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Narration and Restoration in *Mansfield Park*

by Anastasia Eccles

In *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style*, D.A. Miller argues that Jane Austen's narrative voice distinguishes itself precisely through its lack of distinguishing characteristics. Selfless, androgynous, and inexplicable, it speaks with the authority of uncompromised anonymity. If Austenian style defines itself through the renunciation of personhood, however, then the end of *Mansfield Park* must represent a moment of rupture. In the last chapter of the novel, we find a narrator who seems to cultivate a unique identity as assiduously as Austen's narrator spurns one. Announced by the frankly employed "I" and distinguished by a particular style and temporality, this narrator asserts a selfhood that is as engaging as that of any of the characters he describes. Assuming the role of Sir Thomas Bertram, the narrator renovates the threatened figure of the benevolent landowner and offers a revisionist version of *Mansfield Park* that justifies the exercise of patriarchal control.

Though initially disorienting, the personable "I" that surfaces in the last chapter does not entirely come out of nowhere. Book III is many ways an extended experiment in first-person narration, as Austen's ghostly No One is supplanted by the letter-writers who do most of the storytelling. Of course, Austen's dependence on letters derives partly from the scattered geography of the last book: aside from Henry Crawford's unexpected visit, Fanny is removed from the action of the novel, and for the first time must surrender her post as the privileged observer. The epistolary form, however, also serves to thematize narrative style. The letter is in

many ways a logical extension of Austen's characteristic free indirect speech, but rather than obscuring the transitions between narrative voices, it exaggerates them. Each of the transient narrators has a distinctive voice, marked by the subjective "I," and delineated by the letter's formulaic salutations—Miss Crawford's style distracted and petulant, Lady Bertram's languid and rambling, Edmund's grave and sincere.

Austen dramatizes the contingency of narrative style not only through juxtaposition but also through direct commentary. Fanny is a discriminating reader who subjects the letters to intense scrutiny and analysis. "This was a letter," the narrator says of one of Mary Crawford's, "to be run through eagerly, to be read deliberately, to supply matter for much reflection" (327). In the process of analyzing the letters she receives for narrative style, Fanny cues the reader to do the same. Letters from Lady Bertram, for instance, are all in "the same diffuse style," "the same medley of trusts, hopes, and fears, all following and producing each other at haphazard" (335). Fanny's acute awareness of narrative style attunes her even to shifts within her aunt's letters: one of them is "finished in a different style, in the language of real feeling and alarm; then, she wrote as she might have spoken" (335).

The stylistics of letter-writing in book III are articulated in specifically gendered terms. As the epistolary traffic begins to converge around the same events, characters must compete for Fanny's attention and confidence. Edmund and Lady Bertram both tell Fanny of Tom Bertram's illness, while Mary Crawford and Edmund respond to what Mary calls their siblings' "*etourderie*" (343). The contest for narrative authority, in both cases, occurs along gender lines. In Edmund and Lady Bertram's correspondence, the contest is quite literal, enacted as a parodic but significant battle for the pen. After a perfunctory treatment of the Grants' decision to leave Mansfield at the end of his first letter, Edmund notes, "your aunt seems to feel out of luck that

such an article of Mansfield news should fall to my pen instead of her's" (332). The narrator picks up the theme later:

> Every body at all addicted to letter writing, without having much to say, which will include a large proportion of the female world at least, must feel with Lady Bertram, that she was out of luck in having such a capital piece of Mansfield news, as the certainty of the Grants going to Bath, occur at a time when she could take no advantage of it, and will admit that it must have been very mortifying to her to see it fall to the share of her thankless son, and treated as concisely as possible at the end of a long letter, instead of having it to spread over the largest part of a page of her own (333).

Here, Austen extends Lady Bertram's predicament to include "the female world" in general. Both her lack of information capital and the vapid and garrulous style that must result are understood to be specifically female—just as Edmund's terseness is supposed to be characteristically male. In a further Austenian jibe, Lady Bertram's "feminine" style is replicated in the rambling sentence that describes it.

This dichotomy surfaces again and again in Edmund's and Lady Bertram's correspondence to Fanny. When the news of her son's illness falls into her lap, Lady Bertram can declare triumphantly to Fanny, "I take up my pen to communicate some very alarming intelligence, which I make no doubt will give you much concern" (334)—and which, the narrator adds, "promise[s] occupation for the pen for many days to come" (334). Her monopoly on "Mansfield news" does not last long, however: Edmund soon interjects again, writing a "few lines … purposely to give [Fanny] a clearer idea of his brother's situation" (337). Fanny is struck by how "a very few lines from Edmund shewed her the patient and the sick room in a juster and stronger light than all Lady Bertram's sheets of paper could do" (337). Indeed, for the duration of Tom's illness, "a line occasionally added by Edmund to his mother's letter was enough for

Fanny's information" (337). In contrast to Lady Bertram's "diffuse" prose, the masculine style identified with Edmund's letters is clear, forceful, and, most of all, efficient.

The distinctive "I" that asserts itself in the last chapter emerges out of these experiments in narrative style. The "my Fanny" (362) that opens the second paragraph echoes and condenses the epistolary refrain of "my dear Fanny" (329) and "my dearest Fanny" (325, 332), though in this case it is descriptive rather than vocative. If the telling "Mansfield news" emerges as contested territory in book III, with multiple narrators offering overlapping and contradictory accounts, here it is explicitly the preserve of a single narrator. The first sentence announces the shift from cacophony to monolog. The narrator acknowledges the "other pens" that might write this story even as he banishes them (362).

Like the letter-writers in the rest of book III, the narrator of the last chapter has a distinctive voice, one that we are cued to recognize as distinctively masculine. The mention of "pens" specifically recalls the gendered contest for the right to write between Edmund and Lady Bertram. Like Edmund and his mother, this narrator is eager to assert his dominance in the economy of information. He "[has] the satisfaction of knowing" that Fanny is happy (362). Furthermore, the narrator's obsession with efficiency aligns the last chapter with Edmund's economical updates and the "masculine" style they define. Unlike Lady Bertram, whose interest is to occupy her pen "for many days to come" (335), this narrator wishes to finish writing "as soon as [he] can" (362). His tone is perfunctory, dismissive, even: he is "impatient" to finish the story "and to have done with all the rest" (362). Structurally, the last chapter resembles Edmund's terse addendums to Lady Bertram's letters, serving as a kind of economical postscript to novel.

The narrator's interest in efficiency implies a drastic shift in temporality that evacuates the last chapter of the feminine. Just as the epistolary form articulates two alternative narrative styles, the novel in cultivates two very different versions of time, also specifically gendered. Even more persistently than *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park* conforms to rhythms of women's time—which, no doubt, has much to do with its alleged tedium. Women's time, here, is a kind of aesthetics of waiting, structured around the comings and goings of men and defined by periodic blanks in activity. When Henry Crawford leaves Mansfield for two weeks after seducing the Bertram sisters—compelled by the same "season and duties which brought Mr. Bertram back to Mansfield"—he condemns Julia and Maria to "a fortnight of … dullness" (91). Similarly, it is Sir Thomas' absence the creates the space for Lovers' Vows by suspending a whole cascade of events—including Edmund's ordination and Maria's marriage—that would soon make such an endeavor impossible. It is enough to give Mary Crawford the impression that "Everything seems to depend upon Sir Thomas' return." (127). Fanny in particular seems to exist in a kind of lyric time. After Edmund gives her the chain for William's cross, "Fanny could have lived an hour without saying another word" (205), and could have contemplated the half-written note he leaves behind "for ever" (208).

Men's time in *Mansfield Park*, by contrast, is regular, reliable, and busy. If the women spend their time waiting, the men spend their time doing—though exactly how they occupy themselves is always left somewhat ambiguous. When the men move, they tend to move in droves, synchronized by the rhythms of property-ownership and profession. Thus William's departure for Portsmouth the night after the ball coincides with Henry Crawford's for Norfolk and Edmund's for Peterborough. Fanny, meanwhile, is left to reflect on "the difference which twenty-four hours had made in that room, and all that part of the house." Where the night before

had been "bustle and motion, noise and brilliancy" was now "languor, and all but solitude" (222).

These alternative experiences of time produce two different perspectives on change. Because the men can rely on a regular succession of new developments, their vision of time is closely related to the idea of progress. Sir Thomas and Edmund both deem it to be only a matter of "time" (250, 272) before Fanny falls in love with Henry Crawford. Fanny responds by insisting on a kind of lyric stasis. In her mind, "the past, present, future, every thing was terrible" (251). She cries to Edmund, "Oh! Never, never, never; he never will succeed with me" (272). To Edmund, this represents a kind of perverse irrationalism. He chides, "Never, Fanny so very determined and positive! This is not like yourself, your rational self" (272).

The precipitous pace of the last chapter ends the novel-long experiment in women's time. In its place, the narrator offers a radical version of men's time, defined by rapid and regular change. Homecomings, relocations, changes of heart, marriages, and reconciliations are related in brusque and efficient succession. The accelerated pace of the last chapter also brings about the demise of waiting. Everything in this world occurs at the opportune moment. Edmund transfers his affections from Mary Crawford to Fanny "exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier" (369). Mr. Grant dies, conveniently, "just after [Edmund and Fanny] had been married long enough to begin to want an increase of income" (372). Like Edmund and Sir Thomas, the narrator comes to place a pseudo-religious faith in time as a force of improvement. Sir Thomas' sense of guilt would "require some time to soften," but, the narrator observes, "time will do almost everything" (362). He reasons, with similar assurance, that "time would have worn away much of … [the] ill effect" (364) of excessive discipline on the Bertram sisters, and attributes Sir Thomas' improved perspective on Fanny and Edmund's

marriage to the difference that "time is for ever producing between the plans and decisions of mortals" (371).

This narrator is not just an anonymous masculine voice, but the prescriptive voice of the patriarch-landowner Sir Thomas Bertram. Unlike the indifferent narrator of the rest of the novel, this one has a proprietary interest in the welfare of Fanny, Mansfield Park, and the novel itself. Fanny becomes "my Fanny," an object (or, as Sir Thomas describes her later in the chapter, an "acquisition") whose well-being can be source of "satisfaction" (362) to the narrator because of the role he has played in securing it. If this narrator can be said to dwell on anything in his economical account, it is on Fanny's happiness. She is a "happy creature" with endless "sources of delight," which the narrator rehearses as a kind of reassuring catolog: "She was returned to Mansfield Park, she was useful, she was beloved; she was safe from Mr. Crawford, and"—in the first break with the incantatory parallel structure—"when Sir Thomas came back she had every proof that could be given in his then melancholy state of spirits, of his perfect approbation and increased regard" (362). In his impulse to monitor Fanny's well-being, the narrator resembles Sir Thomas, who finds his only consolation on his ill-timed return from Antigua in his niece's "improvement." Indeed, the paragraph reads like a first-person version of his first encounter with Fanny after his return: then, he had called her "his dear Fanny"—rewritten here as "my Fanny"—and "observe[d] with decided pleasure how much she was grown"—revised to his "satisfaction" at her restored happiness (139).

This narrator also shares Sir Thomas' bent for authoritarian control. He begins the chapter with a third person command ("Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery") and tends to direct the characters as much as he describes them. In his account of Fanny's changed situation, the language of speculation gradually gives way to the language of prescription. Fanny "*must*

have been happy," "*must have* been a happy creature," but then the "sources of delight" "*must* force their way" and "*must* make her" happy (362, emphasis added). Here, the subtle shift from past to present subjunctive implies a transition from rosy conjectures to more anxious directives. These orders specifically recall Sir Thomas' own benevolent commands. When Fanny resists his suggestion that she lead the way into the ball, he has only to say, "'It must be so, my dear'" for her to relent (216).

By assuming Sir Thomas' point of view, this narrator surrenders the privileged vantage point of the omniscient Austenian narrator. The interiority of the other characters, usually the fertile territory of Austen's free indirect speech, here emerges through a mix of idle conjecture and narrative stereotype. Just as he has to assume that Fanny "must have been happy" (362), he can only speculate that Mrs. Grant "must have gone with some regret" (368), and that "it must have been a delightful happiness" for Edmund to learn of Fanny's affection for him. At times, the narrator is even insistent about the limits of his knowledge, as when he argues that "we may fairly consider" Henry Crawford to be suffering from his loss of Fanny (368), or chivalrously suggests that "no one presume to give the feelings of a young women" upon learning of reciprocated love (370).

In a conclusion that has to make its way through a whole cast of characters, Sir Thomas is the only one to receive sustained and sympathetic treatment. While Fanny, the ostensible protagonist, surfaces only intermittently in the chapter, Sir Thomas exerts a powerful and consistent presence. Though the narrative gestures periodically at the courtship plot, it is really about Sir Thomas' reconciliations—first with Fanny, then with Julia and Mr. Yates, then of "him to himself" (363), and finally with Edmund's engagement to Fanny. It is the gradual alleviation of Sir Thomas' suffering that provides the unifying logic for what would otherwise be a

disconnected serious of vignettes. He begins as "poor Sir Thomas, a parent, and conscious of errors in his own conduct as a parent" and ends with "forever repeated reason to rejoice in what he had done for them all" (373).

Of course, this remarkable transformation is only accomplished through the work he does as a narrator. In the process of narrating the final chapter, Sir Thomas ends up rewriting much of the novel. Once he is in control of the pen, he able to rationalize his punishments by couching them in the language of biblical justice. Maria's banishment is the "deeper punishment" that follows from her "deeper guilt." In their state of exile, Maria's and Miss Norris' "tempers became their mutual punishment" (365). He rewrites Fanny's childhood at Mansfield, transforming it from a history of trauma and suffering into a product of "charitable kindness," "liberality," and the "general goodness of his intentions by her" (371). Perhaps her childhood might have been "happier" but that momentary "error in judgment" had produced only "the appearance of harshness," soon ameliorated and forgotten (371). Most impressively, after recognizing his tendency toward arbitrary and repressive discipline, he is able first to dismiss it, by reasoning that "time would have worn away much of its ill effect" (364), and finally to valorize it, by pointing to Fanny, William, and Susan as living testaments to the "the advantages of early hardship and discipline" (372). By the end of the chapter, Sir Thomas has narrated his own redemption, but, as the opening paragraph will also remind us, all in the benevolent interest of "restor[ing] every body … to tolerable comfort" (362).

This represents an unprecedented collusion of patriarchal authority and authorial control. In a novel that has seen a series of threats to patriarchal control, this coda effects an emphatic restoration of a masculine order. Indeed, the last chapter acts as a narrative recapitulation of an earlier such "restoration" in Sir Thomas' return from Antigua. If the staging of "Lovers' Vows"

represents a kind of lurid nightmare of patriarchal absenteeism, Sir Thomas can only negate it by acting out an equally theatrical scene of authoritarian repression. His homecoming becomes an occasion for violent expurgation, as he seeks to "wipe away every outward memento of what had been, even to the destruction of every unbound copy of "Lovers' Vows" in the house, for he was burning all that met his eye" (149). The narrative restoration of the last chapter, like Sir Thomas' return to Mansfield, is also contingent on erasure. Through the new alliance of patriarch and narrator, however, this productive amnesia can be acted out through both narrative and domestic space. The "odious subjects" of "guilt" and "misery" are ritually purged from the narrative, even as the characters deemed unfit for restoration are banished from Mansfield Park (365).

Sir Thomas reinstates a system of benevolent despotism without the tangible reminders of its excesses. The terms he chooses to erase refer specifically to Maria's indiscretion and its aftermath, but might also function as the twin identifiers of the darker side of the patriarchy as it emerges in the rest of the novel. "Guilt" turns out to be more self-referential than circumstantial. We learn in the last chapter that Sir Thomas is plagued by guilt—for his sanction of Maria's marriage to Mr. Rushworth, for his arbitrary repression of his daughters, for early indifference toward his now beloved niece, and, on a less conscious level, for the colonial oppression that underwrites the Bertram family estate. By eliminating "misery," furthermore, Sir Thomas banishes the term that has been until recently the most salient marker of Fanny's autobiographical musings—and one of which he is characteristically skeptical. Earlier, when Fanny applies the term to herself, he cannot help thinking "in spite of the great black word" that she shows a "little relenting, a little change of inclination" (250) in favor of Henry Crawford's advances. Sir Thomas concludes his narrative with an idealizing gaze that is at once retrospective

and panoramic, translating a history of "guilt" and "misery" into a "thoroughly perfect landscape" (372) that had "long" been so in Fanny's eyes.

By turning the novel's resident patriarch-landowner into its narrator, the last chapter acts both as the means and the justification for the renovation of patriarchal authority. The happily-ever-after scenario rehearsed here does indeed supply a rosy version of Mansfield Park's system of benevolent "patronage" (372). But after the heightened sentimentalism of Fanny's suffering and the social realism of her return to Portsmouth, the fairy-tale mode here can seem like little more than an elaborate parody. Jane Austen, with her over-developed sense of irony, may have given the patriarch the pen just to laugh at him later.

Works Cited

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