

Men and national security in *Mansfield Park*

Abstract

Throughout the Regency period, nationalist ideology increasingly informed conceptions of English masculine identity. Men were constructed as the guardians of the nation, both in relation to the conflict with France, and also as the preservers of English national character and values. The men of Mansfield Park – particularly Sir Thomas, Tom and Edmund Bertram – are unequal to this task as they are unable to recognise the threat to domestic and national security posed by the Crawfords, or to redeem the estate and the family when they come to the brink of moral ruin. These men therefore fall short of the early nineteenth century ideal of English masculinity. Throughout Mansfield Park Jane Austen presents Fanny Price as the moral guide of the family and estate, and questions the wisdom of placing political and moral authority in the hands of men.

Mansfield Park is the most overtly political of Austen's novels, in that it is grounded in and responds to contemporary political events and cultural trends, including the second Regency period, the Napoleonic Wars and continued threat of invasion from France, and unrest throughout the empire following the 1807 act to abolish slavery. The links between Mansfield Park and these events have attracted critical attention of a different nature to Austen's other novels. Mansfield Park has been interpreted as an allegory of the Regency crisis. The absence of Sir Thomas Bertram, and his replacement by his irresponsible and selfish son Tom as head of the family and estate, can be interpreted as paralleling the madness of King George III and his replacement with his dissolute and

self-indulgent son the Prince of Wales, who showed no interest in government despite his position as ruler of the nation and empire (Sales, 93-106). Mansfield Park has also been interpreted as a reworking of King Lear, in which Sir Thomas recognises the true worth of his young niece Fanny, only after his two elder daughters have betrayed him (Ford, 95-110). These two interpretations sit comfortably together. The fact that King Lear was rarely performed during the Regency period, owing to its similarity to the actual situation of the British royal family, seems to emphasise the novel's political relevance. Finally, Austen's references to Sir Thomas' colonial interests in Antigua, have lead Mansfield Park to be interpreted as an example of early nineteenth century complicity in the imperial project, specifically with regard to slavery (Said, 80-97; Fraiman, 206-110).

Each of these interpretations of Mansfield Park is linked to either the domestic or imperial aspects of English nationhood, suggesting that Austen engaged with the ideology of English nationalism which flourished during the period. Renewed interest in national identity and nationalist sentiment was prompted by a range of factors, including an anthropological interest in the concepts of national character and identity (Langford, 7), debate over the style of sociability appropriate to the modern 'civilised' state, as well as the response to the French Revolution. It was during this period that the words 'Englishness' and 'un-English' have their first recorded usage, and the phrase 'national character' became a fashionable term (Langford, 1, 7). National character was understood to be transitory, as susceptible to the successes and failures of the nation, and therefore as requiring constant maintenance and remedial attention (Langford, 8-9). National character was also understood to reside principally in the men of the nation. Men were

therefore the protectors and guardians of the nation both in real terms, in relation to the war with France, and also in more abstract terms relating to English national identity. Further, Linda Colley argues that women recognised and encouraged the duty of men to protect them – both in terms of patriotism, and in terms of male identity (Colley, 257). In this paper I would like to examine Mansfield Park in relation to the role of men and England's national security.

The characteristics of English men were a subject of intellectual and popular debate through essays, periodicals, conduct books, theatre, poetry and fiction. The image of English national character – and thus ideal English masculinity – developed and distributed through these genres was based around the concept of sincerity. England was associated with genuine feeling and emotion as opposed to the perceived duplicity and artifice of the French. This purity was expressed by an artless and honest manner, through which the thought of the mind and the emotion of the heart were spoken with earnestness and courage. Crucially, this frankness of speech and manner, and forthrightness of opinion and action, reflected the moral independence of the individual man. Men should be self-reliant in their judgment and consistent in their behaviour, based on their own internal standards of duty, morality and honesty. This would ensure that they were unafraid to oppose the opinions, styles and trends of popular society.

Such ideals were increasingly informed and influenced by nationalist ideology, and patriotism became an essential component of masculine identity. In An Enquiry into the Duties of Men in the Higher and Middle Classes of Society, Gisborne described

patriotism as a moral duty and obligation incumbent on all men (Gisborne, 111). Cobbett wrote in Advice to Young Men that:

Love of one's native soil is a feeling which nature has implanted in the human breast, and that has always been peculiarly strong...in Englishmen. God has given us a country of which to be proud, and that freedom, greatness, and renown, which were handed down to us by our wise and brave forefathers, bid us perish to the last man, rather than suffer the land of their graves to become a land of slavery, impotence and dishonour (Cobbett, 333-34).

These and other sources from the period emphasise that men should place the welfare of the nation and the protection of the English people, morality and values, ahead of their own personal self-interest. Fordyce elaborates on the role of men to protect England and everything it stands for in Addresses to Young Men. The opening statement acknowledges the link between masculine conduct and character and familial and national continuity. Throughout Addresses to Young Men, Fordyce fears that the degeneration of qualities composing traditional conceptions of masculinity will leave England vulnerable. He compares England to Athens and Rome, arguing that these nations were strong while they retained their 'masculine spirit', 'the frugality and simplicity of their manners', and 'their respect for the sweets of home', for 'female decency' and for 'conjugal fidelity' (Fordyce, 141).

Finally, Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France expresses similar sentiments as the aforementioned texts but articulates a more complex relationship

between English nationhood and masculine identity. Unlike Fordyce who feared the increased degeneracy of English youth, Burke perceived Englishmen as preserving qualities traditionally gendered as male (as opposed to their destruction in France), and characterised England as an essentially masculine nation.ⁱ In Reflections, Burke celebrates aspects of English national character which he views as different from the French. His description is overwhelmingly masculine, emphasising ‘duty’, ‘liberal and manly morals’, and male-dominated institutions of power such as the monarchy, the clergy, parliament, guardians, magistrates and estates. At various points throughout Reflections, English religion and worship, English freedom, English sentiment, English heroic enterprise, English pride, and the management of English estates are all described as ‘manly’.

Whereas Burke draws on nationalist ideology, and also on the estate/state metaphor to celebrate English masculine identity and to affirm male authority, in Mansfield Park Austen uses these themes to question the wisdom of placing moral and political power in the hands of men.ⁱⁱ Mansfield Park is characterised by a distinct absence of morally sanctioned masculine authority. Unlike Austen’s other novels, Mansfield Park is focused on the survival and continuance of an estate rather than on the courtship narrative of the heroine, Fanny Price, and Edmund Bertram. Austen uses male characters and their influence over the estate to represent the internal and external forces which threaten national security. With the exception only of the sailor William Price, the male characters are deficient in their roles as English men, particularly in terms of estate management and

family responsibility, when compared with early nineteenth century standards of ideal English masculinity.

Sir Thomas is reserved, strict, severe and gruff in his approach to domestic life. Despite his good intentions, Sir Thomas fails to be welcoming to Fanny on her first arrival at Mansfield Park:

Sir Thomas seeing how much she needed encouragement, tried to be all that was conciliating; but he had to work against a most untoward gravity of deportment – and Lady Bertram, without taking half so much trouble, or speaking one word where he spoke ten, by the mere aid of a good-humoured smile, became immediately the less awful character of the two (Austen, 49).

These qualities also prevent his children, particularly his daughters Maria and Julia, from really loving him. Tom spends as little time at home as possible, and even Edmund fears dealing with him. Clearly, Sir Thomas does not fulfil Gisborne's statement of ideal fatherhood in An Enquiry into the Duties of Men: 'A parent ought constantly to aim at gaining the affectionate confidence of his children; and should lead them to regard him not as a father merely, but likewise as a friend. He must avail himself, that he may govern them properly, of the joint principles of love and fear' (480).

The emotional distance between Sir Thomas and his children, particularly Tom, Maria and Julia, produces serious deficiencies in their education and upbringing. Tom is careless, irresponsible and extravagant, particularly with money, and spends more time drinking and gambling at fashionable watering places than learning his role and

responsibilities as heir of Mansfield Park. Sir Thomas is keen for his daughters to acquire the good manners, deportment and accomplishments which will ensure them socially and economically advantageous marriages (Austen, 56). However, they are:

entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity, and humility. In every thing but disposition, they were admirably taught. Sir Thomas did not know what was wanting, because, though a truly anxious father, he was not outwardly affectionate, and the reserve of his manner repressed all the flow of their spirits before him (Austen, 55).

Despite this, 'the Miss Bertrams continued to exercise their memories, practise their duets, and grow tall and womanly; and their father saw them becoming in person, manner, and accomplishments, every thing that could satisfy his anxiety' (Austen, 56).

Rather than prioritising the interests of the community and the nation, Sir Thomas is essentially self-interested in his management of his estate and his family. His colonial interests are not doing well, and he leaves England for an extended period to attend to business in Antigua. This leaves the Mansfield Park estate without protection and vulnerable to the dangerous influence of Tom Bertram, and particularly, Henry Crawford. Rather than signifying complicity with the imperial project, Austen uses Sir Thomas' sugar plantation in Antigua to suggest that empire is a potentially dangerous distraction for rulers more interested in the accumulation of wealth, than in fulfilling their duties and responsibilities at home, to protect the political and moral health of the nation. Sir Thomas' mercenary nature and his deficiencies as a father, coupled with events which

take place at Mansfield during his absence, bring the estate and the Bertram family to the brink of moral ruin.

Henry Crawford and his sister Mary arrive at Mansfield Parsonage shortly after Sir Thomas' departure for Antigua, and Maria Bertram's engagement to a neighbouring landowner, Mr Rushworth. They immediately become part of the Mansfield circle, and Henry is described as 'the most agreeable young man the sisters had ever known, and they were equally delighted with him. Miss Bertram's engagement made him in equity the property of Julia, of which Julia was fully aware, and before he had been at Mansfield for a week, she was quite ready to be fallen in love with' (Austen, 77).

Contrary to Julia's hopes, Henry chooses to flirt with Maria despite her engagement. Sir Thomas' absence removes all parental restraint from Maria, who responds to Henry's gallantry in a manner to worry her fiancé. Tom Bertram's establishment of an amateur theatre in Sir Thomas' room, and the performance of a play of questionable moral values, enable Henry and Maria to openly indulge their flirtation. As head of the family and estate manager in his father's absence, Tom rejects Edmund's opposition to the theatrical project, and his arguments that Sir Thomas would not approve, saying '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' (Austen, 152).

Sir Thomas's return from Antigua signals the end of the amateur theatre and the marriage of Maria. In An Enquiry into the Duties of Men, Gisborne writes of the duties of fathers in relation to the marriages of their daughters:

the inability of the daughters to provide for their own support, a circumstance which places them in almost entire dependence on their father, affords him no plea for constraining their choice in marriage; though from their being more open to imposition than sons, partly from their want of opportunities to scrutinise the private characters of men, and partly from the quick sensibility of the female mind, he may certainly be justified in requiring a longer pause and delay from them, when he deems the proposed connection unfavourable on the whole to their welfare (491).

Sir Thomas knows that Maria is indifferent to Rushworth, by observing her careless and cold behaviour towards him, and advises her that despite the economic advantage of the marriage and the public nature of the engagement, her happiness should not be sacrificed. Maria, however, is determined to marry Rushworth to acquire wealth and status, and to escape from the confines of Mansfield Park. Despite his misgivings, Maria's insistence comes as a relief to Sir Thomas for social and economic reasons:

It was an alliance which he could not have relinquished without pain...Such and such-like were the reasonings of Sir Thomas – happy to escape the embarrassing evils of a rupture, the wonder, the reflections, the reproach that must attend it, happy to secure a marriage which would bring him such an addition of respectability and influence, and very happy to think any thing of

his daughter's disposition that was most favourable for the purpose (Austen, 215).

Rather than delaying the marriage to give Maria more time to consider, Sir Thomas allows it to take place within a few weeks.

Maria's marriage, however, does not signal the end of Henry Crawford's attempts to influence the Bertram family and the Mansfield Park estate, as he decides to court and propose to Fanny. Fanny is emphatic in her rejection of Henry, not only because she loves Edmund, but also because she is convinced that he is a dangerous influence. The Bertram family find her decision incomprehensible, particularly Sir Thomas, who points out to her:

Here is a young man wishing to pay his addresses to you, with every thing to recommend him; not merely situation in life, fortune, and character, but with more than common agreeableness, with address and conversation pleasing to everybody. And he is not an acquaintance of to-day, you have now known him some time. His sister, moreover, is your intimate friend, and he has been doing that for your brother, which I should suppose would have been almost sufficient recommendation to you, had there been no other (Austen, 316).

To this point in the novel, Crawford has much in his favour, and his only real misconduct lies in his brief flirtation with Maria Bertram. This on its own does not appear to be a sufficient basis for Fanny's determined dislike. However, there are more subtle signs throughout the novel that Henry falls a long way short of the patriotic ideal of English masculinity. Henry has been educated in London high society, and places a high regard

on codes of politeness, fashion, and appearance rather than sincere emotion and principle. Henry and Mary regularly use French words and phrases throughout the novel, associating them with French threats to English national security. Like Tom, Henry prefers London and fashionable resort towns to a quiet domestic life managing his own estate, Everingham. Henry takes very much an arms-length approach to estate management. He is much more interested in the aesthetics and potential for the “improvement” of estates, than in responsible economic and social management, demonstrated by his visit to Rushworth’s estate, and his plans for Edmund’s parsonage.

Austen dwells on Henry’s lack of profession throughout the novel by comparing him to William Price. Kestner has argued that William Price is a democratised and domesticated version of the idealised images of Lord Nelson and the Duke of Wellington that were extensively promulgated through the popular press, and in this way contributes to the early nineteenth century reconstitution of English masculinity (148). William is described as ‘a young man of open, pleasant countenance, and frank, unstudied, but feeling and respectful manners’ (Austen, 243), immediately fulfilling several components of ideal English masculinity. Educated at Portsmouth and later in the navy, William’s approach to social interaction is the opposite of the precise and polite manner cultivated by Henry. This enables William to express himself honestly and genuinely: his affection for Fanny is described as being ‘as warm as her own, and much less incumbered by refinement’ (Austen, 243).

William was often called on by his uncle to be the talker. His recitals were amusing in themselves to Sir Thomas, but the chief object in seeking them,

was to understand the recitor, to know the young man by his histories; and he listened to his clear, simple, spirited details with full satisfaction – seeing in them, the proof of good principles, professional knowledge, energy, courage, and cheerfulness – every thing that could deserve or promise well (Austen, 245).

Sir Thomas' approval of William is formed on his experience, principles, and knowledge, and qualities of idyllic English masculinity such as energy and courage. He does not appear to require these qualities in Henry, who he almost instantly approves on the basis of his wealth, connections and manners. Indeed, Henry reflects that he shares few qualities with William Price, which seem to impress the Bertram family:

To Henry Crawford they gave a different feeling. He longed to have been at sea, and seen and done and suffered as much. His heart was warmed, his fancy fired, and he felt the highest respect for a lad who, before he was twenty, had gone through such bodily hardships, and given such proofs of mind. The glory of heroism, of usefulness, of exertion, of endurance, made his own habits of selfish indulgence appear in shameful contrast; and he wished he had been a William Price, distinguishing himself and working his way to fortune and consequence with so much self-respect and happy ardour, instead of what he was!

The wish was rather eager than lasting. He was roused from the reverie of retrospection and regret produced by it, by some inquiry from Edmund as to his plans for the next day's hunting; and he found it as well to be a man of fortune at once with horses and grooms at his command (Austen, 245-246).

This is Austen's clearest articulation of the difference between William Price, whose patriotism cannot be questioned, and Henry Crawford, whose conduct and mind are turned ultimately to his own self-indulgence rather than the welfare of the nation. There are other more subtle reminders throughout the novel of the contrast between the landed gentry, and men who pursue naval and military careers. During the theatrical episode, Henry plays a young though war-weary soldier, and enjoys the costume and mockingly drawing his sword while men such as William are in fact defending the nation and his way of life. Whereas William goes to Portsmouth to meet his ship and continue his national duty, Henry's business in Portsmouth is to strut along the ramparts with Fanny, and use the naval dockyards as a backdrop to persuade her to marry him (Sales, 90, 112). Furthermore, where the Crawfords do value William's choice of profession, it appears to be for the wrong reasons: for 'the glory of heroism' and for self-interest, rather than for national duty and self-sacrifice. Mary expresses similar views earlier in the novel, saying 'the profession, either navy or army, is its own justification. It has every thing in its favour; heroism, danger, bustle, fashion. Soldiers and sailors are always acceptable in society. Nobody can wonder that men are soldiers and sailors' (Austen, 136). Mary's opinion of the navy reflects Linda Colley's description of the flourishing cult of heroism which was generated during the period to motivate working class men to take up arms for their country, a cult which was driven largely by female enthusiasm (Colley, 257). Austen's juxtaposition of William Price and Henry Crawford is a stark representation of the gradual redefinition and reconstruction of masculinity following the revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (Kestner, 155), a process which Austen continued in Persuasion.

Above all, Fanny believes Henry to lack the moral independence and consistency of mind and action that is crucial to ideal English masculinity. She is convinced that Henry's politeness and gallantry, which is pleasing to the other characters, is in fact a mask for his lack of principles. In Fanny's opinion, Henry 'can feel nothing as he ought' (Austen, 238). The danger of Henry's manners, and the potential for deception, are revealed by Fanny's acknowledgement of the change in her feelings towards him: 'she thought him altogether improved since she had seen him; he was much more gentle, obliging, and attentive to other people's feelings than he had ever been at Mansfield; she had never seen him so agreeable – so near being agreeable...He was decidedly improved' (Austen, 398).

Indeed, Henry does attempt to change throughout the novel. His focus shifts from London, and his habit of frequently moving from place to place, to prolonging his visits at Mansfield Park, and a wish to be more settled and domestic generally. This change is signified firstly by his proposal to Fanny. Fanny is, in almost every respect, the image of early nineteenth century conduct book femininity: the only respect in which she really differs is in her determined and independent decision to reject Henry. Fanny is perhaps Austen's least likeable heroine, having been described by critics variously as insipid and a 'frigid prude' (Moler), and the courtship of Edmund and Fanny as 'The Mating Ritual of Cold Fish' (Tandon, 87). Mary says to her brother 'You will have a sweet little wife; all gratitude and devotion. Exactly what you deserve' (Austen, 296) and Henry admits that it was her gentleness, modesty and the sweetness of her character that he fell in love with (Austen, 297). Henry's growing inclination for ideal English domesticity is

developed during his visit to Portsmouth. He discusses his recent visit to Everingham, and his settlement of a dispute between his steward and some tenants for the mutual benefit of the estate and the community, conduct which signifies a shift in Henry's view to a more socially responsible outlook, and which is deliberately designed to impress Fanny. It works:

It was pleasing to hear him speak so properly; here, he had been acting as he ought to do. To be the friend of the poor and oppressed! Nothing could be more grateful to her, and she was on the point of giving him an approving look when it was all frightened off, by his adding a something too pointed of his hoping soon to have an assistant, a friend, a guide in every plan of utility or charity for Everingham, a somebody that would make Everingham and all about it, a dearer object than it had ever been yet (Austen, 397).

It is not Everingham, however, but rather Mansfield Park, where Fanny will be valued as assistant, friend and guide. After leaving Fanny at Portsmouth, Henry travels to London and almost immediately recommences his affair with Maria, now Mrs Rushworth. Maria is subsequently abandoned by Crawford and divorced by her husband, leaving her socially expelled, and combined with Julia's elopement, bringing the Bertram family and the Mansfield Park estate to the brink of moral ruin. Edmund's letter to Fanny recalling her to Mansfield Park ends with the almost biblical statement: 'There is no end to the evil let loose upon us' (Austen, 431). This lapse in male protection and guardianship is a security breach which has left the family and the estate vulnerable to corruption and subversion from within.

The Mansfield Park estate, and by extension, the state, are ultimately purged of these threats to national security. Fanny returns to Mansfield Park not as an object of charity, but as a comfort and valued for her moral worth, and eventually she marries Edmund. However, the conclusion of Mansfield Park, like the conclusions of Northanger Abbey and Sense and Sensibility, is a deceptively happy resolution. Austen places the blame for the near destruction of the family and estate squarely on the shoulders of Sir Thomas, for the deficient education of his children and his lack of judgment with regard to the Crawfords. Echoing Gisborne's advice on the duties of fathers with regard to the marriages of their daughters, Austen writes:

Sir Thomas, poor Sir Thomas, a parent, and conscious of errors in his own conduct as a parent, was the longest to suffer. He felt that he ought not to have allowed the marriage, that his daughter's sentiments had been sufficiently known to him to render him culpable in authorising it, that in so doing he had sacrificed the right to the expedient, and been governed by motives of selfishness and worldly wisdom (Austen, 446).

Interestingly, Austen recorded a neighbour's comment that Sir Thomas' 'conduct proves admirably the defects of the modern system of Education' (Southam, 50). While Sir Thomas acknowledges his failures as a father, the damage has been done, and in a way considered to be irrevocable. Sir Thomas reflects on the upbringing of his daughters: 'Something must have been wanting within, or time would have worn away much of its ill effect. He feared that principle, active principle, had been wanting, that they had never been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers, by that sense of duty which alone can suffice...' (Austen, 448).

After a serious illness, Tom ‘became what he ought to be, useful to his father, steady and quiet, and not living merely for himself’ (Austen, 447). However, despite being the heir of the estate, Tom remains an essentially marginal figure, and there is no suggestion at this stage of continuity beyond his own generation (Sales, 106). Sir Thomas regrets Tom’s homosocial tendencies and his generally rakish behaviour towards women.

In many respects, Edmund seems to embody many of the qualities of ideal patriotic English masculinity – he is plain speaking and forthright, he is honest and open in thought and emotion, he takes his profession as a clergyman seriously and intends to live within his parish, and he cares deeply for his family. However, the influence which the Crawfords exert over Edmund reveals that he is unable to exert the moral independence required of the Englishman – the theatrical episode demonstrates his inability to act consistently according to his internal standards – and in Edmund’s resolution of the novel, he would have been married to Mary, and Fanny would have accepted Henry.

Fanny is in fact the only character not duped by the Crawfords, and Austen questions the wisdom of investing men such as Sir Thomas, Tom and Edmund – each of whom failed to recognise the Crawfords as a dangerous threat to national security – with moral and political authority. It would seem that the health of the nation would be much safer if this type of power was placed in the hands of women like Fanny and men like William, and there is clearly also a class commentary operating throughout the novel. Austen’s commentary on the state of the nation under male rule is particularly pronounced when

Mansfield Park is compared to Austen's treatment of men in her other novels. Pride and Prejudice is concerned with the emotional and ethical reformation of an otherwise principled landowner. Emma celebrates the benevolent and socially responsible landlord, and traditional estate management, as the foundation of the community. In Persuasion, the professional class, and specifically sailors and their service for the nation, is validated as a new form of masculine authority, to replace the parasitic aristocracy. By contrast, having shown themselves unfit to rule the estate, and by extension the nation, Mansfield Park does not provide or look for redemption in men at all, and in this sense, the novel is fundamentally pessimistic about contemporary male authority, its ability to govern the nation, and to morally direct future generations.

ⁱ For further discussion of Burke's representation of masculinity in Reflections on the Revolution in France, refer to Tim Fulford Romanticism and Masculinity: Gender, Politics and Poetics in the Writings of Burke, Coleridge, Cobbett, Wordsworth, De Quincey and Hazlitt New York; St. Martin's Press, 1999.

ⁱⁱ For further discussion of Austen's use of the estate/state metaphor in Mansfield Park and other novels, refer to Alistair Duckworth The Improvement of the Estate. Baltimore and London; John Hopkins Press, 1971 and to Roger Sales Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England. London and New York; Routledge, 1994.

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