

Jane Austen:  
*A Stroll Through Mansfield Park*

Becca Tarnas

My father says that with Jane Austen, not a single word is out of place. Each sentence is composed with the utmost precision, an attention to detail and subtlety that distinguishes her writing, and sets it high on the pedestal of the greatest English writers. She wrote at a time when, in her own words, “Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story.”<sup>1</sup> Her works tell the story women were not often given the opportunity to tell, unveiling the intimate details of home, marriage, and the inner folds of emotion tucked away in the country houses of rural England.

Part of my purpose with this *Women of Words* project is to read works by female authors that I have never read, and to write a short essay on each author from various perspectives, sometimes literary, sometimes personal, sometimes astrological, or often a combination of these different perspectives. If I have already read something written by the chosen author, I will choose another work of hers, perhaps a piece less well-known. This was the case with Jane Austen. I have had the great pleasure of reading several of her novels already over the years: *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Emma*. I must say I enjoyed each of these immensely and could not rank one as a favorite over another. The characters and their individual development, the dialogue, the prose—all are exquisite. I look forward to the day I can re-enter these provincial worlds again, whether it is by falling passionately in love alongside Marianne Dashwood, or coming to greater

---

<sup>1</sup> Jane Austen, qtd. in Janet Bukovinsky Teacher, *Women of Words: A Personal Introduction to Thirty-Five Important Writers* (Philadelphia, PA: Courage Books, 1994), 12.

self-understanding with Elizabeth Bennet, or undergoing deep emotional maturation alongside Emma Woodhouse.

Having already read the three most well-known of Austen's novels I chose *Mansfield Park* as my next endeavor for this project. *Mansfield Park* tells the story of a young girl, Fanny Price, who is brought to the countryside by her wealthy Aunt Bertram and her uncle, Sir Thomas, to be provided with a better upbringing and social opportunity than she would have had if she had been raised by her own lower class parents along with the rest of her siblings. Janet Bukovinsky Teacher describes *Mansfield Park* as a morality play on entering the church.<sup>2</sup> The primary focus of the plot is Fanny's dedicated love for her cousin Edmund, who has been her dearest companion since he soothed her tears when she was first displaced into her new home. Drama unfolds when two eligible siblings, Henry and Mary Crawford, move to the neighborhood and upset a romantic tangle amongst nearly all the members of the Bertram family. As the second son, Edmund is destined to become a pastor, a vocation that leaves opposite impressions upon the two young ladies desiring his attention.

Fanny Price is a sweet, demure, shy girl whose heroism seems to lie solely in her propriety and goodness. At times, there can be something frustrating about her to the contemporary sensibility. Why is she so physically weak? Why does she not stand up for herself, or express her own feelings? While the perspective of the story certainly makes one want to be on Fanny's side, the actual qualities of her rival characters, particularly that of Mary Crawford, leave one wanting something more from Fanny, some act of heroism or engagement besides her shy propriety. Fanny's quiet devotion to Edmund is

---

<sup>2</sup> Teacher, *Women of Words*, 12.

admirable and certainly understandable, but at times his happiness seems far better suited to being with Mary. Mary's supposed faults, which I will let the reader discover for him- or herself, are not ones that would easily withstand the test of time or feminism.

I often found the most enjoyable moments of the book to be when Austen's writing steps out of the small, ordinary world of Fanny's domestic sphere and connects with a more philosophical way of thinking, or enters into observation of the natural world and the greater cosmos. In one passage, when Fanny is walking with Mary through a garden, Fanny begins to muse on the nature of time and memory:

“How wonderful, how very wonderful the operations of time, and the changes of the human mind!”

And following the latter train of thought, she soon afterwards added: “If any one faculty of our nature may be called *more* wonderful than the rest, I do think it is memory. There seems something more speakingly incomprehensible in the powers, the failures, the inequalities of memory, than in any other of our intelligences. The memory is sometimes so retentive, so serviceable, so obedient—at others, so bewildered and so weak—and at others again, so tyrannic, so beyond controul!—We are to be sure a miracle every way—but our powers of recollection and of forgetting, do seem peculiarly past finding out.”<sup>3</sup>

This is one of those exquisite moments when the reader is permitted to see the deeper thoughts underlying Fanny's shy demeanor. One can feel almost as though we are briefly

---

<sup>3</sup> Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1988), 208-209.

permitted to see right through Fanny and into the thought of Austen herself, sharing one of her own contemplations upon the nature of human memory.

Austen was a contemporary of Coleridge and Wordsworth, and one can see the Romantic language of the era coming through in her own descriptions of the natural world. In a quiet scene in the family drawing room, Fanny is withdrawn by the window away from the conversations and flirtations of the Bertram sisters and the Crawfords. To her delight, Edmund joins her for a moment by the window.

Fanny. . . had the pleasure. . . of having [Edmund's] eyes turned like hers towards the scene without, where all that was solemn and soothing, and lovely, appeared in the brilliancy of an unclouded night, and the contrast of the deep shade of the woods. Fanny spoke her feelings.

“Here’s harmony!” said she, “Here’s repose! Here’s what may leave all painting and all music behind, and what poetry only can attempt to describe. Here’s what may tranquilize every care, and lift the heart to rapture! When I look out on such a night as this, I feel as if there could be neither wickedness nor sorrow in the world; and there certainly would be less of both if sublimity of Nature were more attended to, and people were carried more out of themselves by contemplating such a scene.”<sup>4</sup>

A similar Romantic sensibility is evoked toward the novel’s ending, while Fanny is visiting her parents in town. Fanny is contemplating with melancholy the loss of the beauty of spring in the countryside:

---

<sup>4</sup> Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 113.

It was sad to Fanny to lose all the pleasures of spring. She had not known before what pleasures she *had* to lose passing March and April in town. She had not known before, how much the beginnings and progress of vegetation had delighted her.—What animation both of body and mind, she had derived from watching the advance of that season which cannot, in spite of its capriciousness, be unlovely, and seeing its increasing beauties, from the earliest flowers, in the warmest divisions of her aunt's garden, to the opening of leaves of her uncle's plantations, and the glory of his woods.—To be losing such pleasures was no trifle; to be losing them, because she was in the midst of closeness and noise, to have confinement, bad air, bad smells, substituted for liberty, freshness, fragrance, and verdure, was infinitely worse.<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting to note the strong influence of both the weather and landscape on the unfolding of everyday events in Austen's novels. They remind the contemporary reader of the differences between the world before and after the invention of the automobile and the construction of major road networks. Social relations, travel plans, family visits, and even physical exercise are far more susceptible to the fluctuations in climate than they would be today.

One of my favorite scenes in *Mansfield Park* is a conversation that takes place between Edmund Bertram and Mary Crawford as they are walking through the woods of a neighboring estate. It is early in their acquaintance, and a subtle flirtation has begun to develop between them, to Fanny's chagrin. Mary, at this time, is much more taken with

---

<sup>5</sup> Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 431-432.

Edmund than he seems to be with her, which starts to come through in the following dialogue. The substance of the conversation itself is on the nature of time as seen from their differing perspectives, views which seem to have something of a gender bias. Mary begins the conversation:

“I am really not tired, which I almost wonder at; for we must have walked at least a mile in this wood. Do not you think we have?”

“Not half a mile,” was his sturdy answer; *for he was not yet so much in love as to measure distance, or reckon time, with feminine lawlessness.*

“Oh! you do not consider how much we have wound about. We have taken such a very serpentine course; and the wood itself must be half a mile long in a straight line, for we have never seen the end of it yet, since we left the first great path.”

“But if you remember, before we left that first great path, we saw directly to the end of it. We looked down the whole vista, and saw it closed by iron gates, and it could not have been more than a furlong in length.”

“Oh! I know nothing of your furlongs, but I am sure it is a very long wood; and that we have been winding in and out ever since we came into it; and therefore when I say that we have walked a mile in it, I must speak within compass.”

“We have been exactly a quarter of an hour here,” said Edmund, taking out his watch. “Do you think we are walking four miles an hour?”

*“Oh! do not attack me with your watch. A watch is always too fast or too slow. I cannot be dictated to by a watch.”*<sup>6</sup> (Emphasis added.)

Austen reinforces many of the gender norms of her day, including views on manners and propriety of behavior. The primary concern of the women in Austen’s novels is their marriagability, a stark contrast to her revolutionary forebear, Mary Wollstonecraft. Yet Austen herself never wed. She once accepted a suitor’s offer, but by the next morning she had changed her mind and reversed her answer. She seems to express some of her views on a woman’s choice to marry, and whom she is to marry, through the voice of Fanny Price when she says,

“I *should* have thought,” said Fanny, after a pause of recollection and exertion, “that every woman must have felt the possibility of a man’s not being approved, not being loved by some one of her sex, at least, let him be ever so generally agreeable. Let him have all the perfections in the world, I think it ought not to be set down as certain, that a man must be acceptable to every woman he may happen to like himself.”<sup>7</sup>

To touch briefly on Austen’s birth chart, because we know her exact birth time we are able to know that she has a tight Moon-Saturn conjunction in Libra. Austen is born on December 16, 1775 at 11:45 pm in Stevenston, England. The Moon archetypally relates to the home, domesticity, relationship, emotional expression, and feeling. Saturn, on the other hand, correlates with constraint and restraint, hard work, discipline, reserve, and a serious disposition. Austen’s Moon-Saturn conjunction is expressed archetypally as the quiet sphere of the home that is depicted in all of her novels, as well as the emotional

---

<sup>6</sup> Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 94-95.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 353.

struggles and maturation of her lead female characters. Her detailed descriptions of the quiet day-to-day experiences of living in the English countryside, and the work of securing a husband and home, all correlate to Moon-Saturn. She also did all of her written work (Saturn) in the parlor of her home (Moon), and even would hide the stories she was writing when visitors came calling.

Another significant aspect in Austen's natal chart is her Mercury in opposition to a broad Jupiter-Uranus conjunction. The archetype of Mercury comes through as all forms of communication, from writing and speaking, to thinking, the intellect, and education. Jupiter correlates archetypally with expansion, success, and celebration, while Uranus relates to change, revolution, rebellion, innovation, and ingenious breakthroughs. The Jupiter-Uranus combination correlates with expansion of horizons, successful breakthroughs, and rapidly opening world views and perspectives. Although Austen lived in a constrained home environment, which correlates to her Moon-Saturn conjunction—never moving from her family home—she was able to expand her horizons and those of all her readers through her writing, which correlates to her Mercury in opposition to Jupiter and Uranus. The breakthrough quality of her exquisite novels—from the first, *Sense and Sensibility*, which she published anonymously, claiming only on the title page that it was “By A Lady”—have rippled through history and come down to us today as the beloved stories of the extraordinary, yet everyday, women of the English countryside.

#### Works Cited

Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Teacher, Janet Bukovinsky. *Women of Words: A Personal Introduction to Thirty-Five Important Writers*. Philadelphia, PA: Courage Books, 1994.