

Jane Austen and the “West Indians” : A Postcolonial Return to *Mansfield Park**

Hidetada Mukai

I .

Edward Said’s reading of *Mansfield Park* has proved to be one of the most influential and durable analyses on Jane Austen in 1990s. In a summary of critical approaches to Jane Austen studies, John Wiltshire states :

During the last years of the twentieth century when a form of political radicalism became almost mandatory within academic criticism, many chapters and articles appeared which based their interpretation of *Mansfield Park* on this hitherto ignored or slighted aspect of the Bertrams’ circumstances. They gave readings of the novel derogatory of the gentry estate, in effect reversing the claims of those earlier commentators who invested the country house and its grounds with a near-transcendental or ‘religious’ aura. The most influential, though not the first, of these readings was in Edward W. Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) where a section on *Mansfield Park* forms a key part of the opening chapter. (Wiltshire, lxxiv)

In his seminal work, Said centres his argument around the several brief references to Antigua and the West Indies in *Mansfield Park*. The first of these references is in Volume I, Chapter 3. Lady Bertram and Mrs Norris, her elder

sister, talk about the burden of taking care of their niece, Fanny Price, together.

“My object, Lady Bertram, is to be of use to those that come after me. It is for your children’s good that I wish to be richer. I have nobody else to care for, but I should be very glad to think I could leave a little trifle among them, worth their having.”

“You are very good, but do not trouble yourself about them. They are sure of being well provided for. Sir Thomas will take care of that.”

“Why, you know Sir Thomas’s means will be rather straitened, if the Antigua estate is to make such poor return.”

“Oh ! *that* will soon be settled. Sir Thomas has been writing about it I know.” (*MP*, 29)

The second reference occurs in the same chapter when Sir Thomas, accompanied by Tom, his eldest son, who had made “some bad connections at home” (*MP*, 31), leaves England to settle the problems in his Antigua estate. The third reference occurs in Volume II, Chapter I, when Sir Thomas returns unexpectedly from Antigua without notice, reinforcing the patriarchal order by disrupting his children’s plans to perform an amateur play :

Sir Thomas was indeed the life of the party, who at his suggestion now seated themselves round the fire. He had the best right to be the talker ; and the delight of his sensations in being again in his own house, in the centre of his family after such a separation, made him communicative and chatty in a very unusual degree ; and he was ready to give every information as to his voyage, and answer every question of his two sons almost before it was put. His business in Antigua had latterly been prosperously rapid, and he came

directly from Liverpool, having had an opportunity of making his passage thither in a private vessel, instead of waiting for the packet ; and all the little particulars of his proceedings and events, his arrivals and departures, were most promptly delivered, as he sat by Lady Bertram and looked with heartfelt satisfaction on the faces around him [...] (*MP*, 166)

Furthermore, in Volume II, Chapter 3 Edmund asks Fanny to try to talk to her uncle more without reserve, and Fanny touches upon the West Indies in their conversation.

All of these are quite brief references, and casual readers are unlikely to give them any real significance. However, by focusing on such marginal aspects of the text, Said attempts to show how "[t]he 'comfort'—not merely material comfort, but composure and calm—which is so valued in *Mansfield Park* [...] rests upon an unacknowledged world beyond, which is the material precondition of its spiritual and moral principles" (Wiltshire, lxxv). In short, the world of *Mansfield Park* is irredeemably implicated in the project of British imperialism. Said writes : "[T]here is the hierarchy of spaces by which the metropolitan center and, gradually, the metropolitan economy are seen as dependent upon an overseas system of territorial control, economic exploitation, and a socio-cultural vision ; without these stability and prosperity at home [...] would not be possible" (*CI*, 58-59) and "[t]he perfect example of what I mean is to be found in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, in which Thomas Bertram's slave plantation in Antigua is mysteriously necessary to the poise and the beauty of *Mansfield Park*, a place described in moral and aesthetic terms well before the scramble for Africa, or before the age of empire officially began" (*CI*, 59). He reinforces his argument with a citation from John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*, "Our West Indian colonies [...] cannot be regarded as countries with a productive capital of their own" but "the

place where England finds it convenient to carry on the production of sugar, coffee, and a few other tropical commodities” (CI, 59).

In this way, “[t]he Bertrams could not have been possible without the slave trade, sugar, and the colonial planter class” (CI, 94) and Said suggests that he has “tried to show that the morality in fact is not separable from its social basis: right up to the last sentence Austen affirms and repeats the geographical process of expansion involving trade, production, and consumption that predates, underlines, and guarantees the morality” (CI, 92-93). Thus, *Mansfield Park* is “the most explicit in its ideological and moral affirmations of Austen’s novels” (CI, 84).

Said criticizes that “the literature itself makes constant references to itself as somehow participating in Europe’s overseas expansion” (CI, 14) by supporting, elaborating and consolidating the practice of empire, but Austen “in *Mansfield Park* sublimates the agonies of the Caribbean existence to a mere half dozen passing references to Antigua” (CI, 59). Said’s reading not only triggered heated debates over *Mansfield Park*, it also created a significant paradigm shift in Austen studies, displacing the moralistic and religious criticism with the political. In this paper I would like to clear the way for a deeper understanding of *Mansfield Park* by discussing how the privileging of the political has affected, and to some degree limited, critical responses to the novel.

II.

Despite the peripheral nature of the references, Said insists they are crucial, and he challenges readers to consider “not only how to understand and with what to connect Austen’s morality and its social basis, but also *what* to read of it” (CI, 93). In accepting this challenge, I would like to propose a further question, which is “Who on the earth is Sir Thomas Bertram?”

We know from the text that he is a baronet, a member of Parliament and the

owner of Mansfield Park in Northampton "with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income" (*MP*, 5). Besides Mansfield Park, he is the absentee landlord of an estate in Antigua and he is faced with a difficult economic problem there. This is the only information the reader can elicit by reading the novel, and this marked absence is an unusual omission for Austen.

In her novels Austen frequently uses an economic index in creating and defining her characters: the male characters normally are introduced with a direct reference to their income and, correlatively, the exact amount of their dowry helps delineate the female characters. In *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, the Dashwood sisters come down to *five hundred pounds* after their father's death and Mr Willoughby deserts Marianne Dashwood because he chooses to marry an heiress worth *fifty thousand pounds*. Also, as soon as *Pride and Prejudice* starts, the readers are told that Mr Bingley's annual income is *four or five thousand pounds*, while Mr Darcy's is *ten thousand pounds* a year. Miss King suddenly attracts Mr Wickham, who seems to pay court to Elizabeth Bennet, because she may inherit *ten thousand pounds*. Even in *Mansfield Park*, some characters are economically determined: Mr Rushworth, we are told, has *twelve thousand pounds* per annum and Henry Crawford has *four thousand pounds* a year. In other words, Austen often positions her characters with their social status and income, but Sir Thomas's finances remain ambiguous. Because we are told that if his daughter's marriage to Mr Rushworth gives her "the enjoyment of a larger income than her father's" (*MP*, 37) we can extrapolate that his income is less than twelve thousand pounds, but the income of 'twelve thousand pounds' a year is too large a criterion and explains nothing about his social status. Kathryn Sutherland suggests that "[w]hat remains intriguingly unclear throughout the novel is the nature of the Bertram's family identity and how details we are given mediate between self-representation, or how things seem, and how they in fact are" (K. Sutherland, xxvii).

In the period of *Mansfield Park*, there were many upwardly mobile families who were collectively called the “West Indians”. The social and economic success of these families was a direct result of their prosperous plantations and Avrom Fleishman asserts that the modern reader’s assumption that the Bertrams were members of the traditional aristocracy is fallacious :

The inference is that the Mansfield holdings are insufficient to maintain the style of life which the novel describes. This estate—which presumably by represents an entire socioeconomic class—is not self-sustaining but depends for its existence on colonial landholdings. We are to see Sir Thomas as a “West Indian,” with the contemporary connotations both of admiration and of contempt for the nouveau riche. (Fleishman, 36)

If, as Fleishman suggests, Sir Thomas is a nouveau riche social climber, we have to remember that although they are all regarded as gentry, the Bertrams in *Mansfield Park* are quite different from the Darcys in *Pride and Prejudice* or the Woodhouses and the Knightleys in *Emma*. It is, however, difficult for modern readers to understand such a rigid and cultural contextual distinction, although the opening passages of *Persuasion* reveal that Austen, and correspondingly her contemporary readers, suffered no such limitation :

Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellynch-hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own arrangement, never took up any book but the Baronetage : there he found occupation for an idle hour, and consolation in a distressed one ; there his faculties were roused into admiration and respect, by contemplating *the limited remnant of the earliest patents* ; there any unwelcome sensations, arising from domestic affairs, changed naturally into pity and contempt. As he

turned over *the almost endless creations of the last century*—and there, if every other leaf were powerless, he could read his own history with an interest which never failed—this was the page at which the favourite volume always opened [. . .] (Italics mine. *P*, 5)

It is also important to remember that the Bertrams are in an economically precarious position when the novel starts. Mrs Norris worries about it and the narrator clearly explains that "his (Sir Thomas's) own circumstances were rendered less fair than heretofore, by some recent losses on his West Indies Estate" (*MP*, 24). Frank Gibbon argues that "[b]y the presumed date of the events described in *Mansfield Park* most of the prominent plantation owners were, like Sir Thomas, absentees, with no intention of ever returning permanently to their native islands. Their main aim was to be accepted as English gentlemen, and their wealth usually ensured this, until their absenteeism and often the profligacy of their sons in many cases led to their decline" (Gibbon, 300). This analysis can, and should, be applied to the Bertrams.

The living was hereafter for Edmund, and had his uncle died a few years sooner, it would have been duly given to some friend to hold till he were old enough for orders. But Tom's extravagance had, previous to that event (the death of their uncle), been so great as to render a different disposal of the next presentation necessary, and the younger brother must help to pay for the pleasures of the elder. (*MP*, 24)

In *Pride and Prejudice* Mr Darcy decides to take over Mr Wickham's debts, which are believed to be "considerably more than a thousand pounds, another thousand in addition to her own settled upon *her*, and his commission purchased"

(*PP*, 307) with relative ease, but when Sir Thomas has to pay Tom's debts it costs the family dearly, suggesting that, unlike the fortunate and well-established Darcys, the Bertrams stood on the edge of an economic precipice. Similarly, as Clara Tuite points out, the status of a baronet itself was not so secured as the modern readers imagine :

Notice here that the Bertram baronetage itself is never put under interrogation, occluded as it is in this opening passage by the satiric recital of Maria Ward's origin. However, the baronetage was the most unstable peerage, having been the last one created, only two centuries before, in 1611, when it was put on the market by a desperate James I strapped for cash. As the historian Laurence Stone argues [in his *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641* (1967)], the scramble for precedence when these titles were announced was greatest amongst the families of Salisbury and Northampton—Sir Thomas's county. (Tuite, 103)

It is also worth remembering that Austen wrote *Mansfield Park* during a period of both national and international unrest: a war with Revolutionary and then Napoleonic France, Luddite riots in Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire, the assassination of Prime Minister Spencer Perceval, a war with America, Napoleon's Russian campaign and the Peninsular War, all contributed to a general disquiet and uncertainty. (K. Sutherland, xxi-xxii; Fleishman, 35-36) In addition to social and political events, a domestic agricultural crisis in the British West Indies led to a serious economic depression that was exacerbated by the campaign for the Abolition of the Slave Trade and Napoleon's blockade of most markets to West Indian exports. (Fleishman, 36-40; Roberts, 97) As a result, in Antigua "the local government declared bankruptcy in 1805; by 1807 numerous plantations failed" (Roberts, 97).

These emergencies needed the estate owners to be present to make the necessary large-scale planting decisions and improvements, and these serious labours could easily detain Sir Thomas in Antigua for nearly two years.

As Nicholas Marsh suggests “[t]he Bertrams cannot live in their accustomed style on the proceeds of the estate—there is a hidden, hardly mentioned subsidy from the other side of the world, on which and the whole edifice of Mansfield Park rests or falls” (Marsh, 121). Thus, the Bertrams are almost entirely dependent on the Antigua estate in order to support their life at Mansfield Park and, when the head of the family is reduced to going to Antigua to solve the problems, the argument that the Bertrams are “the landed gentry at an uncertain and unstable historical moment” (Tuite, 98) is not only supportable, it is inevitable. Sutherland concurs when she points out :

Sir Thomas is a baronet (a hereditary title) and a Member of Parliament ; but we do not know whether he is the first baronet or one in a long line. The information that Mansfield Park is a ‘modern-built house’, deserving of inclusion (but clearly not included) ‘in any collection of gentlemen’s seats in the kingdom’ (I, v), coupled with Sir Thomas’s anxiety to forge a connection by marriage with the more established Rushworth family, suggests new and uncertain rank, if not new wealth, and an unease in Sir Thomas’s position. (Sutherland, xxvii)

However, there are several critics who still insist on the legitimacy of the identity of the Bertram family. Mary Mollard, for example, “suppose[s] that an earlier Bertram marries a lady who brought an estate in Antigua as her dowry” (Mollard, 51). Such an assumption may be feasible, but the textual and historical evidence tend to suggest that, rather belonging to the traditional aristocracy, Sir

Thomas is a member of the emerging “West Indians” social *bloc*.

Two years after Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* was published, Brian Southam contributed an essay on *Mansfield Park* to *The Times Literary Supplement*, in which he discussed *Mansfield Park* from the postcolonial point of view again. Southam paid his special attention to Fanny’s words in the following conversation :

[...] “Your uncle is disposed to be pleased with you in every respect ; and I only wish you would talk to him more.—You are one of those who are too silent in the evening circle.”

“But I do talk to him more than I used. I am sure I do. Did not you hear me ask him about the slave trade last night ?”

“I did—and was in hopes the question would be followed up by others. It would have pleased your uncle to be inquired of farther.”

“And I longed to do it—but there was such a dead silence ! And while my cousins were sitting by without speaking a word, or seeming at all interested in the subject, I did not like—I thought it would appear as if I wanted to set myself off at their expense, by shewing a curiosity and pleasure in his information which he must wish his own daughters to feel.” (*MP*, 184)

In order to understand the meaning of “a dead silence” here, Southam emphasizes the importance of being accurate on the chronology of the novel : “This line of interpretation, which seems likely to become established, is distinctively and ambitiously historical. Its plausibility depends very considerably upon the accurate dating of events within the novel and in the world contemporary with its story” (Southam, *TLS*, 13). He supposes that the period of the novel was set from 1810 to 1813, and, following this assumption, he develops Said’s argument.

III.

So far, the arguments by Said and Southam are so persuasive and inventive that they have almost established a new, critical orthodoxy. There are, however, dissenters such as Franco Moretti and Mary Waldron, for example, as Wiltshire contends that Said's arguments seem to be too radical to accept for some critics because his "account conspicuously reverses the text's own emphasis: what in *Mansfield Park* is unstressed, peripheral, touched upon at a few moments, becomes the centre, the dominant theme of his reading" (Wiltshire, lxxv).

Moretti suggests that Sir Thomas's travel to Antigua is "for strictly *symbolic* reasons" (Moretti, 27). He offers two reasons for doubting that the estate owners in Antigua were in such an unstable economic condition at that time: first, "the colonies played certainly a significant, but not an *indispensable* role in British economic life" (Moretti, 24-25) and secondly, by referring to *An Open Elite* (1984) by Lawrence Stone and Fawtier Stone, he states that the gentry of Northamptonshire rarely engaged in business activities. Thus, he concludes that "[Sir Thomas] goes, not because he needs the money, but because Austen needs him out of the way" (Moretti, 26) and "Bertram goes to Antigua, then, not because he must go there—but because *he must leave Mansfield Park*" (Moretti, 27).

Although Moretti offers a unique and stimulating way of understanding a literature by using graphs, maps and trees in his recent *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary Theory* (2005), his interpretation here seems too conventional and clichéd, Claudia L. Johnson, for instance, refutes Moretti's analysis by suggesting that "[i]f Austen's sole interest in having Sir Thomas travel to Antigua were, say, to get him offstage so his children could get into trouble without his interference, she could just as easily have dispatched him to some other family property anywhere else in England" (Johnson, 4). In 1967, Fleishman had explored

this issue when he wrote :

In the midst of the action, Sir Thomas is called upon to visit his estate in Antigua. Critics have tacitly assumed that he is removed from the scene merely to allow the theatricals episode to develop and to provide the climactic return in which he cuts them off. But what are we to make of the fact that Mansfield is not a self-sufficient estate, that the family's way of life is threatened, and that the large and airy rooms depend on an external and troubled colonial holding for their purpose? And if a question about offstage action may be admitted, what does Sir Thomas do in Antigua to make secure the sources of his income? (Fleishman, 36)

Mary Waldron resists political and ideological interpretations of *Mansfield Park*, arguing that “[t]he novel is not, after all, about Sir Thomas, but Fanny Price. Its overarching theme is domestic and personal morality, of which commercial and political issues form only a part.” (Waldron, *TLS*, 15) She develops this line of argument in her later book, stating that :

It is interesting to identify foreshadowings in the novels of what were to become elements in the adversarial world of Marx—bourgeois versus proletarian—but they (feminist and cultural historian critics) tell us nothing about the world within which Austen's characters interact, the world which she and they assume. By historicising in this way we run the risk of losing the novel. An example of the sort of historical criticism I should wish to avoid in this study is contained in recent discussions of *Mansfield Park*. (Waldron, *JA*, 12)

It seems to me that Waldron's argument here has more structural problems than

Moretti's because she adheres to the conventional way of understanding the novels and interprets them only from a very limited and traditional viewpoint :

While historicising, as I believe, sufficiently, I shall show in this study that it is possible to construct a unifying critique of the novels based on Austen's own view of what she was about and her knowledge of the society in which she found herself, without either straying inappropriately into peripheral historical-cultural detail or insisting on single authoritative readings. (Waldron, *JA*, 13)

While Waldron's insistence on paying close attention to the text is commendable, her stated preference for the New Critical and Leavisite approaches dislocates her from context of the recent literary criticism.

Anthony Easthope argued that a comparison between *Mass Civilization and Minor Culture* (1930) by F.R. Leavis with *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983) by Terry Eagleton suggests that between the 1980s to 1990s, a significant paradigm shift was occurring in literary studies in which "'[p]ure' literary study, though dying, remains institutionally dominant in Britain and North America while the more comprehensive analysis of what I shall prefer to call *signifying practices* is still struggling to be born" (Easthope, 5). As Easthope predicted, the terrain of literary studies has been irrevocably changed at a foundational level. The guidebooks for initiate readers have been swift to respond this transition.

Interdisciplinarity, in the New Critical Idiom series, aims "to introduce students working within the field of literary studies to interdisciplinary perspectives from other fields such as cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, history, geography, and the sciences" (Moran, 2). In this book Joe Moran argues that literary studies has evolved into a more comprehensive discipline, collaborating

with many other fields and that “[o]ne of the effects of this has been to challenge the disciplinary identity of literary studies by dissolving the category of ‘literature’ into more inclusive notion of ‘culture’” (Moran, 50). Naturally, this disciplinary evolution applies to Jane Austen studies.

In his compact handbook for literary studies, Jonathan Culler explains the process of emergence of cultural studies in a similar way, arguing that “literary studies itself has never been unified around a single conception of what it was doing, traditional or otherwise” and “since the advent of theory, literary studies has been an especially contentious and contested discipline”, thus, he concludes “there need not be conflict between literary and cultural studies” (Culler, 46).

These new trends of literary criticism were derived from the discussions on ‘narrative’ by Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau, and have undoubtedly changed the style of literary criticism itself from judging “the achievements of their authors” (Culler, 46) to analysing how the readers react to their works. Delia Dick explains this change in the case of *Mansfield Park* :

To some reader of these critics (post-structuralist, New Historicist and feminist), in deconstructing her texts, what Jane Austen does not say is even more revealing than what she does. The examination of what are seen as gaps in the overall narrative is one application of deconstruction—the revelation of hidden or partially hidden meanings in a text. Austen set her own constraints upon her intentions as a novelist, but critics have nevertheless often pointed to supposed deficiencies : there is no mention of wars and revolutions which were the background to her life, or of political events nationally ; no sex or passion in stories about love and marriage. For modern critics re-reading classic texts, these perceived absences have a great significance. (Dick, 106)

Dick picks up Warren Robert's *Jane Austen and the French Revolutions* (1979) as the typical example of this, and he regards Robert's viewpoint as a forerunner of Said's postcolonial viewpoint in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). What is essential to understand here is not only Culler's insistence that "there need not be conflict between literary and cultural studies", but also Frank Lentricchi and Andrew Dubois argues that we should stress "the continuity, not the clash of critical schools". The aim is to avoid unnecessary confrontation and become "an ideal literary critic" who tries to "command and seamlessly integrate both styles of reading." (Lentricchi and Dubois, xi) Thus, we should not argue who is right or wrong in their assumptions and interpretations, but rather that we should combine our close textual readings of *Mansfield Park* with detailed research on the social and historical context that informed its production. In this spirit, it is worth reasserting that Said neither attacks Austen nor devalues *Mansfield Park*. On the contrary, he enriches both while using his deconstructive approach to argue that "if we take seriously our intellectual and interpretative vocation to make connections, to deal with as much of the evidence as possible, fully and actually, to read what is there or not there, above all, to see complementarity and interdependence instead of isolated, venerated, or formalized experience that excludes and forbids the hybridizing intrusions of human history" (*CI*, 96).

IV.

Following this recent transition of literary studies, I would like to examine the 'dead silence' scene in *Mansfield Park* which occurs in Volume II, Chapter 3. Here, Fanny and Edmund talk about Sir Thomas's return from his long stay in Antigua, and Fanny reveals that she hesitated to continue her questions because she had been met instantly with confounding silence. We are not sure how Sir Thomas reacted to Fanny's question as Austen glides over the point, and we have to guess

the meaning of “a dead silence” here.

Southam explains that it is because Fanny commits “a breaking of the taboo”. Around in 1812, “the ‘slave trade’ was still a burning issue, a persistent and horrifying scandal, debated in Parliament and extensively reported and discussed in the newspapers and periodicals” (Southam, *TLS*, 13). Waldron offers us a different interpretation, suggesting that Austen intends to emphasize Fanny’s higher virtue than her cousins’ through comparison. Thus, the silence means “the indifference and shallowness of some members of the family group now left by themselves at Mansfield and the deep personal preoccupations of others” (Waldron, *JA*, 12). Maaja A. Stewart also indicates that “[w]omen remain ‘lawful property’ of their territory only if they accept the separation from a public world that would immediately involve them in illegitimate activities of the ‘turbulent usurpers’ in male as well as foreign space” and “[c]onnections between domestic realities and imperial fictions remained necessarily weak, unfocused, and fragmentary in the culture in which Austen wrote”, so “[t]he slave trade as a topic [...] is firmly subordinated to the real issue in the drawing room” (Stewart, 122).

Although Southam’s explanation seems to be persuasive, informed as it is by social context, it is haunted by inconsistencies. Edmund, for instance, tells Fanny that “[i]t would have pleased [Sir Thomas] to be inquired of farther” (*MP*, 184). But, if the slave issues were under taboo, then there is no reason why Sir Thomas would be delighted to be interrogated further. Waldron’s argument, on the other hand, has some validity because Fanny herself admits that she is quite peculiar in quality, saying, “I suppose I am graver than other people” and “The evenings do not appear long to me. I love to hear my uncle talk of the West Indies. I could listen to him for an hour together. It entertains *me* more than many other things have done—but then I am unlike other people I dare say.” (*MP*, 183) Waldron, however, almost neglects the reasons why Austen takes trouble to refer to Antigua

in the novel, and she does not explain the reason why Austen foregrounded the location of Sir Thomas's plantation. Stewart's idea contradicts the fact that "[w]omen participated in the anti-slavery campaign from its earliest stages" and that "individual women of high social status" not only exerted "an important 'behind-the-scene' influence on male politicians in favour of abolition" but also joined the movement themselves by financial support through subscriptions, signatories and public speaking in debating clubs. (Midgley, 9-25) Thus, if there were many opportunities for women to express their opinion on the slave issues in public, there seems little reason for Fanny to be censored in the private sphere. Fanny herself explains that she stops her questions out of personal considerations rather than social or ideological constraints : "I did not like—I thought it would appear as if I wanted to set myself off at their expense, by shewing a curiosity and pleasure in his information which he must wish his own daughters to feel." (*MP*, 184) Far from them from discussing slavery, Sir Thomas seems to expect his daughters to be interested in all aspects of the plantation that provides their economic base. We can conclude, therefore, that the subject of the slavery was not fundamentally taboo in the Bertram family circle.

Among them, Susan Fraiman introduces a convincing interpretation for the silence from a feminist perspective :

Said quotes the line in which Fanny's inquiry into the slave trade is met with a "dead silence," and seems to suggest that Austen's novel, like the Bertram household, has nothing to say about slavery, when in fact the organization of both is premised upon unfree people. My view, by contrast, is that Austen deliberately invokes the dumbness of *Mansfield Park* concerning its own barbarity precisely because she means to rebuke it. The barbarity she has in mind is not literal slavery in the West Indies but a paternal practice she depicts

as possibly analogous to it: Sir Thomas's bid (successful in Maria's case if not in Fanny's) to put female flesh on the auction block in exchange for male status. (Fraiman, 812)

The word "female flesh" here reminds us of a scene in *Emma*, a scene Said surprisingly omits from his analysis and discussion of Austen. In the novel, Jane Fairfax compares the "governess-trade" to the "slave-trade", saying, "There are places in town, offices, where inquiry would soon produce something—Offices for the sale—not quite of human flesh—but of human intellect." (*E*, 279)

Fraiman explains that Jane Fairfax criticizes the commodification of British women by using the word "slave-trade" as a metaphor for the "governess-trade" and by hinting that the sale of "human intellect" is no more than the sale of "human flesh". Fraiman further concludes that in *Mansfield Park* 'the slavery' functions "not as a subtext Austen wherein Austen and Sir Thomas converge but, on the contrary, as a trope Austen introduces to argue the essential depravity of Sir Thomas's relations to other people" (Fraiman, 813). Austen, in short, discovers and exploits a potential analogy between the oppressive, patriarchal order in Sir Thomas's household and slavery.

Fraiman points out that Said lacks this feminist viewpoint in his argument but, in fairness to Said, he too implies the homology between the British women and the black slave by indicating that Sir Thomas regards Fanny as just "a kind of transported commodity" (*CI*, 88). Moreover, by quoting the scene in which Sir Thomas eliminates all traces of frivolous behaviour in the preparations for an amateur theatrical at Mansfield Park during his absence, Said plainly states that we should "assume that Sir Thomas does exactly the same things—on a larger scale—in his Antigua 'plantations'" (*CI*, 87). Observing his alacritous way of rearranging in the house, we know that Sir Thomas must be a very efficient, if somewhat

oppressive, plantation owner who applies the same problem solving methodology he uses so brilliantly in Antigua to his domestic sphere. His absence from home, therefore, creates a power vacuum, a welcome expansion of freedom and personal autonomy, which his daughters greet with a degree of relief. The panic they experience on his sudden return, however, exposes the limits of self-determination and the fracture lines within the family unit :

How is the consternation of the party to be described ? To the greater number it was a moment of horror. Sir Thomas in the house ! All felt the instantaneous conviction. Not a hope of imposition or mistake was harboured any where. Julia's looks were an evidence of the fact that made it indisputable ; and after the first starts and exclamations, not a word was spoken for half a minute ; each with an altered countenance was looking at some other, and almost each was feeling it a stroke the most unwelcome, most ill-timed, most appalling ! " (MP, 163)

Although about two years have passed since their father left home, none of the children offer Sir Thomas a warm welcome. On the contrary, they feel his return is "the most unwelcome, most ill-timed, most appalling" event. From this scene, we can quite clearly understand that he is too rigid with his children. Although his sons are allowed a greater degree of autonomy, his daughters are trapped in their decorative roles. Maria Bertram, quoting from Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768), foregrounds this sense of alienation when she says, "Yes, certainly, the sun shines and the park looks very cheerful. But unluckily that iron gate, that ha-ha, give me a feeling of restraint and hardship. I cannot get out, as the starling said." (MP, 93)

When all of these factors are taken into consideration we are able to extrapolate

the children's seeming lack of inquisitiveness is, in fact, culturally determined. When faced with the implacable rule of law, embodied by their father, obedient silence is the only strategy available to them. Thus, Austen not only draws our attention to the rigid, oppressive patriarchal system in the family, but also reveals a strategy of limited resistance through "the silence of the Bertrams".

V.

In Kristin Olsen's detailed encyclopedia on the age of Austen, she begins the item of "West Indies" flippantly :

The casual reader of Austen's works, and certainly the public that knows her novels primarily through movie versions, may wonder what on earth Jane Austen has to do with the West Indies at all. Her books and their settings are thoroughly English and confined moreover to a few countries within England, that it seems bizarre to traipse so far afield. Why not talk about her relationship to Russia, too ? Or, Japan ? (Olsen, 707)

As Olsen suggests here, Austen has traditionally been regarded as a writer who never ventures outside of England. Reading the famous passage in her letter, "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on" (*L*, 275) too passively, it could be argued that Austen's world is limited to the domestic sphere. This view has its supporters, even among Austen experts such as Meenakshi Mukherjee, who states that "Jane Austen never uses foreign settings in her novels ; her quality of ironic mimesis needed the restrictive frame of the England that she knew" (Mukherjee, 59). However, a detailed and careful reading of her novels exposes the problems inherent in such a statement. By placing the letter in its intended context, it was after all a letter to her niece, Anna, who had asked her aunt to

comment on her novel in progress. Jan Fergus offers a different conclusion, stating that "[e]vidently in the month between this remark and the next, Anna's story wandered too far, so that in context '3 or 4 Families in a Country Village' is less a statement of Austen's own territory than advice on technique of characterisation : concentrate, dramatisé, develop your characters, permit them to interact with one another, 'make full use of them'" (Fergus, 3). By re-contextualising the passage, Fergus offers a welcome escape route from the tyranny of snap judgement stereotyping that has haunted Austen studies.

Detailed and informative accounts on Austen's life, such as Deirdre Le Faye's *Jane Austen : A Family Record* (1989, revised 2004) and George Holbert Tucker's *A History of Jane Austen's Family* (1983), reveal that neither Austen's life, nor her interests, were exclusively restricted to English life and manners. Although Austen never left England, her family members and relations, especially her naval brothers, visited India and often travelled through Europe. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that through her personal relationships and her reading of periodicals, she had sufficient working knowledge of foreign affairs and different countries to fuel her imagination and inform her writing.

Besides her naval brothers, there is further evidence to suggest that the Austens were connected to the West Indies. Southam's essay "Jane Austen and Antigua" to the Jane Austen Society in 1969 states that he came across the name of Austen's father in a book *The History of the Island of Antigua* (1896) and that James Langford Nibbs, who was a "West Indian", was a friend of Austen's father. The two men were at St. John's College, Oxford, together and had been such close friends that Mr Nibbs named Austen's father as a trustee of his plantation in Antigua.

Frank Gibbon has further developed the research on the Austen's relation to the Nibbs family and offers scholars a more detailed history of them. Although the Nibbs family first moved to Antigua in 1671, James Langford Nibbs, the friend of

Austen's father, came back to England to be educated as an English country gentleman, where he entered Oxford University, and later successfully settled in an estate in Devonshire in 1772. Gibbon's scholarship suggests a degree of consanguinity between some of the events in *Mansfield Park* and the Nibbs family history. The prototype of Tom Bertram, for instance, may have been the Nibbs' eldest son who also indulged in dissipation. Similarly, traces of Edmund Bertram can be found in their second son, who had been a country parson before inheriting the estate on the death of his father. (Gibbon, 302)

These, however, are not the only connections the Austens had with Antigua. James, the eldest son, first married a daughter of the former Governor of Grenada and Commander-in-Chief in the British West Indies (Tucker, 105) while, the youngest son, Charles, was married to a daughter of the former Attorney General of Bermuda. (Tucker, 184) Joseph Lew also shows us that Austen was interested in the anti-slavery campaign and loved to read Thomas Clarkson's *History of Abolition*. (Lew, 278) These facts suggest that Antigua is not just an imaginary landscape but, on the contrary, Antigua was a very familiar place to her and, when she wrote 'Antigua' in *Mansfield Park*, her consciousness of geography expanded beyond the limits of England into the real and concrete lived relations of the "West Indians" and their lives and investments in the Empire.

Ⅵ.

Returning, once again, to Said's criticism of Austen, he argues that "in *Mansfield Park* [she] sublimates the agonies of the Caribbean existence to a mere half dozen passing references to Antigua" (CI, 59). Said's criticism is valid only if we accept the orthodoxy surroundings, her advice to her niece, Anna, when Austen argued "we think you had better not leave England. Let the Portmans go to Ireland, but as you know nothing of the Manners there, you had better not go with them.

You will be in danger of giving false representations. Stick to Bath & the Foresters. There you will be quite at home." (*L*, 269) As previously mentioned, however, the passages in Austen's private letters should be approached with a degree of caution. Austen's advice, and her practice as her writer, is not born out of ignorance but out of knowledge, both of the world and her own limitations within it. In *Mansfield Park*, Austen does not describe the life of Antigua because she has no direct, first-hand experience of it, although her knowledge allows her, through brief references to the West Indies, to foreground the homology between the British women and the slaves in Antigua. Thus, Johnson argues, Austen's text offers a rebuttal to future criticism such as Said's and "underscores a moral point that was no longer either obscure or controversial at the time, i. e., that slaveholding is a form of misrule that has disastrous consequences under a man's own roof. Neither at home nor abroad is Sir Thomas a responsible figure of authority" (Johnson, 5).

In 1994, in his "Introduction" for *Representations of the Intellectual*, Said modified his opinion on *Mansfield Park* :

My unforgivable sin in the latter (*Culture and Imperialism*) is my argument that Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*—a novel I praise as much as I do all her work—also had something to do with slavery and British-owned sugar plantations in Antigua, both of which of course she mentions quite specifically. My point was that just as Austen talks about goings-on in Britain and in British overseas possessions, so too must her twentieth-century reader and critics, who have for too long focused on the former to the exclusion of the latter. (*RI*, xi)

This clarification suggests that Said's criticism is not a postcolonial critique directed at Austen or *Mansfield Park*, but rather an attack on those readers and critics who conveniently ignored the colonial context that is implicit within the work,

particularly when she appropriates the symbolism and language of slavery to accentuate the condition of upper-middle class women in England at that time.

Despite this clarification, Said's inventive postcolonial reading of *Mansfield Park* context has gained a degree of hegemony within Austen studies, and this leaves several points to be addressed. Said, for instance, concentrates exclusively on *Mansfield Park* and this is a serious omission. When examining Austen's representations of the West Indies, we should not restrict ourselves to one novel but, on the contrary, analyse her entire *oeuvre* before attempting to extrapolate a clear ideological viewpoint. As we have already seen in dealing with *Emma*, Austen's use of Antigua to foreground the homology between the Bertram sisters and African slaves clearly indicates a critical resistance to the patriarchal system and the oppression of imperialism, be it domestic or international.

In addition to *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*, there are several other references to the West Indies in her novels and I would like to look at two further examples of Austen's attitude and approach to writing about the West Indies. Anne Elliot, the heroine of *Persuasion*, has a close friend Mrs Smith who has difficulty in making a living. Mrs Smith explains to her friend :

There was one circumstance in the history of her grievances of particular irritation. She had good reason to believe that some property of her husband in the West Indies, which had been for many years under a sort of sequestration for the payment of its own incumbrances, might be recoverable by proper measures ; and this property, though not large, would be enough to make her comparatively rich. But there was nobody to stir in it. (*P*, 197)

Thanks to the help offered by her friends, Mrs Smith solves the problem and, at the end of the novel, a degree of stability and happiness returns :

Her (Mrs. Smith's) recent good offices by Anne had been enough in themselves ; and their marriage, instead of depriving her of one friend, secured two. She was their earliest visitor in their settled life ; and Captain Wentworth, by putting her in the way of recovering her husband's property in the West Indies ; by writing for her, acting for her, and seeing her through all the petty difficulties of the case, with activity and exertion of a fearless man and a determined friend, fully required the services which she had rendered, or ever meant to render, to his wife.

Mrs. Smith's enjoyments were not spoiled by this improvement of income, with some improvement of health, and the acquisition of such friends to be often with [. . .] (*P*, 235)

Although Sir Thomas is a baronet and owner of an elegant country house and Mrs Smith is just a poor widow, both of them are dependent on their incomes from the West Indies, which suggests the depth of private income's implication in the project of imperialism. There is another reference to the West Indies in Austen's unfinished novel, *Sanditon*, which also bears some scrutiny :

'Very good, very good,' said her Ladyship.—'A West Indy family and a school. That sounds well. That will bring money.'

'No people spend more freely, I believe, than West Indians,' observed Mr Parker.

'Aye—so I have heard—and because they have full purses, fancy themselves equal, may be, to your old country families. But then, they who scatter their money so freely, never think whether they may not be doing mischief of raising the price of things—and I have heard that's very much the case with your West-injines—and if they come among us to raise the price of

our necessities of life, we shall not much thank them Mr Palmer.’ (S, 180)

Some readers may be surprised to find that a Creole heiress appears in one of Austen’s novels, but here we find many of the familiar representations of the West Indians among the upper-middle class in England at that time. The “West Indians” are regarded as being rich and generous, or rich and wasteful, but they are rarely viewed in a favourable light and, in general, somewhat inferior to the people in England. As the person who is the cause of the false rumour, Miss Lambe serves as an indicator that the West Indians are untrustworthy. In these representations, the complex and distorted feelings held by the upper-middle class in England towards the “West Indians”, indicates the nervousness of a ruling class who is being deposed by the newly emergent *nouveau riche*. Although the “West Indians” are rich and accepted as members of gentry, they are tolerated and condescended to, rather than admired and respected and, had Said read *Mansfield Park* within the context of the rest of Austen’s works, he would have had a clearer understanding of how Sir Thomas and the Bertrams were regarded in England at that time.

This reading of *Mansfield Park* creates another problem worth discussing. Jon Mee, for example, argues that “Austen privileges the condition of white gentlewomen over any concern about black slaves” (Mee, 85). The question of segregation and racial prejudice in Austen’s works is a recent critical development, although the indication from Mee’s reading is that it is going to be an important discussion for some time. Thus, within the context of postcolonial approaches to *Mansfield Park* in particular, and Austen in general. Said’s initial reading has drawn new perspectives on Austen’s novels, with each attempt to generate new readings adding to and enhancing our understanding and appreciation.

As mentioned earlier, however, there are some critics who universally reject Said’s way of understanding the novels who stubbornly dismiss the postcolonial

approach as “only one point of view, that of nationalist complaint” (Windschuttle, 5). Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, offers a counterpoint, suggesting that :

Despite this overwhelming attention to Mansfield Park and its themes, postcolonial concerns need not be limited to the subject of slavery or European imperialism. It is above all the case that postcolonial criticism brings to reading the English text *different questions*, both theoretical and contextual, rather than narrowly exploring it through the lens of a ‘special interest’. The opening up of Austen’s world to these questions, and the joining of issue over them by academics everywhere—even to the setting of different agendas for scholarship—can only be regarded as a most welcome development. (Rajan, 107)

What is interesting is that Said’s earlier reading continues to dominate his contribution at the expense of his revisions and clarifications. It is, therefore, worth confirming his revised position again. In the “Introduction” of *Culture and Imperialism* he writes :

The novels and other books I consider here I analyze because first of all I find them estimable and admirable works of art and learning, in which I and many other readers take pleasure and from which we derive profit. Second, the challenge is to connect them not only with that pleasure and profit but also with the imperial process of which they were manifestly and unconcealedly a part ; rather than condemning or ignoring their participation in what was an unquestioned reality in their societies, I suggest that what we learn about this hitherto ignored aspect actually and truly *enhances* our reading and understanding of them. (CI, xiv)

Here, Said once again shows us that, even if the authors narrate nothing in their works clearly, a dutiful and attentive critic needs to focus on the marginal and peripheral aspects on the text, carefully reading between the lines and informing those readings with detailed research on the social, historical, cultural and political contexts that surrounded and informed its production.

Works Cited

- Austen, Jane. *Emma*. Ed. Fiona Stafford. London : Penguin Books, 2003.
- . *Jane Austen's Letters*. Ed. Deirdre Le Faye. 2nd ed. Oxford : Oxford UP, 1995.
- . *Lady Susan, The Watsons, Sanditon*. Ed. Margaret Drabble. Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1984.
- . *Mansfield Park*. Ed. Kathryn Sutherland. London : Penguin Books, 2003.
- . *Persuasion*. Ed. Gillian Beer. London : Penguin Books, 2003.
- . *Pride and Prejudice*. Ed. Vivien Jones. London : Penguin Books, 2003.
- Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory : A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford : Oxford UP, 1997.
- Dick, Delia. *York Notes Advanced : Mansfield Park*. London : York Press, 1999.
- Easthope, Antony. *Literary into Cultural Studies*. London : Routledge, 1996.
- Fergus, Jan. *Jane Austen : A Literary Life*. The Macmillan Press, 1991.
- Fleishman, Avrom. *A Reading of Mansfield Park : An Essay in Critical Synthesis*. Baltimore : The Johns Hopkins Press, 1967.
- Gibbon, Frank. "The Antiguan Connection : Some New Light on *Mansfield Park*." *The Cambridge Quarterly* 11 (1982) : 298-305.
- Johnson, Claudia L. Introduction. *Mansfield Park : a Screenplay*. By Patricia Rozema. New York : Hyperion, 2000. 1-10.
- Le Faye, Deirdre. *Jane Austen : A Family Record*. 2nd ed. Cambridge : Cambridge UP, 2004.
- Lentricchia, Frank, and Andrew Dubois, ed. *Close Reading : The Reader*. Durham : Duke UP, 2003.
- Lew, Joseph. "The Abominable Traffic : *Mansfield Park* and the Dynamics of Slavery." *History, Gender and Eighteenth-Century Literature*. Ed. Beth Fowkes Tobin. Athens, Ga : U of Georgia P, 1994. 271-300.
- Marsh, Nicholas. *Jane Austen : The Novels*. Basingstoke : Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998.
- Mee, Jon. "Austen's treacherous ivory : female patriotism, domestic ideology, and Empire." *The Postcolonial Jane Austen*. Ed. You-me Park and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan. London :

- Routledge, 2000. 74–92.
- Midgley, Clare. *Women against Slavery: The British Campaigns 1780–1870*. London : Routledge, 1992.
- Millard, Mary. “1807 and All That.” *Persuasions* 8 (1986) : 50–51.
- Moran, Joe. *Interdisciplinarity*. London : Routledge, 2002.
- Moretti, Franco. *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900*. London : Verso, 1998.
- Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *Jane Austen*. New York : St Martin’s Press, 1991.
- Olsen, Kirstin. *All Things Austen: An Encyclopedia of Austen’s World*. 2 vols. Westport, Ct : Greenwood Press, 2005.
- Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder. “Critical responses, recent.” *Jane Austen in Context*. Ed. Janet Todd. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen. 9 vols. Cambridge : Cambridge UP, 2005. 101–110.
- Roberts, Warren. *Jane Austen and the French Revolution*. 1797. London : The Athlone Press, 1995.
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. 1993. New York : Vintage Books, 1994.
- Southam, Brian. “Jane Austen and Antigua.” *Collected Reports of the Jane Austen Society 1966–1975*. N. p. : Wm. Dawson & Sons, 1977. 106–108.
- . “The silence of the Bertrams : Slavery and the chronology of *Mansfield Park*.” *The Times Literary Supplement*, 17 Feb. 1995 : 13–14.
- Stewart, Maaja A. *Domestic Realities and Imperial Fictions : Jane Austen’s Novels in Eighteenth-Century Contexts*. Athens, Ga : U of Georgia P, 1993.
- Tucker, George Holbert. *A History of Jane Austen’s Family*. 1983. Stroud : Sutton Publishing, 1998.
- Tuite, Clara. “Domestic retrenchment and imperial expansion : the property plots of *Mansfield Park*.” *The Postcolonial Jane Austen*. 93–115.
- Waldron, Mary. *Jane Austen and the Fiction of her Time*. Cambridge : Cambridge UP, 1999.
- . “‘Mansfield Park’ and slavery.” *TLS*, 3 Mar. 1995 : 15.
- Wiltshire, John. Introduction. *Mansfield Park*. By Jane Austen. Ed. Wiltshire. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen. 9 vols. Cambridge : Cambridge UP, 2005. xxv–lxxxiv.
- Windschuttle, Keith. “Rewriting the History of the British Empire.” *The New Criterion* 18.9 (2000). 7 September 2005 <[http : //www.newcriterion.com/archive/18/may00/keith.htm](http://www.newcriterion.com/archive/18/may00/keith.htm)>.

* This study was funded by the Matsuyama University Research Association in 2004 academic year.

Abstract

Edward W. Said's reading of *Mansfield Park* has proved to be one of the most influential analyses on Jane Austen in 1990s, signalling a hegemonic shift in Jane Austen studies. The core of his argument depends on the assumption that the Bertrams belong to the "West Indians", a new, upwardly mobile social *bloc* who are dependent on their income from their Antigua plantation.

Although Said's arguments have much influence on the field of literary criticism, there are still several critics who insist on situating the Bertrams within the traditional aristocracy. This trend of criticism suggests that Said's assumptions are not as reliable as they seem to be. These controversies over the identity of the Bertrams tend to polarise critics into two groups: those who insist that we should pay close attention to the text without considering peripheral historical-cultural details (e.g. the New Critical and Leavisite approaches), and those who insist that we should read the novels within the social and political contexts that informed their production and initial reception (e.g. the New Historical and postcolonial approaches).

This paper offers a review of contemporary and traditional approaches to Austen and argues that Said's reading, whilst problematic in some areas, offers a valuable insight into the text and provides an opportunity that will foster and develop a new, attentive, critical reader.