

# *Mansfield Park* and the End of Natural Theology

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The question of Jane Austen's relation to religion has been on the back burner since John Henry Newman declared in 1837 that she had "not a dream of the high Catholic ethos."<sup>1</sup> Like Newman, critical tradition has assumed that there is little to say about the subject beyond rehearsing Austen's religious traditionalism. Even *Mansfield Park*, the novel most explicitly concerned with spiritual matters, has been dominated by critical interest in improvement, acting, and, most recently, slavery.

Yet these themes are given meaning by the broader discourse of natural theology, the shared theological paradigm of the formally educated of Austen's day.<sup>2</sup> Natural theology provided the most stable and

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<sup>1</sup> Newman's judgment is reprinted in *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. B. C. Southam (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), 117. Most critics note that the moral vision of the novels fits well with that of Austen's Anglican Church. For versions of this argument see Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975); and Alistair M. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971). Critics who deduce Austen's faith from the morality of her novels in this manner are following the lead of Richard Whately, whose *Quarterly Review* essay took up the matter of Austen's religion as follows: "Miss Austin [*sic*] has the merit (in our judgment most essential) of being evidently a Christian writer: a merit which is much enhanced, both on the score of good taste, and of practical utility, by her religion not being at all intrusive. . . . The subject is rather alluded to, and that incidentally, than studiously brought forward and dwelt upon" (quoted in Southam, *Critical Heritage*, 95).

<sup>2</sup> To find the language of religion central to Austen's text is not to claim that she needs to be read from a "religious perspective." Indeed, the notion that there is such a thing as a religious perspective is the product of a broadly secular consensus that

effective way for organized religion to accommodate the social and intellectual events that occupied the period from Isaac Newton to Charles Darwin. By referring the intricacy and efficiency of creation to a divine designer—a move frequently termed the “argument from design”—it offered a synthetic means of gathering into a coherent whole the increasingly diverse material of the natural world.<sup>3</sup> Design’s ubiquitous presence during the period means that it frequently operated less than explicitly, an assumed background to any theological discussion rather than a proposition that needed continued demonstration: one need simply refer to the beautiful complexity of the natural world, and one’s listeners could link it to its divine source. The harmony-amid-variety of a beautiful scene—or, more and more often, the beautiful representation of a scene—transparently inspired in the beholder a “natural” feeling for the divinity behind it. Design was thus both a systematic theology and a way to give form to vaguer apprehensions and surmises.

The chief events of *Mansfield Park* originate in design’s failure to control feeling. Where nature once was deployed to bend strong feeling upward toward the divine, we now see feeling escaping into a social realm ungoverned by design. Austen investigates the historical condi-

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would make the religious an object of knowledge. *Mansfield Park* records the arrival of this consensus, with its redescription of religion as internal and private—in short, as a perspective.

<sup>3</sup> For the cultural environment of natural theology see D. L. LeMahieu, *The Mind of William Paley: A Philosopher and His Age* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), 31. For the history of design arguments see Earl R. Wasserman, “Nature Moralized: The Divine Analogy in the Eighteenth Century,” *ELH* 20 (1953): 39–76; Isabel Rivers, “Galen’s Muscles: Wilkins, Hume, and the Educational Use of the Argument from Design,” *Historical Journal* 36 (1993): 577–97; and David A. Pailin, “The Confused and Confusing Story of Natural Religion,” *Religion* 24 (1994): 199–212. For philosophical treatments of design arguments see the literature surrounding Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. An excellent literary analysis of design that has greatly influenced my own argument is Michael B. Prince, “Hume and the End of Religious Dialogue,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 25 (1992): 283–308. John Milbank provides an erudite series of links between design, the division of labor, and classical political economy in *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 37–40.

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tions of this change when the principal characters visit the chapel at Sotherton; their responses to it become an interrogation of the natural theological tradition Austen inherited. In these scenes Austen emerges as a critical reader of her own religious history. Yet if *Mansfield Park* thematizes its doubts about natural theology's historical operations, it confronts them more ambivalently on a formal level. Design is located at the intersection of history and form, where individual lives and feelings are met and shaped by tradition, and Austen engages it in a commensurately complex manner.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, design offers the novelist a language that efficiently reformulates mechanism as nature; on the other, the novel's own equivocal condemnations of acting, improvement, and slavery variously focus a tendency toward naturalization shaped by design's more comprehensive discourse. So Austen must hold design at arm's length.

Fanny becomes a figure for this ambivalent engagement with natural theology when her vigilant rejection of acting and improvement fails to find critical purchase on the Bertram family's silence surrounding the slave trade. Fanny's inability to understand the full dimensions of the slave trade prepares the way for a discussion of her love of nature that the novel exposes as shaped by precisely the artificial channels she seeks to reject. As the narrative proceeds, the natural language of design consistently fails to organize the desires of the principal characters, a difficulty abruptly solved at novel's end through an explicit appeal to the artifice of the love plot. In labeling this knowingly contrived ending "natural," the novel reveals the inadequacy of design's naturalizing procedures to the challenges posed by its own discursive practices. Natural theology's business was to harmonize history and form as they met at the site of an individual life; at the novel's close it abandons this task, departing for the realm of pure form and the more blatant kinds of authority that reside in the great house and in the narrative power of the novel named after it.

<sup>4</sup> I make a case for design's conceptual relevance to understanding the relation between history and form in "Natural Designs: Romanticism, Secularization, Theory," *European Romantic Review* 12 (2001): 53–91.

### “There Is Nothing Awful Here”

In *Mansfield Park* discussions of space encode the historical consciousness of the principal characters. Even the novel’s most apparently “readable” spaces are not innocent. Prior to her first entering the Sotherton chapel, for instance,

Fanny’s imagination had prepared her for something grander than a mere, spacious, oblong room, fitted up for the purpose of devotion—with nothing more striking or more solemn than the profusion of mahogany, and the crimson velvet cushions appearing over the ledge of the family gallery above. “I am disappointed,” said she, in a low voice, to Edmund. “This is not my idea of a chapel. There is nothing awful here, nothing melancholy, nothing grand. Here are no aisles, no arches, no inscriptions, no banners. No banners, cousin, to be ‘blown by the night wind of Heaven.’ No signs that a ‘Scottish monarch sleeps below.’”<sup>5</sup>

The chapel to which she has so looked forward reminds her of a drawing room, the solemn “profusion of mahogany, and the crimson velvet cushions” recalling the “shining floors, solid mahogany, rich damask” of the rest of the house (113). But this response is hers alone; the Rushworths apparently do not mind that their chapel looks like a drawing room, and the Crawfords have no response to sacred places whatsoever. Even Edmund, supposed to be Fanny’s ally in religious matters, assumes that she is merely looking for relics. “You forget, Fanny,” he tells her, “how lately all this has been built, and for how confined a purpose, compared with the old chapels of castles and monasteries. It was only for the private use of the family. They have been buried, I suppose, in the parish church. *There* you must look for the banners and the achievements” (114). Either Edmund misses the point, or he is just not bothered by Fanny’s palpable sense of loss. He judges that the decor of churches should match their functions and thus that a private chapel should not strive to look like “the old chapels of castles and monasteries” or like the pseudomedieval sanctuaries of the gothic novel. But in making this judgment, he not only fails to enter sympathetically into Fanny’s response but mistakes her meaning: she is looking for symbols of holiness; he draws historical distinctions.

<sup>5</sup> Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. Tony Tanner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), 114.

Fanny's imagination is schooled by Walter Scott's gothic description of a chapel in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, his first important work. Given Austen's generally low opinion of romance, critics have assumed that Edmund has the novel's endorsement when he criticizes Fanny on historical grounds. In accusing her of wanting "the old chapels of castles and monasteries," Edmund repudiates the romance of British history and so positions Fanny as someone led astray by an unrealistic, nostalgic conception of worship. At the same time, Edmund figures himself as the inheritor of a modern history marked by a distinction between public church and private chapel and, it seems, comfortable with the domestic environment and the domestic God that the Sotherton chapel delivers.

Yet while Edmund labels Fanny's romance-history unrealistic, her response implicitly comments upon the inability of his modern history to understand holiness. The emotional failure of the chapel is also a theological failure, for it lacks the ideogram of the holy that a space must have to *be* a chapel.<sup>6</sup> Fanny's romantic desires for chivalry and heroism point out the inadequacies of Edmund's response, suggesting that his history, and the history that has given rise to someone like him, is susceptible to critique.<sup>7</sup>

The formative moment of this history is 1688. This fact becomes clear when Mrs. Rushworth narrates the history of the chapel, placing Edmund's defense of it in a historical setting whose specificity is unusual for Austen:

This chapel was first fitted up as you see it, in James the Second's time. Before that period, as I understand, the pews were only wainscot; and there is some reason to think that the linings and cushions of the pulpit and family-seat were only purple cloth; but this is not quite certain. It is a handsome chapel, and was formerly in constant use both morning and evening. Prayers were always read in it by the domestic chaplain, within the memory of many. But the late Mr Rushworth left it off. (115)

<sup>6</sup> I take the term *ideogram* from Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

<sup>7</sup> On the critical possibilities of romance see Theodor W. Adorno, "Reconciliation under Duress," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, by Ernst Bloch et al. (London: Verso, 1980); and Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative As a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), 206–80.

The chapel in its present form is about 130 years old, though apparently it has been in use for much longer, since the house itself is Elizabethan. Before it was “fitted up,” it was considerably more austere, with wainscot (oak) pews and purple cloth; its transformation into a more domestic space, by means of cushions and mahogany, is tied to a time of religious turmoil in England, when parish churches became sites of resistance to James’s attempt to convert the nation to Catholicism. The family, it seems, withdrew from such turmoil by fitting up their chapel for private use. Thus when Edmund tells Fanny that she has forgotten “how lately all this has been built, and for how confined a purpose,” he invokes a founding moment of the eighteenth century’s interpretations of worship and belief, for the contested legacy of James’s reign and the 1688 settlement altered for good how the nation viewed the intersections of culture, politics, and religion. The chapel becomes, in effect, a repository of the religious history of the eighteenth century. Understanding this history not merely as context but as internal to the aesthetic object—both chapel and novel—will allow us to see how that history has materially changed the novel’s theological discourse.

After the failed campaigns of Monmouth and Argyll in 1685, the political tone in England shifted from mutual toleration between a Catholic king and his Protestant subjects to mutual mistrust.<sup>8</sup> James began to manipulate parliamentary elections to favor Dissenters and especially Catholics.<sup>9</sup> Though he did not try to convert the nation to Catholicism, his policy of filling governmental and civil posts with Catholics meant that eventually he could transform England into a nation whose political and social structure was Catholic, even if its offi-

<sup>8</sup> The trials that succeeded Monmouth’s rebellion give a good measure of this changed tone. As the historian David Ogg mildly puts it, “Clemency was not a Stuart virtue” (*England in the Reigns of James II and William III* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1955], 149). Along with the so-called Bloody Assizes, Lord Chief Justice Jeffrys’s commission executed three hundred people and transported another eight hundred to the West Indies.

<sup>9</sup> Vacancies among judges and heads of colleges were invariably filled with Catholics, as were military positions. By 1688, 24 percent of the justices of the peace were Catholic; thirteen of the forty-three privy counselors, or 30 percent, were Catholic, as were sixteen of the forty-three lord lieutenants, or 37 percent—figures vastly out of proportion to the 2–4 percent of English citizens who were Catholic. See John Miller, *Popery and Politics in England, 1660–1688* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 218–20.

cial religion remained Anglicanism. Anglicans fought back in a number of ways, often using chapels to stage anti-Catholic agitation. In October 1688 the Jesuit preacher at London's Lime Street chapel was pulled from his pulpit by a mob. In early November chapels in Bristol, Oxford, Worcester, and Suffolk were attacked. It was common for Protestants to enter Catholic chapels during mass and make a commotion or to occupy the chapels so that Catholics could not get in. This is the environment in which the Protestant family at Sotherton would have stopped worshipping at the parish church and begun worshipping in its private chapel. Under the pressure of such events the 1688 settlement would be asked to refashion the nation's religious imagination.

According to J. G. A. Pocock, there were two contemporary interpretations of the events of 1688. One saw Parliament and the legal system remedying Parliament's own predicament; in this interpretation England was a constitutional state marked by continuity of government. The most famous inheritor of this conservative Whig interpretation was Edmund Burke. The other interpretation was advanced by those whom Pocock calls "radical Whigs," who viewed 1688 as a struggle to limit the monarchy further and achieve a genuine republic in England.<sup>10</sup> Many radical Whigs had been in Holland with William, like John Locke, or had keenly felt James's attack on the Anglican establishment, like the divines John Tillotson and Gilbert Burnet.<sup>11</sup> On such men fell the early burden of interpreting and justifying the 1688 settlement, especially as it applied to the religious polity of the new administration. Under their influence a remarkable religious and political

<sup>10</sup> See J. G. A. Pocock, "The Significance of 1688: Some Reflections on Whig Historiography," in *The Revolutions of 1688: The Andrew Browning Lectures, 1988*, ed. Robert Beddard (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> William promoted Tillotson to archbishop even though he was only a dean. Burnet, also a longtime friend of William and Mary, was made bishop of Salisbury and became chaplain to Mary; under his influence, one of William's first acts was to pass a toleration bill, which extended limited liberties to all religious dissenters except Catholics. Within three years William had consecrated fifteen new bishops, all of them latitudinarian. Locke, too, was a latitudinarian Anglican whose fortunes fluctuated with those of William. Though there is no evidence that he was directly involved in the Rye House Plot, his close association with Shaftesbury made it prudent for him to leave England for Holland in 1683. He returned in 1689 on the same boat that bore the new Queen Mary to England.

consensus began to emerge. Politically, it was republican; religiously, it was Anglican, latitudinarian, and tolerant; intellectually, it valued reason and free inquiry over blind faith and enthusiasm. It was suspicious of absolute authority in both temporal and eternal matters. Under Locke, Tillotson, and Burnet, and with William's benevolent support, the events of 1688 came to represent a consolidation of the Anglican hold over national affairs—specifically, of the hold of a particularly Whiggish, latitudinarian, anti-Catholic Anglicanism.

One of Locke's chief claims in the *Letters Concerning Toleration*, for example, is that the Christian faith is sufficiently supported "by its own beauty, force and reasonableness" and therefore that "external force is not necessary" for it to take hold of the human imagination.<sup>12</sup> Locke's dislike of state coercion is clearly an argument against James's effort to impose Catholicism on England and a defense of William's tolerant regime, for Locke opposes the authority of state religion to a church brought together voluntarily by the internal authority of Christianity itself. "A Church," he writes, "I take to be a voluntary society of men, joining themselves together of their own accord, in order to the public worshipping of God, in such a manner as they judge acceptable to him, and effectual to the salvation of their souls."<sup>13</sup> The way to salvation is plainly revealed in the Scriptures and requires no external authority or force for interpretation. In *The Reasonableness of Christianity* Locke rejects the "unnecessary mysteriousness" of certain doctrines—the Trinity, transubstantiation, and vicarious atonement—as mystifications intended to enslave the believer to the state. Complicated doctrine subverts the ideal of the church as a voluntary society structured around freedom of conscience; while articles of belief and creed are subject to endless dispute, everything important in Christianity boils down to a single, self-evident message. The reduction of dogma to a single tenet is an attempt to hold Anglican orthodoxy together in the aftermath of 1688, when its newly reconstituted hegemony is almost immediately threatened by the competing influences of Calvinism, on

<sup>12</sup> John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity, with A Discourse of Miracles, and Part of A Third Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. I. T. Ramsey (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1958), 91. Locke's *Third Letter* was published in 1692 as a defense of his *First Letter* of 1689.

<sup>13</sup> From the *First Letter*, quoted in Ramsey's "Introductory Note" (88).

the one hand, and deism, on the other. Reasonable Christianity often tries to find a middle ground by invoking the specter of Catholic dogmatism and arbitrary power. It is thus set against “stately buildings, costly ornaments, peculiar and uncouth habits, and a numerous huddle of pompous, fantastical, cumbersome ceremonies” (244).<sup>14</sup>

The resolute nonmysteriousness of the chapel at Sotherton has something in common with Locke’s rejection of stately buildings and fantastic ceremonies. The dominant interpretations of 1688 would certainly have approved of a chapel that refused to cloak itself in mystery and indirection. In Fanny’s view, the chapel refuses an artful religious imagination; Locke himself urged parents whose children showed a taste for poetry to have it “stifled and suppressed as much as may be,” and the Sotherton chapel, according to the Scott-quoting Fanny, is no place for poetry.<sup>15</sup> Both chapel and Lockean theology reject substantive debates about doctrine, appealing instead to the self-evident clarity of the Scriptures and to a history that construes truth as linear and progressive. Such lowest-common-denominator faith abjures the paradoxes of orthodox doctrine in the name of intellectual consistency. For its part, the chapel’s lack of banners and arches suggests representational poverty: in banishing such ideograms, the chapel rejects paradox as unnecessarily mysterious. This is the cause of Fanny’s disappointment: she does not recognize the chapel as a chapel, for it no longer contains in itself the struggle to represent what is unrepresentable. It is only what it appears to be.

For *Mansfield Park* refusal of figuration has serious consequences. Walking through the Sotherton grounds after the chapel scene, Mary tells Edmund to choose another profession: “Men love to distinguish themselves, and in either of the other lines [the law and the military], distinction may be gained, but not in the church. A clergyman is nothing.” In response, Edmund appeals to the clergy’s social usefulness: “I cannot call that situation nothing, which has the charge of all that is of the first importance to mankind, individually or collectively consid-

<sup>14</sup> Locke is speaking of Judaism before the coming of Christ. Liberal Protestantism freely associates Catholicism with Judaism, exploiting anti-Semitism to score points against it.

<sup>15</sup> Locke’s dictum is quoted in Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution, 1603–1714* (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1961), 303.

ered, temporally and eternally—which has the guardianship of religion and morals, and consequently of the manners which result from their influence.” Mary objects that Edmund has overestimated the good that a clergyman can do, but he holds fast to his claim that clergy set the example for their parishioners:

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

“Certainly,” said Fanny, with gentle earnestness.

“There,” cried Miss Crawford, “you have quite convinced Miss Price already.”

“I wish I could convince Miss Crawford too.”

“I do not think you ever will,” said she with an arch smile; “I am just as much surprised now as I was at first that you should intend to take orders. You really are fit for something better. Come, do change your mind. It is not too late. Go into the law.” (120–21)

Most critics see Edmund’s argument as traditional Tory, but its heritage is equally latitudinarian Whig. Edmund draws on the latitudinarian effort to keep Anglicanism together by deemphasizing doctrine and preaching a Christianity of morality, social order, and natural religion. Tillotson, the greatest proponent of this strand of latitudinarianism, famously declared that “the great design of the Christian religion” was “to restore and reinforce the practice of natural law or, which is all one, of moral duties.”<sup>16</sup>

In using this defense of the clergy, Edmund reflects the theological training he would have received at Oxford early in the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> The requirements for the B.A. and M.A. included training in

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Irene Collins, *Jane Austen and the Clergy* (London: Hambledon, 1994), 43.

<sup>17</sup> The curriculum at this time was still largely the same as the one defended by Thomas Secker, bishop of Oxford (1737–58) and then archbishop of Canterbury (1758–68), who declared in his charges to the clergy in 1738 that the prerequisites for embarking on a study of the Christian faith were “a due knowledge of the rules of right reasoning, and of the moral and religious truths which nature teaches; and of the state of the world in its earlier ages, and in that when Christianity first appeared.” Only then should come a “diligent search in Holy Scripture” (*The Works of Thomas Secker, LL.D.*, ed. T. Hardy, vol. 4 [London, 1805], 67).

classics, logic, and natural law but no formal training or examinations in theology. To earn a B.A., the minimum for ordination, candidates had to pass examinations in spoken Latin, in “the Sciences” (logic, geometry, and grammar), and in three classical authors of their choosing. To achieve ordination after the B.A., they had to pass a deacon’s examination, which called for knowledge of Latin and the Scriptures sufficient “to defend the tenets of the Church of England against papists, sectaries and enthusiasts.”<sup>18</sup> Since Edmund is not yet ordained when *Mansfield Park* begins, he is probably preparing himself for such examinations during the events of the novel. Austen subjects him to her own examination when Mary raises her objections to the clergy and to his impending ordination. His appeal to morals and manners perhaps prefigures the answer he will give at his deacon’s examination.

The futility of this conversation demands attention. Though Mary and Edmund are beginning to fall in love, they do not show the least inclination to budge from their positions. Edmund reiterates the social usefulness of the clergy three times, and three times Mary declares this representation false and urges him to choose another profession. When it comes to religion, if not love, it has been an undialectical exchange. The novel needs us to interpret Mary’s and Edmund’s unwillingness to be persuaded as evidence of her selfishness and his sturdiness, but it is not clear that their conversation lends itself to such an understanding. In the chapel Edmund has positioned Fanny’s desire for banners and inscriptions as retrograde, but it may be Edmund who is out of touch. In the aftermath of James’s reign, systematic theology had spent most of the eighteenth century worrying about excesses of religious feeling and training the Anglican clergy to do battle with papists and sectarians, for which a heavy diet of classical logic and rhetoric perhaps fitted them well. But now, in the early nineteenth century, Anglican theology is caught unawares by people like Mary, who have little religious sensibility of any kind. Edmund cannot muster a defense of the clergy that someone like Mary would find compelling. Like the chapel, Edmund is confident of his social and moral

<sup>18</sup> See R. Greaves, “Religion in the University, 1715–1800,” in *The Eighteenth Century*, ed. L. S. Sutherland and L. G. Mitchell, vol. 5 of *The History of the University of Oxford*, ed. T. H. Ashton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 405.

authority but mute on matters of theology and emotion. Trained to identify and curb excess feeling, he does not find it in him to champion his vocation by appealing to feeling rather than to social norms. To Mary, who views it as a mundane career, the church has little to say beyond repeating its own claim to social importance—which merely confirms her in her belief that the church is *only* a social institution, and a shabby one at that.

In other words, Edmund's defense of the clergy has no effect on Mary because it assumes that religion functions as a coherent ground of social choice rather than as one social choice among others. Indeed, the distinction I have made between individual feeling and social life would make no sense to Edmund, for it has meaning only in the context of a split between belief and practice. From the perspective of Mary and that of the modern reader conditioned by a history of religious expressivity, Edmund's response seems tepid because he does not speak a language of belief. His conversation with Mary documents the distance between 1688 and the early nineteenth century: the language of 1688, which preserved theology by privatizing it as belief, no longer has purchase in a world that has taken privatization to heart.

## Second Nature

Critics who wish to find in Austen a critique of Lockean liberalism sometimes align her with Burke. Yet *Mansfield Park* is as critical of Burke as of Locke.

Burke's interpretation of 1688 rejects the radical Whig wish to limit the monarchy and turn England into a republic. For him, freedom is grounded in the state and in the constitution's capacity to pass on to each generation the freedoms traditionally enjoyed by the citizenry. Burke traces this idea back to Magna Carta and to the "still more antient standing law of the kingdom."<sup>19</sup> The Glorious Revolution was therefore not a true revolution at all but an event "made to preserve our *antient* indisputable laws and liberties" (31), an organic reaffirmation of principles inherent in the body politic itself. The English,

<sup>19</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L. G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 32.

Burke writes, can feel the power of these principles on their pulses; custom and tradition are a “second nature” to them. Burke’s methodology thus validates both the constitution and its historical persistence: “We wished at the period of the Revolution, and do now wish, to derive all we possess as *an inheritance from our forefathers*” (31).

Few of those who lived through James’s tumultuous reign and the threat of violence during the interregnum regarded 1688 as simply an exercise in continuity.<sup>20</sup> When Burke declares that 1688 “proceeded upon the principle of reference to antiquity,” he therefore glosses a real and ultimately inconclusive debate about what the 1688 revolution *did* mean. Many scholars have pointed this out, of course; it becomes important here because Burke’s interpretation bequeaths a paradoxical legacy to the anti-Jacobin cause. If the anti-Jacobins want to claim 1688 as a vital part of their English heritage, and if the chief intellectual defenders of 1688, men like Tillotson, Locke, and Shaftesbury, are also the founders of a liberal tradition of political and religious thinking, then British conservatives must powerfully revise their own material in the act of deploying it.<sup>21</sup> By Austen’s time the Lockean consensus, forged in an era of religious toleration as a defense of the 1688 settlement, has been remade into a traditionalist argument for English gradualism and social order, defined in opposition to the tenets of the French Revolution and French atheism—an argument that works primarily on historical grounds, distinguishing 1688 from France in 1789 and England itself in 1649.

Edmund Bertram follows the example of Edmund Burke, accomplishing a similar kind of historical revision at the Sotherton chapel when he tells Fanny that she forgets “how lately this has all been built,

<sup>20</sup> Certainly, the times bore the signs of revolution: an armed uprising against a sovereign, the sovereign’s hasty flight, and a violent reversal anticipated during the long years of the Stuart exile. Throughout December there were rumors of bands of Irish mercenaries roaming the countryside. On 12 December, the day after the king had fled, London caught the alarm and people stayed up all night, banging kettles and firing muskets. Renegade papists were said to be plundering the area around Northampton. It was alleged that eight thousand Irish and Scots had massacred the people of Birmingham. Similar rumors were heard in Wendover, Wigan, Norfolk, and Berwick in mid-December. For more on these rumors see Miller, 260.

<sup>21</sup> See Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 13–14.

and for how confined a purpose.” He stresses the connection between historical process and physical object, positing the chapel as a natural result of historical development. Yet, like Burke’s interpretation of 1688, Edmund’s explanation must work on latitudinarian material, and here lies the paradox of his argument. For Sotherton is an Enlightenment chapel, a product of the Whig consensus gathered around William, in which the old drapery has been torn off and replaced with the bourgeois cushions and reasonable God evocative of the Enlightenment’s own ideological interior. Fanny may sense the radical discontinuity between the idealized religious history she desires and the interior of the chapel, but in Edmund’s eyes the chapel is the inevitable result of an implicitly continuous history. Like the anti-Jacobin novels of the postrevolution retrenchment, Edmund transforms the lexicon of 1688 liberalism into that of 1790s conservatism. He stands at the end of a long eighteenth-century narrative about the fate of the Whig latitudinarian consensus, which gradually remade an argument for toleration into an argument for tradition.

The presence of 1688 in the novel thus creates problems of interpretation for the characters themselves. In the Sotherton chapel, debates over the meaning of the historical legacy one inherits are revealed as part of the very process of inheritance. Consequently, there is no easy distinction between the “real” history to which Edmund appeals and Fanny’s romance-history. For all its talk of continuity and its appeal to “our records” and “our acts of Parliament,” the Burkean line is highly selective when it comes to its own retrospective history; moreover, it furnishes a powerful naturalizing apparatus in the form of a tradition and a constitution that pass on “our *antient* indisputable laws and liberties.” In like manner, Edmund’s defense of the chapel turns on a historical fiction (call it tradition) every bit as powerful and seductive as Fanny’s—perhaps more powerful and seductive, insofar as it comes stamped as natural and does not, like Scott’s history, wear its fictionality on its sleeve. Edmund invents a disingenuous distinction between history and fiction even as he grounds his argument by taking the distinction for granted. His historical interpretation suppresses a real debate by begging the very terms of continuity and tradition.

This debate is embedded in the language of the 1688 settlement itself, for James’s recent attempt to impose Catholicism on the nation

had made it pertinent for Parliament to recall and to formalize the church's wonted subservience. To the coronation oath requiring William and Mary to maintain the true profession of the gospel, Parliament added the sectarian phrase "the Protestant Reformed Religion established by law."<sup>22</sup> *Protestant* suggests anti-Catholicism and also serves as a reminder that when he founded the Church of England, Henry VIII transferred large tracts of church land to private ownership, severely limiting the church's role in public administration and political negotiation. The livelihoods of most clergymen were consequently subject to the whims of private landholders. The coronation oath is full of the continuity terminology that was so important to the Burkean understanding of the revolution, but this continuity guarantees the church's subservience. Thus the Whig interpretation of 1688 reduces the church to a second-class political player even as a revolution is ostensibly staged to preserve it.<sup>23</sup> In his defense of the chapel Edmund unwittingly dramatizes the developing incoherence in the church's language of self-justification.

The sign "1688" betokens a certain imagination of history. In the chapel it masquerades in the guise of historical fact, which obscures but does not dispel its essentially imaginative character. Later, when Edmund appeals to the social and moral example set by the clergy, he reproduces the only religious language that the historical imaginary of the coronation oath allows. He cannot describe the church as something attractive on its own terms, because the "Protestant Reformed Religion," by legal definition, does not have its own terms. Mary's playful suggestion that he "go into the law" may be more serious than it appears. A careful study of the law and its history may reveal to Edmund the weakness of the institution he is about to join.

In the conversations, impressions, and arguments concerning the Sotherton scenes we can therefore construct a prescient critique. The

<sup>22</sup> *Reformed* refers specifically to the Thirty-nine Articles, drawn up during Elizabeth's reign. In making William a defender of the Reformed faith, the oath reasserted the perceived glories of that period and implicitly elevated the Tudor line over the Stuart. For more on the coronation oath see Ogg, 235–37.

<sup>23</sup> Most established churchmen strongly opposed the wording of the oath, with its historical references and implications; some four hundred ecclesiastics resigned their offices in protest around the time of William's ascension.

liberalism of 1688 offers the church little with which to respond either to Fanny's search for holiness or to Mary's disdain. Rereading 1688 as a symbol of continuity only recapitulates the inadequacies that such rereading seeks to escape. Conceptually, moreover, 1688—or any other moment—cannot appear as a singular historical value. Not only is Edmund's history every bit as fictional as Fanny's, but his effort to distinguish the two histories reveals the performative nature of the distinction between reality and fiction, which appeals to a presumably self-evident difference even as it constitutes that difference in the architecture of the chapel itself. Just as there is nothing natural about Burke's second nature, so there is nothing natural about Edmund's historical explanation of the chapel or about the history of the church of which this explanation is an implicit defense. *Mansfield Park* thus exposes the church's assumption that its function is to interpret natural, given, kinds of experiences. Far from resting confidently on natural religion, the church invents its own "natural" heritage from the raw materials of politics and history.

### A Sense of History

When she was sixteen, Austen, with the collaboration of her sister, Cassandra, wrote a *History of England, from the Reign of Henry the Fourth to the Death of Charles the First*. Conceived as a burlesque of standard textbook histories, it also reveals in the young Austen a prickly relationship with the received history of her country. The association of the House of Tudor with England's historical destiny, familiar from Goldsmith's *History of England*, is conspicuously missing from this narrative. Invariably, Austen prefers Catholics to Protestants, Stuarts to Tudors. "My principal reason for undertaking the History of England," she writes, is "to prove the innocence of the Queen of Scotland . . . and to abuse Elizabeth."<sup>24</sup> One does not want to lay too much weight on the lighthearted productions of a clever sixteen-year-old, but Austen's sense that "Englishness" is a constructed rather than natural category suggests at

<sup>24</sup> Jane Austen, *The History of England, from the Reign of Henry the Fourth to the Death of Charles the First, by a Partial, Prejudiced, and Ignorant Historian*, facsimile ed., ed. Deldre Le Faye (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin, 1993), 33.

least a kind of historical skepticism, and there is no reason to think that she has lost this skepticism by the time she writes her novels. Indeed, we might say that her *History* reveals an especially keen eye for just the moments when historical contingency gets naturalized as destiny—for just the kind of history on which Edmund relies.

While the Sotherton scenes may be read as a critique of the religious histories available to Edmund, there is an alternative religious history that is virtually suppressed. This history offers a strongly independent church—and it begins, again, in 1688. Faced with an increasingly recalcitrant Parliament and the stubborn Anglicanism of his subjects, James tried to pressure the Anglican establishment by extending civil and religious tolerance to Dissenters. In 1687 and again in 1688 he issued a declaration of indulgence, which suspended all penal laws in ecclesiastical matters and exempted officeholders from the Test Acts (which required allegiance to the Thirty-nine Articles). Moreover, he demanded that the 1688 declaration be read on two successive Sundays in every cathedral and parish church. This was anathema to most clergy, for it forced them to extend tolerance to religious groups they regarded as heretics and to do so from their very pulpits.<sup>25</sup> Among those who resisted the order were seven bishops, who sent a formal protest to the king. In early June they were charged with seditious libel for denying his dispensing power and, on refusing bail, were sent to the Tower.

The bishops quickly became national heroes. Even Goldsmith's Whiggish *History of England* cannot resist the language of heroism and martyrdom:

As the reverend prisoners passed, the populace fell upon their knees; and great numbers ran into the water [the Thames], craving their blessing, calling upon Heaven to protect them, and encouraging them to suffer nobly in the cause of religion. The bishops were not wanting, by their submissive and humble behaviour, to raise the pity of the specta-

<sup>25</sup> "The order demanding the reading," writes the historian Michael Mullett, "seemed to require the Anglican clergy to act as accomplices in the assassination of their own Church" (*James II and English Politics, 1678–1688* [London: Routledge, 1994], 68). Some clergy complied; many more, noting that the proviso did not require anybody to stay and listen to the declaration, encouraged their congregants to depart before it was read. Many refused the order altogether.

tors, and they still exhorted them to fear God, honour the king, and maintain their loyalty. The very soldiers by whom they were guarded kneeled down before them, and implored their forgiveness.<sup>26</sup>

The bishops' acquittal in late June was widely perceived as a repudiation of James. Certainly, it represented a rejection of his dispensing power, on which the declaration of indulgence had been based. In this sense the acquittal reaffirmed the primacy of divine law over the king's law.

Some historians call this event the "Anglican Revolution." Mark Goldie, for example, argues that the acquittal of the seven bishops formalized a process already under way in England, in which the Anglican Church gradually took the upper hand and established a thoroughly Anglican Tory state with James as king.<sup>27</sup> The principles of the Anglican Revolution were precisely those of divine right and passive resistance to which the bishops gave voice on the river. Their appeal was mild, even submissive; they strongly dissociated themselves from the language of revolution and insubordination and never so much as hinted that James was not the rightful heir. This revolution combined a strongly royalist and conservative politics with an allegiance to divine law; when the two were not aligned, the church followed its mandate by passively resisting the sovereign while respecting his divine right.

In the context of the slowly progressing Tory Anglican Revolution, with its powerful dual command to "fear God [and] honour the king," William's invasion became a *second* revolution, dominated by Whigs and latitudinarians. Most Tory Anglicans resisted: along with the four hundred clergy who resigned around the time of William's ascension, five of the seven bishops refused to acknowledge his claim to the throne and were deprived of their livings; they would not accept that "secular power could change the Supreme Governor of the Church of England even when that governor was an aggressively Popish successor" (Pocock, 279). William's appointment of latitudinarian Whig bishops, fifteen in all, and his promotion especially of Tillotson and Burnet

<sup>26</sup> Oliver Goldsmith, *History of England* 123–24. Hume's generally more critical *History of England* (1778) paints a similar scene, though more self-consciously.

<sup>27</sup> Mark Goldie, "The Political Thought of the Anglican Revolution," in *Bedard*, esp. 107–12.

suggest an effort to influence the prevailing interpretation of 1688, to consolidate the union of Whiggism and Anglicanism around a joint rejection of James—a successful effort to silence the royalist voices of the Anglican Revolution.

The independent tradition of the Anglican Revolution would have given Edmund another sort of language to use at Sotherton. When James decreed that the second declaration of indulgence should be read in every parish church, adherents of the Anglican Revolution refused on the grounds that he had demanded something that contradicted the clergy's oath to defend the church against heresy. The bishops resisted James as Anglicans publicly, as in that extraordinary scene on the Thames. To withdraw from the parish church to a private chapel looks, from this perspective, like cowardice; that Edmund, about to become a representative of the Anglican establishment, defends the private chapel's confined purpose suggests that the latitudinarian Whigs have won the battle over the interpretation of 1688, for his language implicitly acknowledges that the terms of the contest have already been set by Locke, Tillotson, and the simplified religious language of the chapel. The linearity of his narrative aligns itself effortlessly with the artlessness of the chapel. What has happened to the seven bishops?

The only alternative made available at Sotherton is the degraded language of romance to which Fanny appeals. The disjunction between Fanny's and Edmund's responses to the chapel is coded as a choice between fantasy and reality, naïveté and understanding, but we need to read these alternatives as marking two possibilities whose opposition is dialectical rather than incommensurate. Interpreting Fanny's language as naive is structurally necessary to Edmund's instrumental matching of means to ends. Thus the turn to Scott is underdeveloped and undervalued in the text because, if taken seriously, it would jeopardize Edmund's attempt to reorganize historical material into a rational and progressive narrative (Jameson, esp. 206–28). Understanding the form of Fanny's appeal as determined by the linguistic regime handed down by the 1688 settlement, we can read its nostalgia as symptomatic of the latitudinarian language game: tolerant of everything except what hinders "progress." Faced with the chapel's own

refusal of figuration—the stubborn realism of “it is only what it appears to be”—what can desire do but become romance?

Fanny’s appeal to Scott is an allegory of how to read differently from Edmund. In implicit contrast to his defense of the Sotherton chapel, the lines from *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* that surround those that Fanny quotes depict Saint Michael defending the faith:

Full in the midst, his Cross of Red  
Triumphant Michael brandished,  
And trampled the Apostate’s pride.

(2.11)

This image is in the center of a stained-glass window, encircled by “many a prophet and many a saint.” The moonlight, shining through Michael’s cross of red, casts an image into the chapel itself: “The moonbeam kiss’d the holy pane, / And threw on the pavement a bloody stain” (2.11). Thus romance-history is cast into the physical space of the chapel, formalizing an influential relationship between past heroics and the actions of present characters.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, with its complex layering of historical and religious material, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* models such historical understanding on a broader scale. Its nineteenth-century readers hear the story of its sixteenth-century events from a minstrel who has survived Cromwell and whose audience is Anne, duchess of Monmouth and widow of the same duke executed for leading the rebellion against James. *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* thus artfully mediates the confrontation of past and present with an array of possible futures.

So to the question “What has happened to the seven bishops?” we can answer that they live on as Fanny’s nebulous desire that the chapel were otherwise. History that is not part of official history becomes fantasy. Given the chapel’s own history (“fitted up . . . in James the Second’s time”), the most appropriate historical referent of Fanny’s fantasy-history is the seven bishops’ public resistance to state coercion. Thus the invocation of Scott may be understood as a coded way of set-

<sup>28</sup> Scott’s theory of history, writes Avrom Fleishman, “is both an entry into the past—often achieving an interior sense of past life—and a coherent interpretation of that past from a particular standpoint in the present” (*The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971], 24).

ting Edmund's propensity to accommodate against the principled resistance of his forebears, a way therefore to take up the concerns of history as an exclusively formal or generic matter.

The comparison of Edmund to the seven bishops gains depth during the later staging of *Lover's Vows*, when he is prevailed on to act the part of the clergyman Anhalt, despite his reservations about acting and about this particular role. In the novel's moral economy we are meant to take Edmund's capitulation as a fall, to be set against his eventual success in resisting Mary's charms. Later, when Mary recounts her happiest days at Mansfield, she chooses overpowering Edmund's scruples against acting as the very pinnacle: "For I never knew such exquisite happiness in any other [time]. His sturdy spirit to bend as it did!" (354). Mary's language requires that a moral reading of these events be supplemented with a historical one. In the context of 1688, in which sturdiness is the defining characteristic of the Anglican Revolution, Edmund is a weak inheritor of his own religious history. For in accepting the part of Anhalt, he agrees to play the sort of clergyman who pleases others by reading out a script already prepared for him.<sup>29</sup> Here the contrast to the seven bishops is sharpest, since their resistance to James centered on their *refusal* to read out a script, namely, the declaration of indulgence, that had been prepared for them. Indeed, Bishop Trelawny stated that he would rather be "hanged at the doors" of his cathedral than read the declaration. Wherever the shadow of the seven bishops is cast forward into the text of *Mansfield Park*, either as a presence in the acting scenes or as an absence in the chapel, Edmund is revealed as someone who lacks the spiritual wherewithal to follow their heroic model of religious history.

<sup>29</sup> I am not suggesting an allegorical reading, in which Edmund stands for a capitulating clergyman and Crawford, Yates, et al. stand for the tyrannical James. Rather, Edmund has available to him, as a clergyman to be, a historical model of sturdy independence in the face of coercion, a model built around a refusal to read out a prepared script that violates religious principles, and he fails to draw on this history. The fault may be his or, more probably, that of the church into which he is about to be ordained; either way, it is a failure of historical imagination, much more than one of moral or principle, that is highlighted here.

### “Indeed I Cannot Act”

The discussion so far has made Austen into a critical reader of her own religious history by uncovering a debate about the work of historical imagination that is 1688. But this criticism has been undertaken, through the mediation of Scott, from the vantage point of the seven bishops—itsself an instance of historical and religious imagination. In so doing, we have, like most readers of *Mansfield Park*, taken Fanny as our chief moral spokesperson and interpreter. The virtues of sincerity, integrity, and self-transparency that seem to win her the role of moral arbiter rely for their effectiveness on a series of oppositions between the natural and the artificial that are scattered throughout *Mansfield Park*. The novel’s condemnation of acting turns on this opposition, with Fanny lined up on the side of the natural and true. “Indeed I cannot act,” she declares (168), describing not a lack of skill but a quality of character. In this schema the protean Crawfords, their love of acting standing for their bad faith, are foils to Fanny’s sincerity.

Yet much recent work, focusing on acting and the slave trade, destabilizes Fanny as the novel’s authentic voice. Critics have shown how acting and artifice are actually conditions of possibility for the natural and true, rather than their foils. On closer inspection, Fanny’s supposedly authentic self turns out to be a product of something like Burkean second nature, a naturalized construct exposed by events as a product of the will. Second nature is culture naturalized and has the further advantage of always being naturalized before one inherits it. Improvement, a textbook case of such naturalization, is overtly critiqued in the novel; the case of acting is more complicated because Fanny persists in the fiction that she is not acting. Yet the plot of *Mansfield Park* forces her to act and hence to participate in the play of appearances that she purports to reject; her sincerity turns out to be as much an act as Henry’s machinations.<sup>30</sup>

This is important not just for the scenes in which acting is the chief

<sup>30</sup> See esp. William Galperin, “The Theatre at Mansfield Park: From Classic to Romantic Once More,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 16 (1992): 247–71; Joseph Litvak, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and David Marshall, “True Acting and the Language of Real Feeling: *Mansfield Park*,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 3 (1989): 87–106.

thematic concern but for the moral economy of the novel as a whole. If authenticity cannot be consistently distinguished from the play of appearances, then Fanny is mistaken when she assumes that she has immediate access to her own thoughts and desires. If there is no self apart from the performance of the self, then her determination in clinging to the fiction of a sincere self exemplifies not her integrity but the persistence of the very will she disavows. Witness her conversation with Henry in which he asks for her opinion about a tenant of his:

“When you give me your opinion, I always know what is right. Your judgment is my rule of right.”

“Oh no!—do not say so. We have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be.” (404)

Henry is clearly acting, for his words are chosen for their effect on his audience, and Fanny, in appealing to the moral guidance available to the private self, is clearly resisting his invitation to join him in acting. This conversation is usually taken as an example of Fanny’s unique ability to think for herself, but this view assumes that her true self can be easily located, and it fails to reflect on what her words imply: that we have easy access to the truth of our desires; that, while prey to the devices and desires of others, we are incapable of self-deception. To the contrary, the thematic importance of acting in the novel suggests that we ought to be especially skeptical of those moments when we think we are being sincere. As she does when she offers the nonexplanation that she “cannot act,” Fanny here expertly performs her role as allegory of sincerity; in her conversation with Henry, she naturalizes sincerity as a given, handed down from a traditional moral selfhood whose historical origins are appropriately clouded in mystery. Her belief that she naturally possesses her own moral compass turns out to be the result of acting as if she already had one.

The amateur theatricals highlight Fanny’s susceptibility to a certain kind of naturalization. Improvement relies on a similar process, to which she is equally susceptible. Most critics agree that *Mansfield Park* satirizes the improvements proposed at Sotherton and condemns “improving” characters like Henry Crawford. Like acting, improvement transforms a certain artificial arrangement into a natural one so that it can be appealed to as given. *Mansfield Park* is continually concerned to expose this form of ideology.

The novel's sharp eye for naturalization on this level makes its apparent blindness to a more global naturalization all the more surprising. I refer to the economic base of *Mansfield Park* itself: Sir Thomas owns a plantation in Antigua and manages its affairs offstage during most of the novel's first volume.<sup>31</sup> An English estate supported by slave labor is the ultimate improvement because it radically divorces economic reality from aesthetic ideal. Yet while the novel critiques the tendency of improvers to cut a house off from its economic bases and responsibilities, it is strangely reticent about slavery. Indeed, by focusing on Fanny's reaction to Mansfield, the novel seems to participate in the forgetfulness perpetuated by a colonial state, for Fanny is highly susceptible to the naturalizing discourse that Mansfield employs so well. When she visits the Portsmouth home of her biological parents, for instance, she "was almost stunned. The smallness of the house, and thinness of the walls, brought every thing so closer to her, that, added to the fatigue of her journey, and all her recent agitation, she hardly knew how to bear it" (375). The contrast with Mansfield could hardly be stronger, as Fanny is soon led to reflect: "At Mansfield, no sounds of contention, no raised voice, no abrupt bursts, no tread of violence was ever heard; all proceeded in a regular course of cheerful orderliness; every body had their due importance; every body's feelings were consulted" (384). Fanny here repeats the very illusions that Mansfield seeks to perpetuate: calm ease, order, spaciousness, and a wealth whose source nobody has to contemplate. No "raised voice" or "tread of violence" is heard at Mansfield Park because those things take place far away on Antigua. Fanny's reading of the situation is very poor: she knows that Sir Thomas is a slaveholder, but she fails to connect that knowledge to the space of Mansfield Park. Prompted by Fanny, our knowledge of slavery remains dissociated from our interpretation of *Mansfield Park*; it resides simply at the level of fact. The novel emerges from the context of slavery simply by not articulating the richness of that context.

<sup>31</sup> The literature on *Mansfield Park* and slavery is growing. See esp. Edward Said, "Jane Austen and Empire," in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 80–96; Moira Ferguson, "Mansfield Park: Slavery, Colonialism, and Gender," *Oxford Literary Review* 13 (1991): 118–39; Judith Terry, "Sir Thomas Bertram's 'Business in Antigua,'" *Persuasions* 17 (1995): 97–105; and Susan Fraiman, "Jane Austen and Edward Said: Gender, Culture, and Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* 21 (1995): 805–21.

Fanny's reaction to Portsmouth thus reveals a knot at the heart of the novel's attitude toward improvement. For here we find her thinking of Mansfield in remarkably Reptonian terms. At Mansfield, that is, one is not constantly reminded of the means of production that support the establishment; rather, it is a place of "elegance, propriety, regularity, harmony—and perhaps, above all, [of] peace and tranquillity" (384). Mansfield itself has been improved, its means of production shunted off to a distant land, out of sight and (mostly) mind. Moreover, this improvement, because it seems to Fanny an already established fact, can be contrasted to clumsier modes of improvement, like those undertaken by Mrs. Norris and Mr. Rushworth. Their fashionable improvements are condemned because the mechanisms by which they are effected are clunky and obvious; in them, ideology lies too close to the surface. At Mansfield, however, the process of improvement via slavery has been so fully naturalized as to become almost invisible. Such invisibility makes other forms of naturalization, like Reptonian improvement, more visible. The absence of slavery in *Mansfield Park* is the very thing that structures its presentation of improvement, and the vigorous debates over improvement in the novel are, in effect, surrogates for the debate over slavery that does not happen.<sup>32</sup> *Mansfield Park* thus perfects a performance of naturalness that sinks its own artifice into invisibility, disguising itself so completely that its final realization becomes the moment of its disappearance, when act and truth can no longer be distinguished.

### The End of Natural Theology

Natural theology and the argument from design rely on and perfect the naturalization equivocally exposed by the novel's discussions of acting, improvement, and slavery. In such exposures, then, we can discern the novel's anticipation of the end of natural theology. By implying that naturalness is always a performance, the novel does not so much criticize the philosophical worth of the arguments for natural theology as question the project of a *natural* theology by casting doubt

<sup>32</sup> On the relationship between text and context see Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1989), esp. 46–51.

on the nature that it presupposes: if the natural in *Mansfield Park* turns out to be not a given category but a series of performances, then what status are we to assign any discourse whose legitimacy depends on the naturalness of the natural world?

This is an issue not only of theme but of form. The success of the narrative—the reader’s satisfaction that Edmund is worthy of Fanny—hinges on the viability of his vocational choice. Yet the novel records real confusion over the theological status of the natural world, thereby casting doubt on its own supposedly legitimating discourse and on Edmund as its expositor. Instead of channeling enthusiasm for nature into religious wonder, that is, the discourse of design, like the discourses of acting, improvement, and slavery, often serves as a screen behind which human desire may slip the bonds of naturalized convention. In *Mansfield Park* design cannot make nature do its required ideological work, namely, articulate the individual and the individual’s desires as part of a natural structure whose shape tends upward toward the divine. Faced with this failure, the novel bluntly insists that human love is artifice, while love of nature is natural. Forced into this dualism by the need to define nature in opposition to artifice, Austen cannot subsequently bring Fanny and Edmund together without resorting to knowing contrivance.

Whenever love for nature is under discussion, a more human desire derails the conversation. Consider Fanny’s enthusiasm for natural variety: “The evergreen!—How beautiful, how welcome, how wonderful the evergreen!—When one thinks of it, how astonishing a variety of nature!—In some countries we know the tree that sheds its leaf is the variety, but that does not make it less amazing, that the same soil and the same sun should nurture plants differing in the first rule and law of their existence” (223). For Fanny, the natural world is at once diverse and harmonious, meticulously ordered yet teeming with variety, and so her response to it draws on a theological description of the world as an orderly, interconnected mechanism. Astonishment over the “variety of nature,” amazement that one and the same earth nurtures plants “differing in the first rule and law of their existence”—these are the sentiments of natural theology, whose rapturous exclamations showcase the world’s harmony and suggest the benevolence of its designer.

Mary, whom Fanny is addressing, replies, “I see no wonder in this shrubbery equal to seeing myself in it” (223). She is referring to her surprise at how much she enjoys living in the country, but her choice of words betrays a tendency to project herself onto the natural world. Mary’s sentiments may seem merely new instances of the self-centeredness that will eventually get her banished from Mansfield, yet her lack of response to the greenery also suggests that some people are simply unmoved by the discourse of natural unity in variety that is the backbone of natural theology and the argument from design. In this conversation, recognizing design in the natural world turns more on one’s ability to feel in a certain way than on logic; antithetical feelings cannot be reconciled. Both women remain as they were: Mary is still “untouched and inattentive” (222), while throughout the narrative Fanny makes little effort to understand Mary. Many readers have wondered at Fanny’s persistent dislike of Mary, and while the moral plot that requires Mary’s banishment may explain it, their exchange about the evergreen suggests a more immanent reason, namely, natural theology’s inability to create in them a shared feeling for a common object. Little wonder that their conversation lapses soon after Fanny’s appeal to the evergreen. They become animated again only when Edmund approaches, for he is the one object for whom Mary and Fanny do have a shared feeling. Unable to love the natural world jointly for itself, they love the natural theologian instead.

Edmund himself, who as a prospective clergyman ought to be most receptive to Fanny’s enthusiasm for God’s creation, often fails to respond as expected. At an earlier moment in the novel Fanny and Edmund are standing at a window, looking out at a moonlit scene, while Mary plays the piano. Fanny offers another rapturous response to nature: “‘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!’” Edmund replies, “I like to hear your enthusiasm, Fanny. It is a lovely night, and they are much to be pitied who have not been taught to feel in some degree as you do—who have not at least been given a taste for nature in early life. They lose a great deal.” They discuss going out on the lawn to look at the stars. “It is a great while,” says Fanny, “since we have had any star-gazing.”

“Yes, [replies Edmund] I do not know how it has happened.” The glee began. “We will stay till this is finished, Fanny,” said he, turning his back on the window; and as it advanced, she had the mortification of seeing him advance too, moving forward by gentle degrees towards the instrument, and when it ceased, he was close by the singers, among the most urgent in requesting to hear the glee again. (139–40)

Edmund turns his back not only on Fanny but on the outdoor scene, so recently the subject of their joint enthusiasm. She has just declared, with his concurrence, that the scene “leave[s] all music behind,” but he soon turns around and chooses music over moonlight. The contrast Fanny draws between art and nature would make the natural scene appear as a given alongside the obvious artifice of poetry, music, and painting. This contrast depends, for instance, on our forgetting that she is looking through a window, an invisible framing device that presents and shapes nature. In choosing the unembarrassed artifice of the glee over the naturalized artifice of the outdoor scene, Edmund signals that Fanny’s distinction between nature and art carries no emotional weight. He knows that one must be “taught to feel” for nature; like poetry, music, and painting, nature is a taste that requires cultivation, not something that arises naturally from within. Moreover, Edmund’s choice inadvertently exposes the contingency of Fanny’s own feeling for nature, since once he leaves she “sigh[s] alone by the window till scolded away by Mrs. Norris’s threats of catching cold”; her melancholy belies her own earlier claim that there would be less sorrow in the world “if the sublimity of Nature were more attended to” (139). A very human love wins out once again.

To this series of failed conversations about nature we must add the conversation that Mary, Edmund, and Fanny have in the wilderness at Sotherton. Much like the scene in which Edmund abandons Fanny at the window, it may be read as a scene of temptation, a symbolic threat to Edmund’s virtue and steadfastness. Yet its most compelling theological associations come by way of a concrete examination of the persuasive power of natural theology, whose tropes are in play throughout the conversation. While Mary pursues and celebrates a winding path, Edmund seeks to measure with his watch the wilderness where they are walking. Mary claims that they have walked a mile; Edmund avers that it is less than a half mile:

“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.” (122)

We are meant to take this exchange as further evidence of Mary’s willfulness, but Edmund’s insistence on measuring the wilderness with his watch also revisits natural theology’s standard analogy, given its most famous formulation in the opening paragraph of William Paley’s *Natural Theology*:

In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a *stone*, and were asked how the stone came to be there; I might possibly answer, that, for any thing I knew to the contrary, it had lain there for ever: nor would it perhaps be very easy to show the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I had found a *watch* upon the ground. . . . When we come to inspect the watch, we perceive (what we could not discover in the stone) that its several parts are put together and framed for a purpose, *e.g.* that they are so formed and adjusted as to produce motion, and that motion so regulated as to point out the hour of the day. . . . The inference, we think, is inevitable, that the watch must have had a maker: that there must have existed, at some time, and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction, and designed its use.<sup>33</sup>

By analogy, Paley concludes, the watch is to the watchmaker as the world is to God: both objects, simply by their presence, point to a hidden maker.

When Edmund produces his watch in the Sotherton woods, he reproduces the paradox at the heart of Paley’s analogy: a mechanical object is supposed to reveal something characteristic of the natural world. Edmund claims, of course, to reveal only what is already true about the wilderness. But Mary immediately calls attention to the watch’s performativity. “A watch is always too fast or too slow,” she con-

<sup>33</sup> See William Paley, *Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature*, 12th ed. (Weybridge: Hamilton, 1986), 1–3. Timepieces have a long history as the chief analogue for design, beginning with Cicero’s *De natura Deorum*; the publication of Paley’s *Natural Theology* in 1802 would have reestablished the watch’s claim to argumentative preeminence, and the popularity of this work, which went through twenty editions in eighteen years, suggests that it was very much under discussion in theological circles. In the context of the discussion about chapels, religion, and clergymen that has occupied the bulk of the trip to Sotherton, Edmund’s appeal to his watch is unlikely to be accidental.

tinues. "I cannot be dictated to by a watch" (122). Mary resists the watch's naturalizing tendencies by refusing to accept its claim to be merely a cipher that displays nature. Like all mechanical analogies of natural theology, the watch actually shapes the natural world it claims simply to display, and in noting this fact Mary exposes the same performative structure that we have traced in the discourses about improvement and acting. She thus exposes the presupposition embedded in Edmund's appeal to his watch, namely, that a mechanical object deserves epistemological priority over human judgment and desire—that mechanisms are more "natural" than emotions.

Mary's rejection of Edmund's watch is troubling because she is the clear winner of this little exchange; in both intellect and wit she gets the better of her earnest companions. She also gets Edmund to herself for a full hour, further cementing her rejection of his penchant for measurement. For though they have begun this walk expressly to determine "the dimensions of the wood by walking a little more about it" (123), when they return, the watch has vanished from the scene: "It was evident that they had been spending their time pleasantly, and were not aware of the length of their absence" (130). Moreover, their wandering proceeds during the supposed discussion of Sotherton's prospects for improvement, a conversation that itself deteriorates into an inappropriately intimate encounter between Henry Crawford and Maria Bertram. So the novel's longest religious discussion, which encircles a standard analogy of natural theology, is contrapuntally linked to improvement, the most thematically overt instance of naturalization in the novel. Improvement becomes an excuse for erotic dalliance, and the watch for a jaunt into what Austen, with the Eden story in mind, terms the "wilderness."

In every case natural theology fails to persuade. At Sotherton as at the window, human desire trumps the discourse of nature, and Edmund abandons Fanny for Mary. In the window scene Mary clearly represents artifice, but in acknowledging that nature, too, is an acquired taste, both Edmund (explicitly) and Fanny (implicitly) subvert the governing opposition between natural and artificial. At Sotherton the situation is more complex, featuring a three-way contest between the overt naturalization of improvement, Mary's anthropocentric relationship to nature, and the notion, symbolized by Edmund's watch, that accuracy is the same as truth. The watch's argument, so the Sotherton scenes demon-

strate, is the toughest to sustain, because it must convince us that right measurement will so impress us that we will wish to stay on the path rather than brave the wilderness.

Like the conversation about the evergreen and Fanny and Edmund's exchange at the window, Sotherton fails as religious dialogue. It, too, has a curiously static quality; its participants engage in friendly, spirited conversation and then withdraw without learning much about each other, without coming to a new understanding or revising a previous one. As many critics have noted, Mary refuses to be changed by her experiences: despite her love for Edmund, she cannot bring herself to give up either her preconceived notions about the clergy or her desire for a fashionable and urban life. Yet if she refuses to learn from Edmund, he too refuses to learn from her. Though fascinated by Mary, he misses the implications of her ability to cast doubt on his vocation, his inability to answer her questions to her satisfaction, and her refusal to be compelled by the reasons he does offer even though she is in love with him. Austen's readers typically lament that if only Mary could overcome her selfish desire for distinction and marry Edmund, then Fanny would marry Henry and the novel would have a more romantically satisfying ending. But the novel's rejection of a symmetrical series of unions might be blamed equally on Edmund: if he were able to convince Mary of the worth of his vocation, the same happy outcome would ensue.

When operating most powerfully, design turns on a dialectical paradox whose operations are largely implicit. One is "taught to feel" for nature, and the lesson often involves an appeal to an explicitly mechanical object, like a watch, but the feeling that arises must be coded as a natural one: it is human nature to believe that intricacy manifests the presence of a divine creator. The *Edinburgh Review*, in its discussion of Paley's *Natural Theology*, reduces this process to a static opposition: "The great book of nature lies open to all mankind; and he who cannot read in it the name and titles of its Author, will probably derive but little benefit from the labours of any commentator."<sup>34</sup> Either one feels design, or one does not. By indicating that some "cannot read" the book of nature rightly, *Mansfield Park* explores the ramifications of the less flexible world hailed by the *Edinburgh Review*: the

<sup>34</sup> *Edinburgh Review*, January 1803, 289.

uncertain legitimacy of the sentiments of those who are still taught to feel for nature and the problem of those who wish not to be taught. In this new world one begins with the heart, and the argument from design offers no theory of the heart, only the notion that nature will teach the heart how to feel.

Religious dialogue was a foundation of rational theology in the eighteenth century.<sup>35</sup> While belief was increasingly privatized, the polite format of the dialogue both governed the social world and grounded individual belief by legitimating rational investigation of nature as a means of studying God's revelation. But the religious dialogue of *Mansfield Park* identifies not a world of amiable social ordering but a steadily less governable realm of feeling that cannot be adapted to the traditional dialogue's generic limits. Thus Edmund's appeals to dialogic procedure, whether through his watch or through the ecclesiastical history lesson he gives Fanny in the Sotherton chapel, meet with immediate and heartfelt rejection: "I cannot be dictated to by a watch," says Mary; "I am disappointed," says Fanny. Both women's responses come not from the discourse of nature but from somewhere else, and in giving priority to the feeling subject, they skirt the mediating, inductive steps of the argument from design. Without natural theology's social engineering to govern the meeting place of the personal and the social, individual expressions of desire become detached from the structures that previously gave them meaning. Design surrenders its claim as the discourse that shapes desire, becoming henceforth a discourse shaped by desire. It can no longer order a social world in which desire unregulated by design is the self's organizing principle. For some, like Fanny, this circumstance leads to a deeply felt quest for holiness; for others, like Mary, it licenses other sorts of desire. Both are private experiences and therefore cannot be communicated without a shared structure of feeling.

After the undesirables have been banished, the novel announces its hasty denouement: "I [the narrator] purposely abstain from dates on this occasion, that every one may be at liberty to fix their own. . . . I only intreat every body to believe that exactly at the time when it was

<sup>35</sup> See esp. Michael B. Prince, "Hume and the End of Religious Dialogue," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 25 (1992): 283–308.

quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier, Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford, and became as anxious to marry Fanny, as Fanny herself could desire” (454). As several critics have pointed out, Austen is asserting her right to tie up fictional loose ends as she pleases, yet the fact that such knowing artifice proceeds under the label of the natural, however ironically intended, should lead us back to those other places in the text where nature plays a decidedly central role. Austen’s playful invocation of nature here implies that every reader knows just how long a “natural” time is; it is knowledge on which the novelist will not impose by assigning names and dates. Such “natural” knowledge, while it implies universality, is also isolating, for it marks the moment when the putatively public discourse of the novel gives way to the private speculations of its readers. In joining Edmund with Fanny so hastily in its final pages, *Mansfield Park* registers the end of natural theology as a public discourse that shapes private desire to its own providential and inductive ends; now desire changes its objects at a pace that the novel itself declares formally undecidable. The playful language of the conclusion admits that we are witnessing, as we have suspected, the end of design’s ability to narrate a life.

Since natural design has proved itself an unworthy playwright, the conscious artifice of novelistic contrivance writes the closing script. Edmund will not or cannot save himself, so Austen saves him by making him fall in love with the right girl through an imposition that originates from outside the novel’s world. In trading Mary for Fanny, we now realize, Edmund exchanges one form of artifice for another: a natural ending was never a possibility. Whether such a self-aware discourse will produce happiness is left for the unwritten future to decide, while the remaining characters assume their new roles as selves designed for the more blatantly ideological surveillance of the great house and its efficient naturalizing mechanisms—those discourses that come, as the punning final sentence reminds us, “within the view and patronage of Mansfield Park.”



