealth. I guessed how
it would end.” (88)

Though Marianne’s definition of competence is on the “noble” side, she
is right about what it would take for Willoughby, the gentleman of leisure
she is in love with, to remain content with domestic life. Elinor’s estima-
tion of what would suffice for her material well-being is geared up to the
character of Edward Ferrars—a thousand a year would ensure the reason-
able standard of consumption that would keep her and her family within
the lower gentry and allow them to maintain the cultural, social, and reli-
gious activities that endow this class affiliation with idealized meaning. This
moderation of financial status also implies a utopian dream of defying the
first law of economics: there just might be enough for everyone. However,
the patriarchal disposition of property discussed in the first chapter of the
novel (along with the entail that motivates Mrs. Bennet’s agenda in Pride
and Prejudice) sacrifices the interests and cultural commitments of gentle-
women such as the Dashwood sisters to the principle of consolidation of
patricrhal landed estates and transmission of political power.

Elinor and Marianne combine leisure-class cultivation with the peaceable
ethics of activity and contentment. The goals of the sisters are contrasted
with those of their half-brother John and his wife and mother-in-law—pur-
suit of the expansion of property and elevation of social status. John Dash-
wood is an exponent of the atavistic mentality that Norbert Elias describes
by what was once “said of the American pioneer: ‘He didn’t want all the
land; he just wanted the land next to his’” (1982: 160). This too is an ideo-
logical commitment—John conceptualizes the enhancement of the estate
in terms of “duty”—which excuses him, as it were, from the small expenses
that might add to the comfort of his sisters and totally absolves him from
concern about the peasants who might be hurt by the enclosures:

“The inclosure of Norland Common, now carrying on, is a most serious
drain. And then I have made a little purchase within this half-year—East
Kingham Farm, you must remember the place, where old Gibson used to
live. The land was so very desirable for me in every respect, so immediately
adjoining my own property, that I felt it my duty to buy it. I could not
have answered it to my conscience to let it fall into any other hands.” (219)

John Dashwood’s greed is thus presented not as a personal vice but as
a status-determined commitment. His expenses during the stay in London are a matter of _noblesse oblige_: “we must live at a great expense while we are here” (219). His wife likewise considers a certain standard of living not as a comfort but as a duty, so that she can even pretend to envy Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters’ exemption from the burden of status symbols: “They will live so cheap! Their housekeeping will be nothing at all. They will have no carriages, no horses, and hardly any servants; they will keep no company, and can have no expenses of any kind! Only conceive how comfortable they will be!” (10).

Mr. and Mrs. Dashwood’s talk of their own obligation to buy adjacent property, maintain large households and equipages, and enclose the commons is not entirely describable in terms of a hypocritical double standard. Theirs is a clear expression of the _invidious emulation_ that in Thorstein Veblen’s _The Theory of the Leisure Class_ (1899) is analyzed as a distinctive feature of the _predatory_ leisure class—the tendency to compare people “with a view to rating and grading them in respect to relative worth or value—in an aesthetic or moral sense—and so awarding and defining the relative degrees of complacency with which they may legitimately be contemplated by themselves and others” (34). Versions of invidious emulation are one of the dominant issues in the English novels of the nineteenth century (Thackeray’s _Vanity Fair_, Dickens’s _Martin Chuzzlewit_ and _Our Mutual Friend_, George Eliot’s _Middlemarch_, among others), where they reflect not the attitudes of the nobility (to which Veblen traces them) but, mainly, the social ambitions and insecurities of the middle and upper middle classes.

Austen’s cumulative portrayal of her own class and of the cultural legacy of the Augustan age involves a privileging of the domestic ideal (Romantically tinged yet desentimentalized, with disinterested public service restricted to setting the ethical standards in one’s own parish), over a truculent ambitious quest for vaster power and “consequence.” She opts for what almost a century later Veblen would call the peaceable culture as opposed to the

14. Veblen here neglects the Kantian distinction between a person’s “worth” and a person’s “value” to others (see Kant 1946: 63–64).
15. “Consequence” is one of the insistently recurrent key words in _Mansfield Park_ (see McKenzie 1985), along (to a smaller extent) with the words “evil” and “connections” (see Fleishman 1967: 51–54) and the word “struggle” associated with the Malthusian “struggle for existence” (Knox-Shaw 2004: 176), the way the derivatives of “exert” are in _Sense and Sensibility_ (see Tave 1973: 113), the derivatives of “exhibit” in _Pride and Prejudice_, and those of “perfect” in _Emma_.

predatory one. Veblen, indeed, reduces the social hierarchy to two classes: the leisure class (scions or imitators of the once-predatory social prominents) and the toilers, people who maintain themselves by their industry instead of enjoying the spoils of belligerence.\footnote{Veblen’s description of social stratification offers an alternative both to the English traditional view of social hierarchy (upper, middle, and lower classes— with the subtleties of the distinction forming the daily substance of etiquette in Jane Austen’s milieu and surviving to this day) and to the Marxist nomenclature of class as related to the means and forces of production. In modern societies Veblen’s distinction between the leisure class (whatever the sources of its income) and the citizens who have to work in order to make a living is no longer (if it ever was) watertight, but Veblen’s theory is still illuminating in application to consumer culture, in addition to being useful for the analysis of the representation of society in realistic nineteenth-century fiction, whose authors responded to empirical data similar to those observed by Veblen himself. Peregrine Worsthorne’s 2004 \textit{In Defense of Aristocracy} is an interesting counterstatement to Veblen’s view of the aristocracy (as well as to the Marxist view).} Though Austen’s characters belong to the former class, and the few working professionals among them (clergymen, a barrister such as John Knightley, army and navy officers, governesses) are still closely linked to families in which primogeniture usually meant exemption from the need to make a living, most of her protagonists cultivate the values of the peaceable culture, and hence find themselves in opposition to authority figures in their environment. The ethical and personal goals of Austen’s protagonists are, indeed, pitted against the invidious emulation that, according to Veblen, commonly takes the shape of “conspicuous consumption” and “conspicuous leisure.” In discussing Jane Austen’s corpus, this scheme must be supplemented by conspicuous sexual charisma, or what may be called \textit{invidious sexuality}. The less demonstrative version of “conspicuous consumption” is behind the regularity with which a gentleman, who can pride himself on overcoming multiple hardships abroad, will tend to perceive minor hardships in his own home as indignities. The more demonstrative version is often resorted to by the so-called new money as well as by frauds and charlatans, such as Montague Tigg with his Anglo-Bengalee Life-Assurance company in Dickens’s \textit{Martin Chuzzlewit} (see Toker 1998) or Becky and Rawdon Crawley, who know “how to live well on nothing a year” in \textit{Vanity Fair}. With the exception of Mrs. Elton in \textit{Emma} (a \textit{parvenue} who takes vicarious pride in her brother-in-law’s estate and barouche-landau and sneers at the small quantity of white satin and lace at Emma’s wedding), Austen tends to delineate the less showy version of conspicuous consumption, still almost always critically. In \textit{Persuasion}, for instance, despite his debts, Sir Walter Elliot cannot stoop to giving up his carriage and some of his servants while staying in his family mansion but will not feel the discomfort of living in a
much smaller house in Bath because there the relatively cramped quarters are not a retrenchment but a general rule. Conspicuous wealth is Sir Walter’s “spiritual” need;\(^{17}\) by contrast, his daughter Anne, the protagonist of the novel, is disinclined to invidious emulation of any kind. The “competence” desired by Elinor Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* amounts to the minimal level of consumption that would still be classifiable as genteel.

In *Mansfield Park* the motif of conspicuous consumption includes Sir Thomas’s sending Fanny to the dinner at the Grants in his carriage—not because it may rain or because the order of the day is kindness but because it does not suit his status to have a niece of his *walk* half a mile to a formal dinner engagement. Maria and Julia Bertram hold Fanny “cheap” on finding that she is not interested in music (musical training belongs to the semiotics of “conspicuous leisure”) and has only two sashes (12). In the Mansfield circle it is unthinkable to make do without a necklace at a ball. If Henry Crawford makes his horses, carriage, hunting dogs, and jewelry available to his friends, he is, among other things, enjoying a benevolent version of conspicuous consumption: his friends’ consumption is an extension of his own.

Veblen’s theory does not apply to all national leisure-class cultures in a uniform way. Among the English gentry, partly owing to Protestant suspiciousness of lavish display, consumption tended to be less conspicuous than the cultural signs of leisure.\(^ {18}\) In literature, showy wastefulness was an unfailing butt of satire—as in Smollett’s *Humphry Clinker*. The semiotics of leisure, on the other hand, entered into a dialectical tension with the negative view of “idleness.” The resulting confusion is comically caricatured in Rushworth’s disparagement of the theatricals: “I am not as fond of acting as I was at first. I think we are a good deal better employed, sitting comfortably here among ourselves, and doing nothing” (128). A suave *reductio ad absurdum* of the paradox of diligent leisure (also explored in the portrayal of Rosamond Vincy in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*) is Henry Crawford’s elegantly cynical remark that because he does not like “to eat the bread of idleness” (157) he will set himself the challenge of seducing the affections of Fanny Price.

17. “Very much squalor and discomfort will be endured before the last trinket or the last pretence of pecuniary decency is put away. There is no class and no country that has yielded so abjectly before the pressure of physical want as to deny themselves all gratification of this higher or spiritual need” (Veblen 1899: 85; see also 167–68, 190).

18. To this day the so-called U-culture in Britain dispenses with a great deal of material appurtenances considered necessary for the display of successful middle-class status. This regularity is recurrently noted in Fox 2004.
A lady, in particular, needs always to be occupied, although, in contrast to the occupation of the “spinsters” of olden times, not in a way that would increase the family’s income or force her to change into work clothes.\textsuperscript{19} The “great deal of carpetwork” and “many yards of fringe” that Lady Bertram produces, Penelope-like, during her husband’s absence from Mansfield Park are useful mainly for demonstrating how “her own time had been irreproachably spent” (124); even so, it is Fanny, essentially in her role of an errand-running dependent, who must smooth My Lady’s “work” by untangling knotted threads. Insofar as the conduct of a gentleman’s wife is expected to be analogous to that of his upper servant,\textsuperscript{20} Fanny is, in fact though not in intention, trained accordingly while at the service of her aunts. Veblen’s remark that the servants’ (“vicarious”) leisure is not their own but an extension of the leisure of their masters (1899: 59–60) is foreshadowed in Henry Crawford’s commendation of the “unpretending gentleness” with which Fanny takes it “as a matter of course that she [is] not to have a moment at her own command” (202).

In a young lady’s home education in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century England, the emphasis on “accomplishments” (spelling, writing in a small hand, decorative needlework, drawing, music, dancing, French, and— as befits the age of imperial expansion—geography) rather than on academic or professional training was geared to the conspicuousness of leisure. Excellence in drawing and musical performance could be real amenities in the pretechnological times, and writing in a small hand saved postage, but in the absence of real talent or love of the art, most other accomplishments were social props and facilitators, or decoys for minor vanity (see Poovey 1984: 29), or just sanctioned ways of passing the time:\textsuperscript{21} the elegant constraint of Mrs. Grant’s tambour frame (47) supplements and attenuates the grimmer

\textsuperscript{19}. Cf. Nancy Armstrong on “labor that is not labor” (1987: 75–81).
\textsuperscript{20}. “The servant or wife should not only perform certain offices and show a servile disposition, but it is quite as imperative that they should show an acquired facility in the tactics of subservience—a trained conformity to the canons of effectual and conspicuous subservience. Even to-day it is this aptitude and acquired skill in the formal manifestation of the servile relation that constitutes the chief element of utility in our highly paid servants, as well as one of the chief ornaments of the well-bred housewife . . . trained service has utility, not only as gratifying the master’s instinctive liking for good and skilful workmanship and his propensity for conspicuous dominance over those whose lives are subservient to his own, but it has utility also as putting in evidence a much larger consumption of human service than would be shown by the mere present conspicuous leisure performed by an untrained person” (1899: 60–61).
\textsuperscript{21}. Jane Austen’s metaphor for her fiction as the “little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory” (Letters, 16 December 1816, p. 469), a version of the traditional “modesty topos” (cf. Curtius 1953: 83–85; Wolosky 2004: 155–99), also constitutes a claim to inoffensiveness by aligning her writing with the ladies’ recognized pastimes (see Gilbert and Gubar 1979: 107–9).
symbolism of the iron gate in front of which Fanny is seated in Sotherton. In Austen’s *Emma*, the recoil of the intelligent Jane Fairfax from the position of a governess may have as much to do with this curriculum as with the indignities and vexations of that ambiguous status.22

Fanny Price, whose happiest hours are spent in the unheated East Room (formerly a schoolroom) with her plants and her books, seems to endow a selected part of her own “accomplishments” with a genuine spiritual significance. The by-product of her being treated as “the child of the attic whose wicked stepmother (Aunt Norris) allows her no fire to keep her warm” (Meyersohn 1983: 226) is the absence of privacy—on cold days Fanny has to go down to the warm main drawing room, and stay there in attendance on her aunts. Thus if Fanny’s early education provides her with intellectual resources to compensate for social disadvantage, her position in the Bertram household tends to prevent her from falling back on those resources—until Henry Crawford’s courtship heightens her “consequence,” calls Sir Thomas’s attention to her, and induces him to overrule Mrs. Norris’s ban on a fire in the East Room.23

Jane Austen can be described as a “connected critic” (Walzer 1987: 38–40ff.) of the gentry at the margins of which she lived most of her life (see Collins 1994: ix–x), a critic whose relative well-being largely depends on this society.24 If, according to Veblen, the leisure class is an outgrowth of the primeval bellicose predatory aristocracy of greedy merit that, by force or fraud, had made its fortune and won positions of dominance over the peaceable population who eat their bread in the sweat of their brow (1899: 1–21),25 Austen’s

23. Mrs. Norris’s name may be an allusion to a notorious slave dealer about whom Austen must have read in Thomas Clarkson’s *History of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade* (see Gibbon 1982: 303). The name undergoes an intertextual carnivalization when given to a cat in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*.
24. A milder fictional portrayal of such a critic is the protagonist-narrator of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford*, affectionately critical of the elderly ladies who offer her confidence and seedcake.
25. This poetic anthropology is in tune with the history of the medieval heroica and the distribution of landed estates among the kings’ faithful. Fanny nostalgically romanticizes this past when disappointed by Sotherton’s modern chapel (61). Her ideals of chivalrous generosity are associated with Walter Scott’s characters and with romantic figures by the name of “Edmund,” which her beloved cousin happens to share with the anti-Jacobin author of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (see Kelly 1982: 34): “It is a name of heroism and renown—of kings, princes and knights; and seems to breathe the spirit of chivalry and warm affections” (145). The predatory ways of the distinguished ancestors of the older upper-class families actually occupy her mind as little as the Shakespearian use
favorite social setting is the unranked gentry, with a marginal sprinkling of knights and baronets. Her favorite characters are indifferent to the peerage (cf. Greene 1953); only the unredeemed Sir Walter Elliot and the social climber Mrs. Ferrars are presented as actively seeking “connections” with the aristocracy. Ideally, people belonging to the stratum ranging from the Bertrams of Mansfield Park to the Bennets of Pride and Prejudice were in a better position to effect a convergence of the genteel sense of responsibility with the values of the peaceable culture, especially since resident landownership imposed practical duties and counteracted the restlessness of unlimited leisure. The idealized conception of the commitments of the rural gentry involved the cultivation of family pieties, paternalist respect for the tenants of the estate, and the life of the spirit in which love would hold pride of place. Austen’s circumscribed oppositionality consists in her sympathy with those members of the leisure class who opt for peaceable moderation and thus, as the money talk in Sense and Sensibility shows, for the agenda of expanding the ranks of the cultivated upper class instead of reducing them by concentration of property.

The morphology of Austen’s novel-of-manners “courtship” plots can be described in the framework of this oppositionality and in a way different from that of the Bildungsroman plots in the same novels. The heroines find themselves in conflict with the authority figures, usually of the older generation, who restrain their freedom, but this conflict is outwardly displaced by one with the predatory rival in the same age group. There is little supererogation in Austen’s novels and even less absolute evil. The “wicked” figures such as John Thorpe in Northanger Abbey, Willoughby in Sense and...
Sensibility (a role-confusing namesake of the Sir Clement Willoughby in Fanny Burney’s Evelina), Wickham in Pride and Prejudice, Henry Crawford in Mansfield Park, Mr. Elliot in Persuasion, and to some extent even Frank Churchill in Emma are mild comedy-of-manners versions of traditional villains or rakes; they act not as adversaries but as catalysts, indirect facilitators of the heroines’ victories over the rival camps. As befits “cover stories,” such victories are usually crowned by the favor of the novels’ representatives of patriarchal authority. The positive male agents, the eligible jeunes premiers of Northanger Abbey and Sense and Sensibility (Henry Tilney and Edward Ferrars, respectively), function as prizes of the struggle; in Pride and Prejudice, Emma, and Persuasion, they (Darcy, Knightley, Wentworth) eventually replace the paternal authority figures; in Mansfield Park, Edmund Bertram combines these two functions.

The main issue of contention between Austen’s heroines and their rivals (Isabella Thorpe, Lucy Steel and the John Dashwoods, Caroline Bingley, Mrs. Elton) and rulers (General Tilney, Sir Thomas Bertram, Sir Walter Elliot and Lady Russell) is motives for marriage. Austen’s protagonists want to marry for love, or not at all; their antagonists are committed to the pursuit of “advantageous” marriages that raise one’s “consequence.” The most unabashed spokesperson for this principle in marital choice is Mary Crawford, Fanny’s rival in Mansfield Park, whose better feelings eventually conflict with her own maxims. Quite wealthy herself, Mary desires a marriage that will enhance her social position (“every body should marry as soon as they can do it to advantage” [32]), and considers a clergyman ineligible because, in her economy, “a clergyman is nothing” (66). Her conscious agenda is thus in tune with the upper-class politics of power expansion through a network of connections and alliances. Her best friends are women who have contracted loveless marriages and whom Edmund’s letter defines in terms of invidious emulation:

I do not like Mrs. Fraser. She is a cold-hearted, vain woman, who has married entirely from convenience, and though evidently unhappy in her marriage, places her disappointment, not to faults of judgement or temper, or disproportion of age, but to her being after all, less affluent than many of her acquaintance, especially than her sister, Lady Stornaway, as is the determined supporter of every thing mercenary and ambitious, provided it be only mercenary and ambitious enough. (285–86)

Fanny and Edmund consider such a philosophy of life corrupt (286, 288): for them it represents not an accepted state of affairs, one in which dynastic
marriages are the norm, but a falling-off from a chaste ideal. In that sense, Fanny and Edmund, as well as Elinor and Edward Ferrars in Sense and Sensibility, may be regarded as forces of progress, while Mary Crawford, who believes her principles to be advanced, is actually a reactionary. Indeed, it was only by the end of the eighteenth century that in the circles of the rural gentry “the ideal of a companionate marriage” had replaced the previous policy of arranged marriages (Waldron 1999: 116), still routinely practiced among the aristocracy. It is in the service of the latter predatory policy that in Pride and Prejudice Lady Catherine de Bourgh travels all the way to Elizabeth Bennet’s house in order to demand that she decline Darcy’s proposal.

The ideal of the companionate marriage is closer to the values of the growing middle class than to those of the Regency ruling upper classes that Mary Crawford emulates. Fanny’s and Edmund’s belief in a peaceable companionate marriage, with the couple’s financial standing beyond the mandatory “competence” (of about £500 per annum) regarded as a bonus rather than a goal, is liberal rather than conservative.

Fanny and Edmund, indeed, seem to strike the golden ratio in the scale of the gentry’s attitudes to labor and leisure. On one side of their unhurried occupations is Mrs. Norris’s unseemly love of trafficking with her neighbors’ housekeepers, gardeners, cooks, and coachmen. At the other extreme is the Crawford siblings’ impatience with productive labor and its signs: Henry wishes to shut out the blacksmith’s shop so that it might not be seen from Edmund’s Thornton Lacey parsonage (166), and Mary is astonished that, contrary to the “London maxim, that every thing is to be got with money” (43), at hay-making time farmers will not spare a cart for transporting her harp. Though Mary’s and Henry’s urban sophistication should suggest advanced views and freedom from provincial inhibitions, actually the two

28. What Denis de Rougemont writes of the new stability of marriage in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France was also largely true of England, where upper-class family “alliances” were likewise a matter of negotiation: “If the parties happened to have a real or fancied inclination for one another, this merely added an element of exquisite perfection and of agreeable luxury to the arrangement—an ultimate touch of whimsicality amounting almost to insolence. (In the eighteenth century it quickly came to be considered bad taste.)” (1956: 206).

29. The case of Charlotte Lucas, whose marriage of convenience is not wholly condemned in Pride and Prejudice, is an exception that proves the rule. Her knighted father purchased a country estate in lieu of “providing for” the future of his daughters; and Charlotte is shown to be sacrificing part of her own identity and deliberately blunting her senses in becoming Mrs. Collins: she chooses not to hear her husband’s tasteless remarks and to have her sitting room in the back part of the house that he frequents least.

30. Modern critics rather enjoy reading Mary’s comment on admirals, “Of Rears, and Vices, I saw enough. Now, do not be suspecting me of a pun, I entreat,” as an “indecent [remark] about homosexuality in the Navy” (Hammond 1993: 78), one that most of Austen’s target audience would choose not to understand.
display the dated mind-set of the predatory leisure class that, engaged in a Regency antecedent of the modern rat race, rejects the progressive agenda of convergence with the peaceable pursuits of happiness.31

When Mary falls in love with Edmund, she considers modifying her expectations while also trying to dissuade him from ordination. Yet even in the context of her jealousy of the Miss Owens in whose brother’s house Edmund seems to be spending a long time, she restates, albeit ironically, her maxim that it is “everybody’s duty to do as well for themselves as they can” (198). Jealousy, an unwelcome intruder in Fanny’s inner life, is a legitimate participant in Mary’s psychodrama. One of the reasons why Mary is not transformed by her love for Edmund is her habit of extending invidious emulation to the struggle of all against all in the virtual marriage market. She thrives on invidious sexuality, on competition for sexual power. Unable to imagine that others may be differently disposed, she thinks that Henry’s having been coveted by other women should make his offer attractive to Fanny, who would thus triumph over them. At the end of the novel a similar attitude is ascribed to Maria Bertram: when in the course of her adulterous affair she is reproached by Henry “as the ruin of all his happiness in Fanny,” she is given “no better consolation in leaving him, than that she had divided them” (314–15). Invidious sexuality is as important a motif in Mansfield Park as it is in Pride and Prejudice and, through the character of Lucy Steele, in Sense and Sensibility.

A touch of voyeurism is sometimes imputed to Fanny (especially in Auerbach 1998 [1983]), but Mary Crawford is actually the more neurotic voyeur of the two. When Crawford’s courtship of Fanny is no longer a secret to the Bertram clan, Mary savors the opportunity of writing to Fanny about Maria’s jealousy: “‘Shall I tell you how Mrs. Rushworth looked when your name was mentioned? I did not use to think her wanting in self-possession, but she had not quite enough for the demands of yesterday’” (267). If Fanny cannot help wishing to watch the rehearsals of “Lovers’ Vows,” Mary derives a voyeuristic enjoyment from the scenes of other women’s defeat in invidious sexuality.32 This may be the less obvious of the motives for her interest in Fanny, her inferior at any social game, yet the causal plotting of the dénouement suggests that the same feature may ultimately account for Mary’s own defeat with Edmund.

31. “Fanny and Edmund, not the Crawfords, are the children of the future, the Victorians. Mary Crawford in particular is an eighteenth-century type, with her exuberance, wit, and Johnsonian preference for the city” (Julia Prewitt Brown 1979: 87).

32. Cf. Daleski 1985: 135 on Mary’s and Henry’s “predatory” self-indulgence and “need for a constant provision of amusements.”
It has not been often noticed that Mary is a link in the causal chain that leads to Maria’s elopement with Henry: it is she who detains Henry in London when he is on his mission to Everingham (to adjust property relationships and prepare a world for Fanny). Mary’s second letter to Fanny in Portsmouth mentions that Henry “cannot any how be spared till after the 14th, for we have a party that evening. The value of a man like Henry on such an occasion, is what you can have no conception of; so you must take it upon my word, to be inestimable.” As Mary’s next sentence shows, for her this “value” is not confined to Henry’s social skills and ability to enliven gatherings: “He will see the Rushworths, which I own I am not sorry for—having a little curiosity—and so I think has he” (283). Fanny, always willing to see corruption in Mary, translates this into a sign of Mary’s “endeavour to secure a meeting between [Henry] and Mrs. Rushworth.” Without calling the intrigue by its name, Fanny thinks it in Mary’s “worst line of conduct, and grossly unkind and ill-judged” (283). This is the closest she comes to regarding Mary, to whom she owes several minor favors, as “wicked.”

In a conversation that Edmund holds with Fanny upon meeting the Crawford siblings, both comment on a flaw in Mary’s manners—her harsh remarks, made to new acquaintances, about the uncle to whom she owes a debt of gratitude (46). Manners, according to Veblen, are a sign of conspicuous leisure because a great deal of time has been invested, unproductively, in acquiring them. When in Austen’s novels bad manners on one occasion contrast with leisure-class flair on others, a slip in etiquette stands either for advanced liberal principles (subtly explored in Anne Elliot’s conduct in Bath in *Persuasion*) or, more frequently, for a moral flaw. Edmund tries to persuade himself that Mary’s flaunting of emotional independence from her uncle is not indicative of the latter; her own sense of her conduct is clearly associated with the former.33 The ending of the novel, in which Mary is not properly horrified by her brother and Maria Bertram’s affair, is a reversed replay of the same situation. Though Edmund does not realize that Mary’s moral flaw lies not so much in her treating adultery as a social mishap but in her cultivation of invidious sexuality (causally connected with Maria’s

33. Mary’s indiscreet remarks on her uncle on their first meeting involve, among other things, an implicit expectation of reciprocal frankness and thus constitute an advance that would, at the time, seem too “forward.” Yet it is well motivated psychologically—in terms of the trauma of Mary’s early experience in her foster home (see Wiltshire 1997: 62).
adultery), he correctly takes her attitude to the debacle not as vicious in itself but as symptomatic of values that place her outside his ethos. If for Mary freedom from middle-class lip service to moral appearances is a matter of “improvements” introduced by each generation (along with liberation from family prayers in the chapel), in the novel’s system of norms her tactlessness signifies a neglect of moral realities and a commitment to the atavistic predatory agenda. Fanny’s moral and matrimonial victory over her rival amounts to a local victory of liberal oppositionality over a system of values that is presented as corrupt rather than obsolete.

The tactics of presenting social opportunism as a corruption of positive values is part of Austen’s strategies of opposition to authority figures—opposition, for which, as noted above, the conflict with the rival is a “cover story.” In Mansfield Park, as in Sense and Sensibility, Austen critiques the agenda of the expansion of the clan’s power through increase of wealth and calculated marriages; however, she presents this agenda not as a norm but as a symptom of deterioration, a fall from the formerly more idealistic principles associated with status and property as trusteeship (see Duckworth 1971: 129). Fanny Price, the mistreated shabby genteel dependant of Sir Thomas Bertram, is shown developing not into a resentful rebel but into an upholder of the very values from which the baronet and his family have been sliding away.

Austen’s first novel, Northanger Abbey, was written several years after the Jacobin terror in France, during the period of the British political reaction to the French Revolution. As noted above, Austen has long been considered either an apolitical writer or else one associated with the anti-Jacobin trend in the English novel, especially since her novels were read as promoting

34. The view that the holding of old landed estates signified the gentry’s undertaking the guardianship of the country’s high-cultural tradition (expressed, for instance, in the vast library of the Darcy mansion, which all the generations of the family regarded as their duty to complement with what they considered the best of their contemporary works) is a cultural translation of the medieval understanding that the estates distributed by the kings to their supporters are to be held “in trust” for the king—an understanding subverted by the transformation of these estates into property of the owners.

35. Bernard Paris (1997: 144) contrasts the “education pattern” in nineteenth-century fiction with the “vindication pattern” in terms of which the process of Fanny’s gaining recognition is comparable to the stories of Henry Esmond and Jane Eyre. It is as a guardian of the idealized version of traditional loyalties that Fanny gains her vindication at the end of Mansfield Park.

36. The latest known revision dates from 1803; the latest Gothic novel mentioned by the characters is of 1797.
traditional family values. If Edmund Burke presented the French Revolution in terms of a crime against the family, in particular, the family of the King (cf. Hunt 1992), the preservation of the manners and the family morals of the English gentry was regarded as a guarantee of political stability. And though Austen and her present-day readers sympathize with the heroine of her unfinished “Catherine, or the Bower,” who wonders, in response to her aunt’s scolding, how her having paid more than a standard amount of attention to a young man at a provincial ball could possibly endanger the security of the nation (cf. Claudia Johnson 1988: 1–6), her fiction ultimately points to the method behind the apparent absurdity of conservative positions: the “metatheatre of manners” (Tanner 1986: 27) is mandatory for maintaining the authority of the class whose economic and political status rests on tradition rather than on the power of cash or an armed force.37

Austen disapproved, no doubt, of the guillotine, yet she disapproved no less of the axe—especially the one with which Mary, Queen of Scots was beheaded on Queen Elizabeth’s orders.38 She may have carnivalized her own predilection for the mistreated Stuart dynasty,39 but she was earnestly conservative in not doubting the justice of the general socioeconomic stratification of her society. Her Tory-radical objections were to its excesses as well as to its moral oppressiveness to the disadvantaged members of her own class: the dowryless young women, shabby genteel spinsters, younger sons, victims of the rules of precedence. Authority figures in her novels are judged in terms of their role in this oppression—in Northanger Abbey, for instance, the anti-Jacobin General Tilney dampens the spirits of his children, is suspected of psychological violence to his wife, and is guilty of an unpardonable breach of etiquette towards the heroine; moreover, his boast of “burning midnight oil” (172) over pamphlets for the sake of the nation may suggest that he works as a political censor (see Hopkins 1978 and Minma 1996). When the young people are by themselves, on one occasion they slip into a reference to a complex social issue, the enclosures; from enclosures the conversation moves to politics, and from politics it is “an easy step to silence” (100). Silence, an embarrassing lull in a conversation, also follows the question

37. Cf. Worsthorne on an epiphenomenon of British civility: “Anyone who spoke like a gentleman, dressed like a gentleman, carried himself like a gentleman . . . were more than able to overawe, and do so just as authoritatively by carrying a rolled umbrella and wearing a bowler hat as did the boys in blue by wielding truncheons and wearing helmets” (2004: 83).
38. In another piece of juvenilia, her mischievous “History of England,” Austen allowed Henry VIII the merit of “not being quite so bad as his daughter Elizabeth” (1978: 72).
39. Austen’s juvenilia, unlike her mature works, contain numerous carnivalesque touches: “There was humour and absurdity; and every now and then she must have shocked her readers—the members of her own family—by standing morality on its head” (Jarvis 1996: 32).
about slave trade in *Mansfield Park*. In *Northanger Abbey*, however, the step from politics to silence turned out to be prophetically symbolic: this was Austen’s only completed novel not to be published in her lifetime.

Austen’s later works, though ostensibly apolitical, are characterized by implicit social oppositionality. In her last completed novel, *Persuasion*, the heroine, a baronet’s daughter, turns her back on her father’s circle and marries a naval officer of humble antecedents. Though this step is facilitated by the co-optation of the successful representatives of this profession into the upper middle class of the time, the values of the social enclave from which Anne Elliot exits are questioned almost openly, even though, as in *Mansfield Park*, invidious emulation is again presented not as the norm but as a corruption of these values. In *Mansfield Park* the oppositional critique of the moral world of the gentry is even more radical than in *Persuasion*, albeit less direct. It consists in the suggestion that there may be life after losing one’s niche in the leisure class and that the culture of that class need not be regarded as an absolute standard.

This class culture is challenged—covertly—in the Portsmouth episode of the novel. When, secretly in love with her cousin Edmund Bertram, Fanny rejects the affluent Henry Crawford, Sir Thomas Bertram sends her back to her parents in Portsmouth under the pretext of family feelings but actually

40. Fanny’s interest in the problem is usually believed to be critical of slavery, but Claudia Johnson calls this into doubt, noting that “Herself a perfectly colonized subject, [Fanny], too, is one of Sir Thomas’s slaves, every bit as bound to and constituted by the system that oppresses her as the hero of Edgeworth’s appalling story *The Grateful Negro*” (1993: 114). The “dead silence” (136) that follows Fanny’s question ostensibly suggests the egotistic Bertram children’s lack of interest in their father’s concerns (cf. Said 1993: 96), their “indifference and shallowness” (Waldron 1999: 12), yet it may just as well also mean the family’s awareness of how much their well-being depends on slave labor (see Southam 1998). The slave trade, much discussed at the beginning of the nineteenth century (see Terry 1995), had been prohibited by a Parliament bill in 1807 but a similar bill was passed again in 1811, to close the loopholes left by the original legislation. Sir Thomas’s journey to the West Indies may be dated some time towards the end of the first decade of the century (see the calculations in I. Armstrong 1988: 43–44 and Knox-Shaw 2004: 180–81). John Wilshire, however, calls the possibility of precise dating into doubt because of inconsistencies probably stemming from revisions Jane Austen made at different periods (2005: xliii–lvi; see also the useful overview of debate on Jane Austen’s allusions to slavery [lxiv–lxxv]). To this one might object by surmising that in the latest revision Austen would have taken care to preempt unwelcome interpretive options. By 1814 many of Austen’s readers were likely to know that the ban on the slave trade first led to a deterioration in the conditions of the already owned slaves in West Indian plantations because overseers attempted to maximize the profit from the residual pool of slave labor (see Hammond 1993: 77). This backfired: the resulting unrest among the slaves caused a reduction of revenues. At the same time, in England the returns from country estates dwindled because of the wartime taxation and drain on rural manpower (and eventually the poor harvests of 1811 and 1812—no wonder the farmers cannot spare a cart to transport Mary’s harp during haymaking). In any case, G. M. Trevelyen’s view that in the mirror that “Miss Austen held up to nature in the drawing room, it is hard to detect any trace of concern or trouble arising from the war” (1942: 582–83) was more representative than right.
as a punishment and a warning. The narrative of the Portsmouth episode promotes our sympathy for Fanny’s unhappiness, but it can also smuggle in a disapproval of some of her culture-bound attitudes. Though the account of Fanny’s experience in Portsmouth is filtered through her consciousness, it contains clues to a perspective different from her own.\(^{41}\)

Fanny fails to appreciate the moral reality of her lower-middle-class parents’ disorganized, stuffy, unhygienic, noisy, ill-mannered way of life. This attitude seems to legitimize the commentators’ near-consensus concerning the incivility, callousness, inefficiency, and confusion in the Portsmouth inner-city dwelling of the Prices, the populous family of the coarse half-pay officer of the Marines.\(^ {42}\) However, Austen’s ostensibly negative treatment of the household may also be read as an oppositional maneuver, a decoy: the Portsmouth Prices have a system of values of their own, a *valid* system, though different from that of their landed relations. One of the things that Fanny does not understand is that polished manners, a sign of conspicuous leisure (Veblen 1899: 45–51), are far less important for the status of the Portsmouth family than for that of the Bertrams.

The main trouble with most members of the Price family is lack of consideration for each other’s minor everyday needs—this is presented as the result of constant hardships, of Mr. Price’s egoism, and of Mrs. Price’s well-meaning inefficiency. Ironically, trivial but constant discomforts may be a good seasoning for the Price children, whose prospects are hard work and struggle to keep afloat. Indeed, these children, especially the boys, seem to be doing remarkably well, which suggests that the parents have done something right after all. William, the firstborn, is the most advanced and cultivated, but there are two more grown brothers, one “a clerk in a public office in London” and the other a midshipman (259). There is also Sam,

\(^ {41}\) The unreliability of Fanny’s ethical perspective is veiled by the third-person narrative. Whereas a first-person narrator can be expected to be ethically unreliable, in the case of the third-person center-of-consciousness technique it is more difficult to distinguish the perspective of the focal character from that of the implied author. In the Portsmouth episode Fanny’s perspective is implicitly criticized by the ample supply of meaningful detail that Fanny fails to process.

\(^ {42}\) Thus Marvin Mudrick maintains that Portsmouth is “the limbo of the morally unborn” and the Price family is “lost except for the few who by luck and force of purpose have succeeded in tearing themselves away” (1952: 174). Lionel Trilling disapproves of Fanny’s family for their indifference to her—“of a piece with the general indecorum of their home”; he sympathizes with her disgust at the “half-clean and the scarcely tidy, of confusion and intrusion” and with the “vulgarity that thrives in these surroundings” (1955: 217). Howard S. Babb perceives the Price household as “dirty and chaotic” and “self-engrossed” (1962: 154). D. D. Devlin (1975), who notes that the novel critiques rural conservatism, still sees the world of Fanny’s Portsmouth family as one of economic struggle “that leaves people morally stunted” (1975: 110). Marilyn Butler discusses the Portsmouth episode as Austen’s version of the “low-life sequence” common in anti-Jacobin novels (1975: 244–45), eliding the corrections that Austen has introduced into that schema.
who, like his sister Susan, seems to be ready to take the responsibility for whatever needs to be done. The two younger schoolboys are full of healthy animal spirits.

Mr. Price, Fanny’s father, is guilty of a less than moderate fondness for alcohol and peer company—compensations of many an impecunious retired officer (especially one who does not have an intellectual disposition and resources such as Captain Harville’s in Persuasion yet who would have been granted more sympathy by a writer such as D. H. Lawrence). However, in the context of Austen’s general sensitivity to family dynamics, the presence of healthy, vigorous, and successful children must suggest that the father is not entirely ineffectual. There is something genuine in Mr. Price’s ways, even in his egocentric neglect of Fanny after his first cordial greeting. His interest in his profession is still so keen and aesthetically tinged that it infects almost all his sons. His threat to “be after” the young ones if they continue making noise is disregarded, obviously because the children know that it is not meant in earnest (260); nor is his statement, on Maria Bertram’s elopement, that had she been his daughter he would have “taken a rope’s end at her” much more than a façon de parler. Mr. Price may not have been the one responsible for William’s and Susan’s manifest commitments to active kindness, but his presence certainly does not create a restraint or cast a gloom on his children’s spirits, as does the presence of the tyrannical General Tilney of Northanger Abbey or even the courteous Sir Thomas Bertram in their families.

For all the mutual elbowing in everyday affairs, the Prices are knit together by common concerns. When Fanny first arrives at her father’s house, the housemaid meets the carriage at the door—not so much to help the travelers as to report the news that “the Thrush is gone out of harbour” (254), and that an officer has been in, looking for William. This servant, however unschooled, is a faithful delegate of the family’s anxieties: she has been on the lookout for William, who seems to arrive just in the nick of time. The same piece of news is then repeated, in greater detail, by Fanny’s brother Sam, “a fine tall boy of eleven” (255). It is on the Thrush that William is to start his career as an officer rather than midshipman. Young Sam is also to start his seafaring career on this ship, as a cabin boy. Yet Fanny is struck by the lack of attention to herself rather than by the importance of her brothers’ not being late to board that ship. As she has not developed an interest in the Thrush43 equal to her family’s, she is pained by the uncouth and noisy ways

43. See Chazal 1991 on the symbolism of the ship’s name and its connection with another bird, Sterne’s starling, alluded to in the Sotherton episode.
of the household and largely oblivious of the urgencies of the situation and the ill timing of her visit. Nor does she understand that her mother’s remark to William, “here every thing comes upon me at once” (256), is not banal moaning but a quite accurate reference to the complex rituals of meeting a daughter and parting with two sons at one and the same time.

A hint at the problematic character of Fanny’s attitude is given in the ironic inversion in her response to her mother, who meets her with an embrace, “with looks of true kindness, and with features which Fanny loved the more, because they brought her aunt Bertram’s before her” (256)—but we almost forget this under the influence of Fanny’s hurt when, the first greetings being over, Mrs. Price turns to William, again with the news about the Thrush and with still more details relating to the suddenness of its departure. It is mainly on a repeated reading that we are at leisure to note the effect of gradation—with still more particulars, but of the kind peculiarly interesting to seamen, the same news is then detailed to William by his father, who takes an obvious pleasure in the professional talk and does not even notice Fanny in the twilight. Meanwhile Fanny, tired after the long ride, is concerned not about the brother’s gear being packed on time but about her tea not being served.

One of the most insistently recurrent motifs of this episode is haste: not a minute should be wasted before apprising William of the fact that a Mr. Campbell will come for him before six o’clock. William has no time for tea with Fanny because he has to dress and pack; the confusion among his things (their privacy has obviously not been respected in his absence) must be put right in a hurry with the inefficient help of his mother and the servant. Indeed, William seems to get ready just minutes before Mr. Campbell arrives.

The density of the motifs of bustle and haste emphasizes that this family has no leisure to flaunt. They may, however, have a residual hankering after outer signs of leisure: for example, Susan has “the dread of being thought to demean herself” by eventually serving the tea. Indeed, the social circle of the Prices, where, according to Fanny, the men are “coarse,” the women “pert” (exempt from Evangelical self-effacing modesty?), and everybody “underbred,” has its own debased version of invidious emulation: the young women

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44. There are thus four utterances regarding the Thrush: the servant’s (18 words), Sam’s (83 words), the mother’s (111 words), and the father’s (281 words). However neglectful of each other the Prices may be in everyday matters, they are all deeply if inefficiently invested in the career goals of the boys.

45. Mr. Campbell turns out to be a polite young surgeon—what an opportunity for courtship lost!—Dickens will pick it up with Allan Woodcourt and Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*. 
there regard Fanny’s upper-class manners as false pretense because she exhibits neither the expected signs of upper-class leisure (she does not play the piano) nor the fashionable signs of conspicuous consumption such as “fine pelisses” (268). Susan runs the risk of contamination by such false values, yet her pride in being active and useful (260) augurs well for her development along more advanced ethical lines.

The Prices, indeed, do not really need a metatheater of manners in their own house: their sense of self-worth does not depend on displays of conspicuous leisure. But when good manners are needed, the proper front can be put on without much difficulty. Indeed, on meeting Henry Crawford, Mr. Price surprises Fanny by behaving without the crudeness that he shows within the family circle: “His manners now, though not polished, were more than passable; they were graceful, animated, manly; his expressions were those of an attached father, and a sensible man;—his loud tones did very well in the open air, and there was not a single oath to be heard” (274). Fanny, pleased enough with this performance, sees only part of the reason for it: “Such was his instinctive compliment to the good manners of Mr. Crawford” (273–74), forgetting that Crawford is not only her suitor but, more important, the nephew of the Admiral who has secured William’s promotion and can perhaps one day do the same for the other brothers. Occasional good manners are here not a matter of conspicuous leisure but a professional qualification that an officer father of young seamen cannot forgo. And Mr. Price is an old professional, although Fanny cannot sympathize with the apparent triviality of his “never-failing interest” in the dockyard.

Insofar as the advancement of the Price boys depends on leisure-class connections, they will be likely to treat the acquisition of the appropriate social skills almost as a matter of professional training. William Price provides a study of social expediency when, still an uncommissioned midshipman, he visits the Bertrams in Mansfield Park. His official motive for the visit, to see his beloved sister Fanny, is genuine, but it is not unaccompanied by a practical ulterior motive: to explore the family connections in the hope of getting a commission. William starts by charming his Mansfield audience by tales of his exploits; then, during a dinner party, he proceeds to drop hints about his need for promotion. Advised by Mrs. Norris to visit Maria and her husband, he notes that as a “poor scrubby midshipman” (168) he will hardly be welcome in Mrs. Rushworth’s Brighton residence. When his aunt replies that he would find Rushworth “most sincerely disposed to regard all the connections of [their] family as his own,” he mutters, in an understated pun, that he would rather find him “private secretary to the first Lord than any thing else” (168). He then complains that Portsmouth girls “turn up
their noses at any body who has not a commission,” and reinforces the point: “I begin to think I shall never be a lieutenant, Fanny. Every body gets made but me” (171). Elements of this line of conduct are, however, interspersed with accounts of the concerns of other characters, so that we tend to miss their consistency. On the other hand, while making the former two remarks, William is successfully engaged in a card game of “Speculation,” during which he sells court cards “at an exorbitant rate” and drives “as hard a bargain” against the others as he can (167). His camouflaged maneuvers meet with success: in a bid for Fanny’s affection, Henry Crawford soon applies to his uncle for help in arranging William’s promotion. It is interesting that when William engages with his wealthy and ranked relatives on their own grounds, he is presented as displaying signs of the very predaceousness that, according to Veblen, characterizes the leisure classes.

The sphere of life to which William and his Portsmouth family belong, and which extends to Captain Harville and some other characters of Persuasion, constitutes the oppositional room for maneuver for which Austen’s heroines can opt: it is in Portsmouth that Fanny moves from passive principle to active kindness. Austen deploys the motifs of common interests, haste, bustle, noise, and animal spirits in a way that can be distilled in order to build up a consistent system of principles to live by—a system alternative to that of the leisure-class gentry. Austen’s target audience, the Fanny Prices and Edmund Bertrams, the Anne Elliots and Elizabeth Bennets of her world, could well be sensitized to this ethos—even though its virtues are camouflaged by its surface inferiority to the idealized standard of the leisure-class manners and morals.

Indeed, though in Mansfield Park and Persuasion Jane Austen denies the absolute value of this standard, she does idealize it—by, for instance, contrasting Julia Bertram (whose forced but impeccable politeness to Mrs. Rushworth is not based on a genuine considerateness) with Fanny Price,

46. The seemingly aleatic but actually agonistic card game is here a faint reprise of the theatricals, a seemingly mimetic but actually agonistic game during which the players highlight the usually subdued features of their characters. William displays his predatory traits, Fanny her habitual compliance, and Henry Crawford the intriguer’s enjoyment of dealing with two ladies’ cards as well as his own, and picking up William’s hints, all at the same time.

47. Cf. Peter Rabinowitz (1977: 126–27 and 1987: 29–42) on “authorial audience,” which can be redescribed as including the mind-set of readers removed from the author in time or cultural space (or both) but seeking intimate understanding of the cultural codes that the author shared with her sociologically specific target audience.
who is constantly trying to live up to the gentle and selfless image that she is taught to project. Manners mark the standard of inner moral refinement that the individual is encouraged to seek—even when they constitute a hypocritical lip service to that standard. This version of everyday civility endeared Austen’s novels not only to her target audience but also to her hurdle audience (see Toker 2005), the audience that would control the contents of family bookshelves and the subscriptions to circulating libraries—people like General Tilney as well as Sir Thomas Bertram, who, upon his return from his plantation in Antigua, quite symbolically destroys every unbound copy of Lovers’ Vows in Mansfield Park.

Yet even the hurdle audience can be drawn into the mildly oppositional stance through the sheer game of mimicry: Jane Austen’s emotionally maturing heroines are presented in ways that attract sympathetic imagination—so that even a real-life copy of a Sir Thomas could imaginatively enter the life of an Elinor Dashwood or an Anne Elliott and vicariously reenact her oppositional stance, temporarily abandoning his own. The high-brow scorn for “human-interest” stories was not as widespread in Austen’s times as it became (see Carey 1993) in the early twentieth century. Genuine aesthetic experience is sometimes hard to distinguish from sympathetic identification with characters of “human interest” stories. In late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century England, at least judging by Henry Tilney’s comments on the novel-reading in Northanger Abbey, potential for vicarious experience did not necessarily discredit a narrative even in the eyes of the highly educated. Strictly speaking, even in the twentieth century the Nabokovian scorn for “human interest” narratives has been reserved mainly for works that exploit thrills or sensationalism for marketability, in the absence of less easily attainable claims to distinction. It is in a similar spirit, though with more than a grain of salt, that Fielding explained his prefatory chapters by the need to show a true skill in writing, beyond the imitable spinning of a yarn. Austen, like Fielding and Dickens, can well be read “for the plot,” with the aesthetic experience, whether in response to style, humor, energeia, or intellectual design, overtaking the reader unawares.

The reasons why Austen’s heroines tend to become the Other into whom we readily project ourselves are rooted both in her novels’ form of content and in their form of expression. The features of the form of content that

48. In an evening prayer composed by Jane Austen, we find the period formula for the relationship between outward conduct and inner reality: “Give us grace almighty father, so to pray, as to deserve to be heard, to address thee with our hearts, as with our lips.” (1954: 453; italics added).

49. Sir Thomas’s descendant, Thomas Gradgrind, M.P., of Dickens’s Hard Times, likewise includes censorship of the children’s reading matter in his educational practices.
promote sympathetic identification are associated with the heroines’ character and condition with their intelligence and integrity as well as agenda of moral and cultural self-improvement: it is only occasionally (e.g., in the episode of the Box Hill picnic in *Emma*) that they temporarily repel the reader, breaking the spell of the vicarious engrossment in their lives. The prominent feature of their condition is their peculiarly disadvantaged position (not excluding Emma’s predicament at the opening of the novel)—the kind of narrative instability that wins the readers’ interest in their welfare; moreover, in the bulk of the narrative their sorrows are great (bereavement, expulsion, separation) and their joys small—according to Adam Smith, it is precisely this asymmetry of grief and joy that facilitates our sympathetic entering into the situation of another. The narrative techniques (form of expression) that facilitate this ludic *mimicry* (sympathetic identification is a game so long as the object of sympathy is a fictional character rather than a real-life Other) include a gradual attachment of the narrative focus to the heroines: Austen’s novels except *Emma* (and to some extent *Northanger Abbey*) open with scenes in which the heroines do not participate; they are introduced gradually; it is by degrees that we are led into their minds, as if in preference to anyone else around them. This shift in focus is usually supplemented by a suspension of dramatic irony. Incidentally, in the Portsmouth episode of *Mansfield Park* dramatic irony is replaced by an ample provision of signals that not only Fanny but also first-time readers fail to decipher; the readers are thus allowed to remain in denial of the particularly subversive oppositional contraband in this part of the novel.

If, as the previous chapter has suggested, the experience of reading a carnivalesque narrative is often, owing to multiple stumbling blocks, agonistic and non-carnivalesque, Austen’s novels point to a converse tendency: the reading of non-carnivalesque oppositional narrative may promote the kind of *mimicry* that takes us, as readers, out of our own predicament and in the direction of the mind and feelings of an imaginary other. The mode of the text and the mode of reading may form a chiasmic relationship, with some overlap in the intersection. Oppositionality, indeed, shares the festive carnival’s effect of perpetuating the prevailing social structure by making it more livable. In both, cultural patterns go into remission, and temporary transgressions or relaxation of rules create loopholes in the grim logic of invidious emulation, struggles for social “consequence,” advantageous marriages, aggressively competitive sexuality, and irreversibility of personal recklessness. The happy endings of Austen’s novels almost invariably constitute witty and well-integrated reprises of the novels’ recurrent motifs: almost as in *Tom Jones*, in the regular course of events, the lives of Austen’s
protagonists seem to be headed for grimmer alternatives, but the ludic turns, which we can usually find carefully though unobtrusively prepared, enact a counterlogic. Everything (or almost) may yet be well with the world where the regularities against which Austen’s heroines struggle can be presented as errors, corruptions, deviations from the path of ideal integrity rather than the actual order of the day, a massive background for the exceptional. And it may, after all, be true that a society in which even the hurdle audience can be brought to believe that it shares the hedged-in oppositional liberalism of a Jane Austen is one in which the movement of political reform and measured social mobility may be partly accountable for an evolutionary mode of development, eschewing violent convulsions such as the recurrent revolutionary cataclysms of late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France.50

The most radical of the latter cataclysms is refracted, through the prism of cross-cultural comparison, in Dickens’s A Tale of Two Cities.

50. I have been glad to discover Jonathan Dollimore’s like-minded reading of the so-called poetic justice in Elizabethan and Jacobean plays: “In mid-twentieth century a generation of critics tried to convince themselves that this didactic dénouement effectively discredits or at least neutralizes the subversive questioning and thought which preceded it. Unfortunately for them, from a creative, a theatrical and an intellectual perspective, the didactic dénouement does not so much close off that questioning as enable it: . . . far from foreclosing on it, a conforming framework actually licensed a subversive content” (2003: 41).