Why the "Dead Silence" About the Slave Trade in *Mansfield Park*?

Abstract

Legend has it that Jane Austen excluded the topic of slavery in toto from the text of *Mansfield Park* even though (or because) the family patriarch, Sir Thomas Bertram, spends the first half of the novel on his estate in Antigua. It is true that Sir Thomas is off-camera. However, in the family circle one evening shortly after his return from the West Indies, the reticent heroine, Fanny Price, attempts to open a discussion of the slave trade—without success. *Mansfield Park* does not impose silence the question of the slave trade; rather, *it depicts the imposition of silence on the question of the slave trade*. If the novel is intended to exclude the slave question, then this episode does not belong in the text. But it is entirely consonant with the surrounding narrative, not least because everyone involved (including Sir Thomas) acts in character. Fanny's attempt to open a discussion of the slave trade comes to nothing, not because the author vetoes it (for it that were the case, why did she allow Fanny to speak in the first place?) but because those present let it die.

As postcolonialism became entrenched in the university, a body of opinion held that Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) is highly implicated in colonialism itself. Specifically, by having Sir Thomas Bertram attend to an emergency on his estate in Antigua but never mentioning that it is a sugar plantation worked by slaves, the author removed the fact of slavery from the text, placed it off limits, and put the reader in the position of taking it for granted. In all, Jane Austen imposed dead silence on the issue of slavery, including the trade in slaves.

Ironically, however, the term "dead silence" appears in the text of *Mansfield Park* itself in the same connection. It refers to the freeze that descends over the family circle one evening shortly after Sir Thomas's return from Antigua, when Fanny Price *asks him about the slave trade*. It is Fanny herself—the novel's heroine—who uses the charged phrase in describing the utter lack of interest shown by those around her in a matter that ought to concern them. That is to say, *Mansfield Park* does not impose silence the question of the slave trade; rather, it depicts the imposition of silence on the question of the slave trade. The distinction is everything.

As we learn in a conversation between Fanny—the impoverished niece of Lady Bertram sent to live in Mansfield Park as a child—and her cousin Edmund, the previous evening in the family circle Fanny asked her uncle about the slave trade. In Britain the slave trade was abolished in 1807, a few years before the publication of *Mansfield Park* (which appears to take place in the interim). Being settled in law, it is a topic safe enough for one as timid as Fanny Price to venture upon; but being settled only recently, it remains alive, and in any case verges upon the great unresolved question of slavery per se. Fanny's topic was brilliantly chosen by Jane Austen.

After an unreported answer by Sir Thomas silence fell, and there the discussion ended. Our impression is that it died before it ever came to life. (If there had been a full-fledged discussion instead of a stunted one, possibly the episode would have been rendered in full, not related indirectly by two of those present.) Where the discussion might have gone if others had kept it alive we will never know. Would Sir Thomas have taken the position that although trading slaves is prohibited under British law, owning slaves is not?

One thing is certain, however. Given that *Mansfield Park* is deeply and invariably in sympathy with Fanny Price and only Fanny Price, her question about the slave trade is in order from the point of view of the novel itself.[1] Moreover, there is a good reason why Fanny seems concerned about the slave trade when no one else does. Being a poor dependent by position and unassuming by nature, she is completely free of the self-importance that distorts others' perceptions. Take Mrs. Rushworth, the blinkered dowager "who thought nothing of consequence but as it related to her own and her son's concerns." What can the slave trade possibly signify to one who thinks like this?[2]

If the text as a whole tells us that Fanny's question is to be taken seriously, the review of the episode of the failed discussion the next day by Fanny and her cousin Edmund allows us to infer what went wrong. Though we might suppose that those present wanted to keep well away from the hot topic of slavery and avoid appearing to subject Sir Thomas's conduct on the Antigua estate to scrutiny, the text suggests something else at work. In brief, their minds were elsewhere. While the slave trade—already contrary to the law of the land—is discussable in principle, those who might have pursued Fanny's line of questioning were too wrapped up in their own concerns and fantasies to take an interest in something so remote.[3]

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[1] Cf. Garielle D. V. White, *Jane Austen in the Context of Abolition: 'A Fling at the Slave Trade'* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). The author discerns in the text of *Mansfield Park* a web of subtle allusions to slavery.

[2] Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (New York: Penguin, 2025), p. 66. Subsequent page references given in my text.

[3] Cf. Mary Waldron, *Jane Austen and the Fiction of Her Time* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 12.

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We learn of the discussion that never happened in the following exchange the next day:

Edmund: “You 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.”

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

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

Fanny: “And I longed to do it—but there was such **a dead silence**! And while my cousins were sitting 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.”

> Edmund: "Miss Crawford was very right in what she said of you the other say—that you seemed almost as fearful of notice and praise as other women were of neglect. We were talking of you at the Parsonage, and those were her words. She has great discernment. I know nobody who distinguishes characters better. For so young a woman it is remarkable! . . . I wonder what she thinks of my father! She must admire him as a fine looking man, with most gentleman-like, dignified, consistent manners; but perhaps having seen him so seldom, his reserve may be a little repulsive." (p. 173; my emphasis)

If *Mansfield Park* intends to exclude the slave question (as many seem to believe), then the failed discussion and its review by Fanny and Edmund do not belong in the text. But these related episodes are entirely consonant with the surrounding narrative, not least because everyone involved acts in character. Fanny's attempt to open the topic of the slave trade comes to nothing, not because the topic is taboo but because those present lack interest—most culpably, perhaps, Edmund himself.

<u>Edmund Bertram</u>

Fanny is failed by the one member of the Bertram family who might be expected to come to her aid, her cousin and champion Edmund, an earnest young man awaiting ordination as a vicar. Kindly, somewhat stiff and pompous, and completely unaware that she is in love with him, Edmund has undertaken to form Fanny's mind and morals, and the

humble but perceptive observer we get to know in the course of *Mansfield Park*, who remains in character even as she asks a topical question—this young woman is his pupil and project. Yet when she finds that she cannot discuss the slave trade alone and unaided (if only because of a habitual reluctance to put herself forward and a humility befitting a poor relation of the Bertrams), Edmund does nothing. The curtain of silence that descends over the topic marks his failure to add his voice to Fanny's, as he should have done—a failure so complete that he does not realize, even in reviewing the episode the next day, that he stands guilty of it. Surely Edmund must know that only a matter of unusual importance to her would be enough to overcome Fanny's reluctance to place herself in the foreground, even momentarily. Moreover, given that he himself is largely responsible for Fanny's "delicacy of taste, of mind, of feeling" (p. 71), her feelings about the slave trade should ring true to him. Something appears to be clouding Edmund's judgment.

As we learn from our glimpse of the discussion that failed to occur, that something is Mary Crawford. Edmund is so beguiled by Mary Crawford and her arch manner that he is willing to overlook the glaring contradiction between her easy principles and his solid English morality, and if he can overlook that, he can overlook his duty to Fanny. When Fanny reminds him that she tried to open the topic of the slave trade, Edmund talks not of the slave trade but Mary Crawford, and talks in exclamations. He is intoxicated with her, or at least his fantasy of her. When he replies that he hoped Fanny's question would be followed up by others, he somehow manages not to count himself among those others at that very moment.

Recalling Mary Crawford's quip that Fanny is "almost as fearful of notice and praise as other women were of neglect"—a sparkling epigram that could not be more foreign to his dull style—Edmund extols her "discernment." He does not recognize that he failed to offer support to a cousin "fearful of notice" who has been left in a painfully exposed position by the unwillingness of others to join a discussion she tried to open (compounded by the unwillingness of Sir Thomas to speak without being supplicated). He does not recognize that he has discerned Mary Crawford's own character wrongly. Nor does he discern that the elegance of her witticism is as nothing compared to the simplicity of Fanny's question.

In short, Edmund's enchantment with Mary Crawford has distracted him from a duty as plain as his cousin's reluctance to stand out against the social background. That she is willing to forsake her customary invisibility in order to ask her uncle about the slave trade should have told Edmund about the importance of that topic to her, even if he couldn't feel it for himself. A certain superior tone in his colloquy with Fanny the next day suggests that this is a young man with large blind spots.

Maria Bertram

There is no evidence in *Mansfield Park* that Maria Bertram cares one whit about the slave trade, but even if she did, she is too consumed with her imaginary intrigue with Henry Crawford (Mary's brother) to join the discussion shortly after the return of Sir Thomas to Mansfield Park puts an end to the rehearsals of *Lovers' Vows* and scatters the performers.

Maria was already engaged to the dolt James Rushworth when the atmosphere of sexual suggestion surrounding the rehearsals intoxicated her with Crawford and convinced her that this trifler was in love with her as well.

But at the time of the family evening in question, Maria is not just magnetized to one man while betrothed to another. When Crawford disappears with the return of her solemn father, she feels betrayed, and to spite him moves up the date of her marriage to Rushworth, assuring her father with the utmost insincerity that she highly esteems her prospective husband and wishes to go forward with the wedding post haste. In other words, Maria is burning with wounded vanity and self-destructive spite. In speeding up her marriage to a known dunce she acts in the heat of injury, as if she wanted to wed while her wounds (real or imagined) are still fresh, and almost as if she looked to bring more injuries upon herself in short order by becoming the wife of a man she detests. This is her state of mind when Fanny raises the question of the slave trade.

One imagines a young woman as proud as Maria Bertram often gave Fanny Price the silent treatment.[4] In contributing to the "dead silence" that greets Fanny's attempt to raise the question of the slave trade, she does just that.

Julia Bertram

Like her sister, Julia Bertram is not about to subordinate herself to Fanny Price by entering a discussion she has begun.

[4] See e.g. p. 70.

As we are told in the last chapter of *Mansfield Park*, Julia had essentially the same upbringing as Maria, except that she was less the pet of her officious aunt Norris and ultimately fared somewhat better as a result. Before Henry Crawford disappeared, she was locked with her sister in an imaginary but poisonous competition for his favor; after his disappearance she consoles herself with the thought that at least Maria has not won him. "If Maria gained him not, she was now cool enough to dispense with any other revenge" (p. 170). Such is her state of mind at the time of the family evening that concerns us. Like Maria, Julia is a prisoner of her own pettiness.

Peering into the minds of the rivalrous sisters shortly before Sir Thomas's return from Antigua, the narrator states, "With no material fault of temper, or difference of opinion, to prevent their being very good friends while their interests were the same, the sisters, under such a trial as this [that is, mutual jealousy], had not affection or principle enough to make them merciful or just, to give them honour or compassion" (p. 142). Little would we would expect someone lacking mercy, justice, honor and compassion to take an interest in the slave trade. We might view that topic itself as a "trial" or test to show what those present at its introduction are made of.

<u>Others</u>

Also attending the family circle are the elder son Tom and Lady Bertram. It seems appropriate that, like Julia, neither figures in Edmund's account of the evening, because both are so selfish that they are virtually unconscious of the world around them.

A profligate given to hunting and gambling, Tom Bertram runs up so much debt that at one point his father reproaches him, “You have robbed [Tom’s younger brother] Edmund for ten, twenty, thirty years, perhaps for life, of more than half the income which ought to be his” (p. 20). The lecture makes little impression, and Tom resumes his “cheerful selfishness” forthwith (p. 21). One so devoid of conscience that he can plunder his own brother is unlikely to be troubled by the slave trade.

Lady Bertram has so devoted herself to the fantasy of her incapacity that she has perhaps really become totally incompetent. She does nothing and sees nothing, and things go on around her as if she weren’t there. In a novel concerned with absenteeism, she seems absent even in presence. At a later point in *Mansfield Park* we are told that “The sufferings which Lady Bertram did not see, had little power over her fancy” (p. 374). She certainly does not see the slave trade.

Sir Thomas

If his heir is a wastrel, his wife seems to have opted out of life itself, his sister-in-law has insinuated herself into the household like a spirit of misrule and looks forward to the duty of reporting his death (p. 157), his daughters are miseducated, and his elder daughter marries hastily as a sort of black joke and speaks of her husband-to-be in language so twisted with irony that he fails to understand it (p. 175), does all this not reflect on the family patriarch? The hero of the Odyssey is detained on a remote island, eventually returns to Ithaca, and restores order in his household. Sir Thomas Bertram is detained on

Antigua, returns at length to his own domain, and restores an appearance of order to a household that was never in good order to begin with.

On the evening of his return to Mansfield Park, Sir Thomas is unusually voluble, speaking mostly, it seems, of his journey home (pp. 156-57). By the date of the family circle in question some days later, enough time has passed for the resumption of his habitual reserve—the solemnity of manner which Mary Crawford may find "a little repulsive," that is, displeasing. A man of dignity practices reserve: does not say too much. If Fanny's question went nowhere, perhaps this is not only because others failed to join in but because it was addressed to a man of few words. If Sir Thomas were to suspend his practice of reserve in answering Fanny, it might mean straying from the settled question of the slave trade toward the broader, and far from settled, issue of slavery per se. That Fanny "longed" to ask more questions suggests that whatever Sir Thomas said left much unsaid.

Edmund's comment, "It would have pleased your uncle to be inquired of further," also suggests that Sir Thomas had more to say; but if that's the case, why didn't he just say it? Evidently, he was waiting for someone to ask a question, as though a ceremony had to be performed, or he were conducting a sort of official audience at an intimate gathering. Such august behavior is as much in character for Sir Thomas as sheer indifference to the slave trade for others. Not much is going to be said about the slave trade if no one but Fanny is willing to ask a question and Sir Thomas will not speak unasked.

Sir Thomas may wish his daughters showed Fanny's curiosity (as Edmund implies and she surmises), but if he leaves things unsaid in order to leave them things to ask about, he needn't bother. Their minds are emphatically not on the slave trade. And as the

patriarch who authorized the miseducation that molded his daughters into what they are, he himself bears responsibility for their meanness. In the end, "Wretchedly did he feel, that with all the cost and care of an anxious and expensive education, he had brought up his daughters without their understanding their first duties, or his being acquainted with their character and temper" (p. 405). Whereas Maria fantasizes that she can get even with Crawford by marrying Rushworth, and Edmund fantasizes that Mary Crawford is a worthy object of love, Sir Thomas imagines, until it is too late, that he presides over a decent and well-ordered household.

If the justification of slavery is that slaves are incapable of freedom, how well do the members of the Bertram family exercise their own freedom? The very first sentence of *Mansfield Park* has Maria Ward "captivate" the young Sir Thomas, implying that he told himself he was in love.[5] Under the influence of this fantasy, he married a woman of great stupidity and "indolence" (p 18), an act of folly from which much of *Mansfield Park* flows.

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If a single study could be said to set the default attitude of the humanities toward Jane Austen, it would be Edward Said's *Cultural and Imperialism*, a chapter of which holds up *Mansfield Park* as a canonical work badly compromised by its complicity in colonialism.

[5] Cf. Rushworth's imaginary love of Maria Bertram: "Mr. Rushworth was from the first struck with the beauty of Miss Bertram, and being inclined to marry, soon fancied himself in love" (p. 33).

Less concerned with the text than with the apparatus he brings to bear on it, Said misnames Maria as Lydia (the headstrong runaway in *Pride and Prejudice*) and disregards the context in which Fanny's question about the slave trade is set. According to Said, "dead silence" falls not because of the reprehensible indifference of the Bertrams but because there exists "no common language" between Mansfield Park and Antigua—as if no one in Britain were speaking of conditions in the West Indies. Said concludes elusively, "Having read *Mansfield Park* as part of the structure of an expanding imperialist venture, one cannot simply restore it to the canon of 'great literary masterpieces'—to which is most certainly belongs—and leave it at that."[6] As Said's analysis went into general circulation, to be picked up across the humanities by scholars who had not necessarily even read *Mansfield Park*, its qualifiers, obscurities and delicate paradoxes vanished, leaving only the damning judgment that *Mansfield Park* is predicated on slavery and refuses to acknowledge it.

With this opinion in the ascendant for decades, it seems like time to re-examine the text of *Mansfield Park*, and this I have tried to do. Only by attending to the text can we hope to understand why Fanny's attempt to open a discussion of the slave trade in the family circle meets with dismal failure. It fails not because discussion has been disallowed by the author, but because those present lack interest, as Fanny perceives. They are lost in their own minds, as estranged from reality as Sir Thomas was when he was captivated by the

[6] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. 95. On Maria as Lydia: p. 87. On Said's construction of the "dead silence" episode, see Devoney Looser, "Breaking the Silence: The Austen Family's Complex Entanglements with Slavery," *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 May 2021.

young Maria Ward, or when he approved his daughter's engagement to Rushworth from Antigua, no doubt in the belief that Rushworth was an amiable gentleman of considerable wealth and good family.

Even Edmund, for all his sobriety, is in a dream state, enthralled with a playful immoralist whom he understands not at all. His account of the evening of Fanny's question very soon becomes an account of Mary Crawford. As for Sir Thomas, evidently he has more to say about the slave trade but remains silent because no one asks, as though the ceremony of a question-answer session meant more to him than the matter itself. In assessing Sir Thomas's grasp of things, we should remember that he originally brought Fanny Price to Mansfield Park only after his sister-in-law Norris, whose speech is a never-ending stream of fictions, convinced him that he needn't worry about one of the Bertram sons marrying her. "She will never be more to either than a sister." "There is a great deal of truth in what you say," replied Sir Thomas in the sagacious tone of one delivering a considered judgment (p. 6). In the end, of course, Edmund marries his cousin—to his great good.

The unwillingness of those present in the family circle to discuss the slave trade serves in every case as an index of moral failure. Throughout the very exchange in which we learn of Fanny's question, Edmund is all at once complacent, abstracted, and deficient in self-awareness. He does not see that the failure to follow up on Fanny's question was in the first instance his own. The sisters, for their part, are too consumed with their fantasy battles, as well as too little inclined to support their reticent cousin, to enter a discussion

she attempted to open. If the topic of the slave trade appears in the text of *Mansfield Park* only to die, it is because the parties present, acting in character, let it die.

Presiding over this sorry exercise is Sir Thomas Bertram, a man blind to the comedy of horrors in his own household. In declining to add anything to the answer he gave Fanny because no one goes through the ritual formality of asking a question, he too acts in character, just as he does in pressing Fanny to marry a suitor who seems, but only seems, a perfect gentleman: Henry Crawford. Having chosen Maria Ward, having blessed the intolerable Rushworth from afar and then misread him in person, Sir Thomas was not about to alter his practice of bungling questions of love and marriage. Significantly, Crawford formally applies for and receives Sir Thomas's permission to marry Fanny (p. 273). The approval of Crawford because of his smooth manners, the approval of a suitor for Maria on the word of the meddlesome Mrs. Norris, the question-answer session that failed for lack of questions: all are empty ceremonies with Sir Thomas at the center. If *Mansfield Park* endorses colonialism, why is the one actual colonialist in its pages portrayed as a fool?

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." Read with attention to irony, the immortal opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* suggests that villagers unanimously believe that men like Bingley come looking for wives because they echo one another, not because their minds are illumined by the same timeless insights. The *Mansfield Park* equivalents are "the general lookers-on of the neighbourhood, who had, for many weeks past, felt the expediency of Mr. Rushworth's marrying Miss Bertram" (p. 33). In the village of academia, humanists too tend to receive their truths from one another, one of these being that Jane

Austen endorsed colonialism. However, the support for this proposition comes not from the text of *Mansfield Park* but simply from the number of onlookers who hold it.

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