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## Marriage as a Dubious Goal in *Mansfield Park*

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### I. Introduction

Jane Austen's 1814 novel *Mansfield Park* begins and ends with the topic of marriage. In this regard it seems to fit into the genre of the courtship novel, a form popular in the eighteenth century in which the plot is driven by the heroine's difficulties in attracting an offer from the proper suitor. According to Katherine Sobba Green, the courtship novel "detailed a young woman's entrance into society, the problems arising from that situation, her courtship, and finally her choice (almost always fortunate) among suitors" (2).

With the story of Fanny's cousin Maria (Lady Bertram's eldest daughter and namesake), however, Austen gives us a critique of marriage pursued for the wrong reasons. Maria does not recoil from the idea of marrying without affection (at least where money and status are to be gained). There is never any suggestion of Maria's having either affection or respect for her fiancé, Mr. Rushworth, who is by all accounts an unimpressive man, described as "inferior" (185), lacking "more than common sense," and "heavy" (37).<sup>2</sup> Rather, Maria is attracted to Mr. Rushworth's ability to provide her "the enjoyment of a larger income than her father's, as well as . . . the house in town, which was now become a prime object" (37).

Maria's intention of marrying the dull Mr. Rushworth weakens

only after she has been Maria accepts her fate. Even after her father, struck by Rushworth's deficiencies and Maria's obvious indifference toward him, offers her the chance to break off her engagement, Maria assures her father she is perfectly happy. Her only desire now is to be free of her father's control, and to take refuge from her disappointed feelings in the splendor of being Mrs. Rushworth, living a life of "fortune and consequence" (188). In case we have any doubt about Maria's motives for marriage, the narrator, with breathtaking irony, tells us the following:

In all the important preparations of the mind she was complete; being prepared for matrimony by an hatred of home, restraint, and tranquility; by the misery of disappointed affection and contempt of the man she was to marry. The rest might wait. The preparation of new carriages and furniture might wait for London and spring, when her own taste could have fairer play. (188)

If Maria's motives for marriage are suspect and her feelings toward her spouse do not bode well for their union, most of those around her are either willfully blind to these things or incapable of seeing them. The narrator is particularly scathing toward Aunt Norris, who, with her obsession with money, had been the one to encourage her niece's engagement to the wealthy young man: "no one would have supposed from her confident triumph, that she had ever heard of conjugal infelicity in her life, or could have the smallest insight into the disposition of the niece who had been brought up under her eye" (189). The mention of conjugal infelicity brings us back to the ironic reference to Mr. and Mrs. Norris's "career of conjugal felicity" in the opening pages of the novel.

Irony—in this case, a statement that says one thing but implies the opposite—is a technique that Austen uses throughout the novel. Surely the narrator is reminding us here that Mrs. Norris knows very well what conjugal infelicity is, having in all probability experienced it herself, and that her shepherding of her niece into a marriage such as this one is all the more reprehensible.

Whether or not Mrs. Norris has heard of conjugal infelicity, her creator, Jane Austen, undoubtedly had. The source of the ambivalence toward marriage expressed in the novel may very well be stories she had heard of the marriages of friends and relatives. When Austen was only sixteen, she wrote a story based on the experience of her father's sister, Philadelphia

#### Notes

1. See Green, especially 1-7, and also Hinnant, for further description and discussion of the courtship novel. Green considers *Mansfield Park* a courtship novel, including it in a list of such novels in the period 1740-1820 (163-64).
2. Here, *heavy* does not mean overweight, as we might think, but probably “ponderous and slow in intellectual processes; wanting in facility, vivacity, or lightness” (“Heavy,” def. A.18).

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