Examination, Exertion, and Exemplification: Wives of Anglican Clergymen in Jane Austen’s Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility, and Mansfield Park

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Examination, Exertion, and Exemplification: Wives of Anglican Clergymen in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Mansfield Park*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of New Orleans in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English Literature

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Table of Contents

Abstract ......................................................................................................................................................... iv  
Introduction ................................................................................................................................................ 1  
Self-Examination: Northanger Abbey ........................................................................................................ 9  
Examination and Exertion: Sense and Sensibility .................................................................................... 13  
Examination, Exertion, and Exemplification: Mansfield Park ................................................................. 23  
Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................. 44  
Works Cited .............................................................................................................................................. 47  
Vita ............................................................................................................................................................. 50
Abstract

Jane Austen’s Anglicanism shaped her works, especially her novels *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Mansfield Park*. Austen is didactic regarding the future of the clergy of the Church of England through the clergymen in these novels (Henry Tilney, Edward Ferrars, and Edmund Bertram, respectively), but her didacticism is clearest through these characters’ wives, Catherine Morland, Elinor Dashwood, and Fanny Price. *Mansfield Park* and the marriage of Edmund and Fanny are the most explicit exploration of Austen’s view of what was necessary for the future of the Church as it continued changing in the nineteenth century.

Keywords: Austen; Anglican; clergy
Introduction

“Give us grace to endeavour after a truly Christian Spirit to seek to attain that temper of Forbearance and Patience, of which our Blessed Saviour has set us the highest Example and which, while it prepares us for the spiritual happiness of the life to come, will secure us the best enjoyment of what this World can give. Incline us Oh God! to think humbly of ourselves, to be severe only in the examination of our own conduct, to consider our fellow-creatures with kindness, and to judge of all they say and do with that charity which we would desire from them ourselves.”

—Jane Austen’s third written prayer (Minor Works 456)

Jane Austen’s prayers make it clear that she was a devout, thoughtful Christian, carefully considering her own actions and relying on the grace of God to behave in a more Christ-like manner. Her prayers echo the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, not surprisingly, given her experience as the daughter of an Anglican clergyman. The Anglican Church experienced significant changes during Austen’s time, many of which were related to the role of the clergy. In her novels, Austen’s observations about religion reveal her convictions of how Christians should think and behave, but not nearly as explicitly as her prayers do. Through these same observations, Austen also urges readers to consider how the wives of Anglican clergy and how Anglican clergymen themselves should behave. Austen based these opinions on her own experience as an Anglican at the turn of the nineteenth century. Even though the opinions are clear, the manner in which Austen includes them in the texts is subtle rather than overt. Careful readers will see that Austen believed that the Anglican clergy ideally should act as moral compasses for their congregations, behaving in an exemplary manner that was polite, humble,
and guided by consideration of others before themselves. Austen begins revealing these aspects in *Northanger Abbey*’s Henry Tilney, who, though not an overtly religious clergyman, guides Catherine Morland toward the behavior appropriate of an Anglican of her time. While Henry Tilney shows Austen’s early opinions related to the clergy, the role of the clergy is more important in *Sense and Sensibility* and finally most imperative in *Mansfield Park*, reflecting the growing importance of religion in Austen’s own life. Jane Austen’s belief that there should be high standards for clergymen and their wives is made evident in *Sense and Sensibility*’s Edward Ferrars and Elinor Dashwood and in *Mansfield Park*’s Edmund Bertram and Fanny Price; however, when compared to the quietly religious Edward and Elinor, openly pious Edmund and Fanny show Austen’s intent to make *Mansfield Park* a more thorough exploration of her beliefs as religion had become more important to her as she grew older as well as the most didactic of her novels, one that teaches readers what characteristics the future clergy of the Church of England needed to possess.

The Church of England, established as such in the sixteenth century, was Protestant and episcopal and considered itself the “median way” between other Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church. The theology of the Anglican Church closely resembled that of other non-Calvinist Protestants, rejecting predestination and emphasizing grace, but its ecclesiastical structure was similar to that of Roman Catholicism. Salvation was “a combination of true faith and good works, free will and divine grace” (Kelly 149). In Austen’s time, groups who disagreed with various theological teachings of the church were known as Dissenters or Nonconformists and were not permitted the same civil rights as regular Anglicans. But many Anglicans disagreed about the role of the clergy in theology, resulting in the Church splitting into High Church, those calling for absolute alliance to the government and church doctrine, and Low
Church or Latitudinarians, those advocating that the national church allow for theological differences within itself. Latitudinarians became closely tied to the Whigs, who advocated a collaboration between the monarchy and landed gentry. When the Whigs came to dominate politics, they “brought the established church into the patronage system” that directed the country’s socioeconomic life. Gary Kelly explains that because of this connection between church and state, “the Church of England became increasingly secularized and integrated into the civil order and culture which were dominated by the upper and upper middle classes” (149). This increasing secularization had an effect on Austen’s family and on her writing.

Expectations of Anglican clergy changed tremendously during the eighteenth century. Austen’s own family reflects these changes. Her father, George Austen, “an exemplary clergyman in the late eighteenth century,” was ordained when he was twenty-nine and was an absentee. After he came into residence at Steventon, he practiced ecclesiastical pluralism, also serving the adjoining parish of Deane, and let the rectory there until his son James could become curate (MacDonagh 3). While James was described as “a particularly strict and earnest priest,” he, too, was an absentee and a pluralist during different stages of his career. Austen’s nephew Henry, who was ordained only after failed stints in the Oxfordshire militia and in banking, became “a stern and fiery Evangelical” (MacDonagh 3). Austen had clergymen in her extended family as well, including puritans and Evangelicals, all reflecting the variations within the Broad Church1 of Austen’s time.

While it is easy to examine the history of the church and the members of Austen’s family who were clergymen themselves, it is more difficult to examine Austen’s own religious beliefs. In Jane Austen: Real and Imagined Worlds, Oliver MacDonagh asserts that “there can at least be no reasonable doubt that Jane Austen was a conscientious and believing churchwoman” (4).

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1 The term Broad Church refers to the Anglican tolerance of differences in theology within its own tradition.
MacDonagh believes that four of Austen’s letters, dated 1808-1814, are the most worthwhile records of her religious beliefs, but cautions readers that they do not say much about the “spiritual dimension” of faith. This is because spirituality was something “only ‘enthusiasts’ (to use the contemporary term) would ordinarily speak of outside church walls” (5). Upon examination of the letters, MacDonagh gleans the following:

The four religious references of 1813-14 seem to carry, however faintly, these particular implications: that Jane Austen’s Christianity was Christocentric in the orthodox pious-Protestant sense; that she conceived of religion as also national in character; that her Anglicanism and her chauvinism were mutually supportive and interpenetrating; that she rejoiced in what seemed to her the increasing religiosity and advance in public morality in her homeland; that she was—or at any rate believed one ought to be—seriously devout; and that, while she herself disliked and eschewed, she also respected and even envied the Evangelical school in the Church of England, whose salvation seemed the more secure for the totality of their conversion. (6-7)

This focus on the “Evangelical school” has created dissent in Austen studies: Was she or was she not an Evangelical? Many present-day scholars classify her as such, but to do so is to study her anachronistically, applying a modern definition of Evangelical to a Georgian Anglican. In 1809, Austen wrote a letter to her sister stating that she did not like Evangelicals, but in 1814, she wrote to her niece and said “she was ‘by no means convinced that we ought not all to be Evangelicals’” (qtd. in Wheeler). This letter has led critics like Anthony Mandal to describe Austen as Evangelical in the twentieth-century sense, focusing on being “born again” and preaching the gospel at every opportunity. Mandal argues that Henry Crawford introduces what Mandal calls “the Evangelical lexicon associated in Mansfield Park with Fanny” because Henry...
uses words such as “industrious” and “duty” (31). Mandal describes Edmund Bertram’s language as “decidedly Evangelical” because Edmund emphasizes manners and conduct (27). It is odd that Mandal sees these terms as *evangelical* when truly they are simply *Christian*. Not all Christian denominations are part of the modern-day Evangelical movement, yet the importance of industriousness, duty, manners, and conduct are emphasized throughout the New Testament, making them shared interests of all Christians. To categorize Austen in the twentieth-century sense is to misunderstand her (and the Anglican tradition) completely.

In Austen’s time, the term “Evangelical” was not limited to describing certain groups of believers but also encompassed the concerns related to how religion and morality affected everyday life. As Marilyn Butler explains in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, “taken as a whole Evangelicalism meant an influence for religion and morality, rather than a particular dogma.” Evangelicalism reflected changes in society and “urged more decent and pious living, a stricter sense of social decorum” (163). While Austen does not overtly preach in her novels, she does reflect this focus on pious living and social decorum while “eschew[ing] the kind of fervent religiosity that characterised much of the religious fiction of her day, particularly Evangelical fiction” (Wheeler 412). In his essay on religion, Michael Wheeler describes Evangelicalism in Austen’s time as having influenced her “without recruiting her to its ranks” (407). Peter Knox-Shaw further explains the confusion related to Austen and Evangelicalism by attributing the confusion to Austen’s nephew Henry, who wrote the biographical notice in *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* (which were published together), a notice Knox-Shaw describes as an “Evangelical insistence on the God-fearing piety of Jane [that] set the tone for later memorials” (11). What critics know for certain about Austen’s faith was that it was “unostentatious yet consistent and mainstream Anglican” and that “she placed great importance on taking holy
communion” and “regarded religiosity unfavorably” (Kelly 152). The fact that Austen’s use of religion is subtle rather than overt relates less to her supposed Evangelicalism than it does to her Anglicanism. As Gary Kelly argues, “[p]aucity of direct comment does not necessarily mean indifference to issues of religion and politics” (153). For an Anglican, especially one of Austen’s time, prayer and faith were personal, private issues rarely spoken about outside of church walls. In order to analyze religion as presented by Jane Austen, one must understand that Austen would never have been overt about such a topic.

Austen’s Anglicanism is the reason for the subtlety in her presentation of religion. She “uses the novel form to embody her response, based on her Anglican faith and culture, to the related religious and political issues of her time” but may have thought that such issues were too important to bring into the realm of the novel (Kelly 159). As an Anglican, Austen believed that religious actions should not be limited to actions alone but should have root in reason and feeling (Ruderman 127). If the reader considers Anglicanism at the end of the Napoleonic wars, it is clear that Austen reflects “the received and commonplace teaching of the Church of England” (MacDonagh 14). Instead of being obvious, “Austen’s religious values are imprinted everywhere in the novels” (White 66). Her characters’ behavior, the way they treat others, and the ways certain characters differ from others show that the “world of her novels is a Christian one in which worldliness competes against traditional orthodoxy and moral precepts” (66). Austen’s subtlety reflects the decorum of the time and what she believed was the proper venue for formal religious subjects. Austen’s “religious decorum was occasioned primarily by a belief that ‘serious,’ that is, religious subjects should not be treated at length within popular fiction,” and she kept in mind that her readers would prefer not to read “more explicitly didactic” novels (White 4). But it is impossible not to recognize that the Georgian church greatly affected Austen
and that she had strong opinions about various aspects of it, including what she deemed proper in a clergyman and his wife.

When examining the subtleties in clergymen and their wives from the early novel *Northanger Abbey* to *Sense and Sensibility* and especially to *Mansfield Park*, written late in Austen’s life, readers see an increasing importance of religion to Austen and her insistence that clergymen feel called to their profession and for a clergy wife not only to support her husband’s calling but to exercise her own faith and behave in a manner befitting a devout Georgian Anglican. While there are other clergymen in Austen’s novels besides Henry, Edward, and Edmund, these three are Austen’s only serious clergymen. Readers cannot overlook Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*, but Austen certainly does not present him as serious. His negative traits, such as focusing on the wealth of his patroness and advising Mr. Bennet to exercise “Christian forgiveness” toward Lydia and Wickham but never to allow their names to be mentioned in his presence, show no indication that Austen meant to portray him as a serious clergyman. The same is true of Mr. Elton in *Emma* and Charles Hayter in *Persuasion*. Mr. Elton and his wife are more concerned with wealth and social affairs than they are with the church, and Charles Hayter becomes a clergyman not because he feels called to serve but because his family’s financial situation leaves him few options. He must do something, and he might as well choose a path that leads toward a parsonage and a living. In *Persuasion*, her last completed novel, Austen portrays characters describing the importance of influential connections to the Anglican clergyman and the awkwardness of waiting for a current parson to pass away, but she does not comment on the spiritual side of the priesthood. It is only in *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Mansfield Park* that readers can find clergymen presented in a serious manner. But readers must be perceptive enough to look past the clergymen themselves and examine the characteristics of
their wives, through whom Austen shares even more of her opinions regarding the future of the Church than she does through their husbands. Catherine, Elinor, and Fanny may not wear white collars and say the collects, but they are just as important in Austen’s didacticism.
Self-Examination: *Northanger Abbey*

*Northanger Abbey* was written in the 1790s, sold to a publisher in 1803, but not published until after Austen’s death. The main character, Catherine Morland, daughter of a clergyman, marries a clergyman, Henry Tilney, but the role the clergy play in *Northanger Abbey* is not as important as it is in later novels. Religious life is part of *Northanger Abbey* without being insisted upon. Henry as a clergyman is mentioned almost in passing, first when Mr. Allen inquires about Catherine’s partner at the Bath assembly and again when Henry explains to Catherine that he spends half his time at Northanger and half at his parsonage in Woodston.

When analyzing *Northanger Abbey*, readers must recognize that Catherine differs from heroines in later novels in that her world is simpler; she has fewer moral situations to face. She becomes friends with Isabella easily and quickly, not realizing that Isabella’s hyperbolic way of speaking or tendency to over-dramatize signify deeper moral issues. Catherine cannot be faulted for liking Isabella; instead, this shows her “capacity for being receptive and open to others” while lacking “Henry’s discrimination or experience of the world” (Hardy 5). Catherine is only seventeen, while Henry is twenty-four or twenty-five. Because she lacks Henry’s discrimination of the world, Catherine believes that most people share her sense of conscience, one that does not allow for women to flirt with men they do not love and that does not repress a doubt of John Thorpe’s agreeableness (Austen, *Northanger Abbey* 65). She has “an unerring sensitivity to certain basic values,” a sensitivity Henry Tilney recognizes early in the novel (Hardy 8). He teases her about the tendency toward the dramatic that she has learned from reading Gothic novels and realizes that he has a far better understanding of Isabella Thorpe’s marriage intentions than Catherine has, but he admires her for her receptiveness toward others and her willingness to trust. He is also impressed by what John Hardy calls Catherine’s “innocent certainty of self” (7).
When Catherine believes Frederick Tilney wants to dance with Isabella only because he is good-natured, she convinces Henry that she is “‘superior in good-nature . . . to all the rest of the world,’” a remark that sounds teasing but is based in real admiration (Austen, Northanger Abbey 126). During the conversation about Isabella’s continued flirting with Frederick Tilney despite her engagement to James, Henry does not set Catherine straight by explaining what Isabella is doing. Instead, he asks Catherine questions about what she thinks of people’s intentions, prompting her to question if she might be mistaken in urging Frederick to leave. Catherine realizes that Henry knows best and trusts him (144), and Henry realizes that her good nature is the foundation of her teachableness, “and a teachableness of disposition in a young lady is a great blessing” (165). After Isabella and James break off their engagement and Catherine realizes that she is not upset about never hearing from Isabella again, Henry responds, “‘You feel, as you always do, what is most to the credit of human nature.—Such feeling ought to be investigated, that they may know themselves’” (194). These words show his appreciation of her awakening self-awareness and his respect for her (Hardy 18).

Throughout the novel, Henry Tilney helps guide Catherine to a better understanding of the differences between the world of novels and the world around her. Henry fulfills both the roles of guide and of clergyman, but there is no mention of religion until Henry’s sternest speech to Catherine. Upon realizing that she has entertained the idea that General Tilney either killed or trapped his wife, Henry reminds Catherine:

“Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. . . . Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?” (186)
This moment is both humbling and life-changing for Catherine. Marilyn Butler describes this moment as one in which “Catherine is brought at last to an understanding of the ‘real’ world of long-lasting social and religious institutions” (175), and T. Vasuveda Reddy points out that “the kind of ‘shattering seizure’ needed for her self-actualization” occurs only after Henry reminds her that they live in a Christian country (21). This most explicit reference to Christianity occurs at the climax of the novel, the moment in which Henry brings Catherine to her realization of herself and how she has erred.

While Henry is responsible for bringing Catherine to this realization, the truth is that she was capable of this kind of self-examination all along. She may have misread other people, such as Isabella or Frederick, but she stayed true to her own convictions regarding manners and propriety. Catherine is not as thoroughly developed in terms of self-examination as Elinor Dashwood, and she is not nearly as didactic in what good Christians should do as Fanny Price, but she does examine her own thoughts and behavior, especially in terms of how they affect others, a learned practice Austen found necessary in young Englishwomen and in the future leaders of the Church of England.

Catherine and Henry do fall in love and marry, and their union is based on gratitude and esteem. According to Ruderman, this is “a way of falling in love that is not just prudent or sensible but is also more natural than the more romantic mode of immediate sexual attraction” (113). Austen continues this prudent, sensible method of characters falling in love in her future novels, but Catherine and Henry are the first example of it, and “[f]rom start to finish, Northanger Abbey illustrates the combination of reason and morality which Jane [Austen] had been brought up to employ” (Collins 194). Reason and morality were significant concerns of the Anglican Church in Austen’s time, and her couples reflect these concerns.
The moral ideals and focus on self-awareness that Austen establishes in *Northanger Abbey* are further developed in *Sense and Sensibility*. Butler describes the two novels as having “the same cluster of themes and characters” (181). Like Catherine, Elinor becomes a clergyman’s wife, but the clergyman she marries is more outspoken about the church than Henry Tilney, and Elinor already possesses many of the qualities of being a clergyman’s wife that Catherine learns during *Northanger Abbey*. They are both well-behaved, respectable girls who put others before themselves and worry about hurting others’ feelings, but Elinor—who is two years older than Catherine—is already aware of the power of judgment she possesses. Jan Fergus describes *Sense and Sensibility* as “far more interesting and mature than *Northanger Abbey*,” largely due to the fact that in *Sense and Sensibility*, “Austen elicits and manipulates the responses of judgment and sympathy, with a moral intention: to exercise, to develop and finally to educate these responses in her readers” (39). *Northanger Abbey* is more comic than didactic and only hints at the idea of the importance of controlling oneself, an aspect Austen develops much further in the character of Elinor Dashwood. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen “addresses herself to the moral and emotional responses of judgment and sympathy rather than to the parallel and simpler responses of suspense and distress, and she develops techniques which will educate her readers’ responses” (Fergus 7). These changes in Austen’s writing portray Elinor Dashwood as more mature than Catherine Morland and show Austen’s greater emphasis on certain qualities in women, specifically women who will marry into the clergy.
Examination and Exertion: *Sense and Sensibility*

Like *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility* was written in the 1790s; however, it was later revised and published in 1811, becoming Austen’s first published novel. Social, economic, and moral burdens shape much of its plot, but each character reacts to these burdens differently. The heroine, Elinor Dashwood, opposes her sister Marianne in Marianne’s constant display of emotion. Elinor keeps her struggles hidden from those around her, observing propriety and exerting restraint. Because the religious elements of Austen’s work are subtle, it is easy to overlook the Christian element of Elinor’s behavior, but upon careful reading, it is clear that *Sense and Sensibility* shows “an abiding concern for how religion affects the conduct of life” (James-Cavan). Through the narrator, the reader is able to understand how Elinor truly feels, what she thinks as she conceals these feelings, and how she reacts when she is alone. Marilyn Butler argues that the most interesting aspect of Elinor “is that this crucial process of Christian self-examination is realized in literary terms. Elinor is the first character in an Austen novel consistently to reveal her inner life” (189). Elinor reveals this inner life to the reader, but she keeps her thoughts and reactions private from the other characters in the novel. She is difficult to shake, always remaining composed, truly mistress of herself. At first glance, this may seem the cliché English stiff upper lip, but it is far more than that. Elinor is capable of exertion; she does not fall apart at the slightest emotion the way Marianne does, and she does not openly display these emotions, betraying to the world what she is experiencing inwardly. Elinor is able to exert herself to remain calm and saves her emotional responses for when she is safely alone.

Like Catherine Morland, Elinor eventually marries a clergyman, but *Sense and Sensibility* makes it clear that Edward Ferrars felt called to be a clergyman, which is not made clear in *Northanger Abbey*’s Henry Tilney. While Edward is not nearly as fully developed as Edmund
Bertram in *Mansfield Park*, he still reflects qualities Austen thought necessary in serious clergymen, namely discerning a call to the church, being polite and honorable, but also being conscious of his human flaws, someone who can connect with his parishioners in their times of difficulty because he has faced those times himself.

Edward Ferrars is the eldest son of a wealthy family. Not surprisingly, his mother expects him to want to live the life of the landed gentry—or, if he must work, to consider the army or the law—but Edward has discerned a call to the clergy. His “dilemma is that he does not want to fulfil [his mother’s] expectations, and that he is temperamentally unsuited to fulfil them” (Giffin 74). His temperament is much better suited for the church. While he is not one of Austen’s most fully developed characters, it is clear that Edward feels drawn to the clergy regardless of his mother’s expectations. He even says that he “always preferred the church” (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 77). Elinor admires Edward from the beginning of the novel, describing him to Marianne: “his mind is well-informed, his enjoyment of books is exceedingly great, his imagination lively, his observation just and correct, and his taste delicate and pure” (16). During the same conversation, Elinor falters in her speech when she admits that she esteems Edward, showing that she cares about him but that this is not information she feels necessary to share with anyone who will listen.

Elinor admires Edward, but it is not because he is perfect. He promised to marry Lucy Steele when he was too young to know better, and he leads Elinor on when he knows he is engaged to someone else, leaving her to face the burden of learning of his engagement from Lucy instead. These mistakes show that Edward is human and flawed, but they also offer the opportunity for Austen to show that Edward is a man of his word. After his family disapproves of his engagement to Lucy—and after he has fallen in love with Elinor—Edward says that he
will still keep his promise and marry Lucy. Edward may have made a mistake, but he does not run from it. He is honorable even when a future with Lucy would obviously be grim.

Colonel Brandon’s comments about Edward also reveal Edward’s positive traits. When offering the living at Delaford, Colonel Brandon describes Edward as “not a young man with whom one can be intimately acquainted in a short time,” making it clear that Edward, like Elinor, is introverted and reserved, not one to put his life on display. Nevertheless, Brandon has “seen enough of him to wish him well for his own sake,” and points out that if Edward is a friend of Elinor’s, then that is all the recommendation Brandon needs (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 213).

While Edward may possess several of the positive qualities Austen thought necessary in a clergyman, he is not nearly as developed as Elinor. Readers can understand more about what Austen wanted for the country clergy and their wives from Elinor than they can from Edward, and Elinor “is most revealing of herself in the way that she relates to Edward” (Hardy 20). When Elinor initially tells Marianne about Edward, she does not share what the narrator describes as the mutual regard Elinor believes she and Edward feel for each other. Elinor is careful; she “require[s] greater certainty of it [their mutual regard]” before she feels comfortable sharing those feelings (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 16). By sharing only so much, Elinor establishes herself as more rational than emotional, more thoughtful than dramatic. As the novel progresses, Elinor’s “endurance of uncertainty about Edward’s feelings becomes a factor in her character, and in our response to her” (Butler 183). This uncertainty is largely a result of Lucy Steele, a woman who is clearly unsuited to marry Edward (or any clergyman) and the source of Elinor’s deepest struggles. After reading Edward’s letter to Lucy—the letter that makes it undeniable to Elinor that Edward and Lucy are, in fact, engaged to be married—Elinor’s “heart sunk within her, and she could hardly stand; but exertion was indispensably necessary, and she struggled so
resolutely against the oppression of her feelings, that her success was speedy, and for the time complete” (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 102). She does react to the upsetting news—later and in private—but joins her family for dinner only two hours after reading the letter. No one sees that she is “mourning in secret” (104), and this exertion actually helps Elinor, relieving her from the well-intentioned but unwelcome reactions of her mother and sister. Her “traditional Christian integrity and forbearance in the face of Lucy Steele’s sustained viciousness” establish the importance of these traits (Koppel 89). Despite Lucy’s actions and her own emotions, Elinor is able to remain calm and controlled. She shows the importance of propriety in behavior, regardless of how one is feeling, as well as the importance of politeness toward others regardless of incitements to anger or jealousy toward them.

Elinor is able to respond to Edward “without compromising either him or herself.” Despite feeling hurt, “she does not allow it to blight what can only be friendship—until an unexpected turn of events [eventually] allows them to share the kind of intimacy, as lovers, which has long been potentially theirs” (Hardy 20). She considers his feelings and what his future with Lucy will be like, as she “wept for him, more than for herself” (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 104). But Elinor keeps herself busy and does not spend her days crying in bed, nor does she discuss her distress with anyone. She continues “the spiritual struggle against melancholy” (Pellerdi) despite its difficulty. This struggle requires the exertion that is so central to Elinor’s character.

Perhaps the most significant example of Elinor’s exertion is during Willoughby’s visit when Marianne is gravely ill. Willoughby has married Miss Grey, breaking Marianne’s heart, yet he realizes he loves (and will always love) Marianne. When Willoughby visits and explains his true feelings for Marianne, Elinor feels compassion for him, but she conceals it; even so, “to
conceal feeling is not to deny feeling” and “Elinor is not a passionless automaton; and she has deep feelings, even of anger, that are quite healthy and normal” (Giffin 71). In front of Willoughby, Elinor exerts restraint, cautioning him, “Relate only what in your conscience you think necessary for me to hear” (Austen, Sense and Sensibility 247). When she tells Willoughby how wrong he is for what he has done, “her voice, in spite of herself, betrayed her compassionate emotion” (249), emotion the reader learns more about after Willoughby leaves and Elinor is alone. After he leaves, Elinor is still affected by his looks, and it takes time for her to compose herself and think through what just occurred, practicing introspection in order to judge herself and others rightly (253). Willoughby is “constantly in her thoughts” and she “acquit[s] herself for having judged him so harshly before” (254), referring to her harsh judgment of him after she read his letter to Marianne, the letter that ended their relationship (137). She has a flawed, human reaction, wishing for a moment that his wife would die, but she realizes her error and wills herself to think the opposite. She turns her thoughts to Marianne, hoping for her recovery and worrying about what will happen to her sister. She does not betray the burden of her feelings to her mother or to anyone else, instead working through them on her own and maintaining her composure.

This ability to restrain her emotions and react privately is a positive trait in Elinor. Elinor’s “strength lies in her power of understanding and ‘coolness of judgement,’” but she does not always practice these strengths. She is so moved by Willoughby that she disregards his conduct when she confesses her regret, but “she has enough detachment to be able to view herself and others impersonally, which makes for a stoic forbearance that characterizes her interactions with life” (Reddy 31). Elinor is still angry with Willoughby for what he did to Marianne, but she also feels how attractive he is and eventually feels compassion for him and is
sorry that he is in the situation he is in now. She recognizes why she feels more compassion for him than she ought. Her “exemplary Anglican conduct” enables her to forgive him despite the distress he has caused Marianne (Giffin 73). This conduct does not mean Elinor is emotionless, nor is she perfect; “Elinor was never intended to be infallible, but to typify an active, struggling Christian in a difficult world” (Butler 192). Her reactions toward other characters may seem calm and controlled, but the narrator brings the reader into Elinor’s mind, making it clear to the reader how difficult these burdens are for Elinor.

Elinor is obviously different from her sister Marianne, and their differences highlight Elinor’s restraint. Unlike Elinor, Marianne makes her reactions and emotions clear to any character who comes into contact with her, especially when Willoughby slights her at the party and sends her the letter explaining that his “affections have long been engaged elsewhere” (Austen, Sense and Sensibility 136). Marianne throws herself into the deepest despair. Elinor, too, is affected by the letter, interpreting every line as an insult and believing “its writer to be deep in hardened villany” (137), but her consideration for others enables her to hide her own emotions to help Marianne, refusing to allow her own feelings to overpower her (Pellerdi). She begs Marianne to do the same, crying, “Think of your mother; think of her misery while you suffer; for her sake you must exert yourself,” but Marianne is unable to be so selfless (138).

Elinor’s and Marianne’s very different reactions to burdens shape their characters. Elinor exerts restraint and does not openly display her emotions, while Marianne reacts with dramatic tears and days of sorrow. Perhaps unexpectedly, it is Marianne who shows the “most explicit treatment of religious commitment and personal conversion” when she tells Elinor about the changes she will make once she has recovered (White 62). Marianne admits that she considered “self-destruction,” or suicide, which was considered a sin, and is pleased “to have time for
atonement to my God” (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 262). She admits to Elinor, “Your example was before me; but to what avail?’ and says of the memory of Willoughby that “it shall be regulated, it shall be checked by religion, by reason, by constant employment” (263). Elinor’s example of restraint and her way of dealing with sorrow have helped make Marianne into a better Christian. The reformed Marianne still has a strong spirit, but she has changed into a better, more Christian character, “[f]or during the first half of the novel Marianne has stood for a doctrine of complacency and self-sufficiency which Jane Austen as a Christian deplored” (Butler 189). But now Marianne says that she will “enter on a course of serious study” (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 260) and that she has had time for “serious recollection” (262), for which editor James Kinsley cites the *OED*: “religious or serious concentration of thought” (326). Marianne is able to get over Willoughby and marry Colonel Brandon, loving him just as much as she ever loved Willoughby. Elinor’s example affects Marianne as a Christian and contributes positively to her religious life, showing that she sets an example that makes her ideal for marrying a clergyman and affecting the religious lives of his future parishioners. Elinor’s way of facing burdens with a Christian kind of stoicism and inspiring other characters in their religious lives makes her the right kind of woman to marry a future clergyman.

Elinor’s and Edward’s story ends with their happy marriage. It is no accident that Elinor and Edward end up together; they have been earning that wedded bliss since their burdens and trials began. Even though she experiences all normal human emotions, Elinor guides her emotions by reason, and reason is what makes her “an ideal clergy wife. Her caution and doubt, and her understanding of the necessity for proportion and propriety, are all ‘correct’; especially the way she exerts her reason to control her feeling, so as not to misjudge the nature of her relationship with Edward” (Giffin 69). Elinor is one of Austen’s strongest examples of how
regulating one’s desires leads to good, how exerting oneself and considering propriety in actions are ways to get along peacefully with society, and how exercising virtue is good for the doer (Ruderman 117). Elinor has deep hopes for happiness, even when she believes she must find happiness without Edward, and through this, Austen presents hope as inevitable and that “the deepest root of it [hope] seems to be religious” (131). By holding on to this hope for happiness, with or without Edward—and by not forfeiting her esteem for Edward upon learning of his engagement to Lucy Steele—Elinor makes it possible for them to end up together. Edward, driven by reason and staying true to his principles, shows “the true cost of Christian discipleship” and “is blessed with both Elinor and Christ” (Giffin 79). Their reason, sense, and restraint make them the ideal clergy couple and bring them together in the end. They “share a characteristic affinity with reason appropriate to a clergy couple that is meant to be a sign to the community that is more worldly than religious” (69). Not only are they ideally and temperamentally suited for each other, but they are also ideally and temperamentally suited for the church. Much like Marianne’s sensibility highlighted Elinor’s sense, the Brandons’ marriage highlights aspects of the Ferrarses’. In Jane Austen and Religion, Michael Giffin argues that the Brandons’ happiness contributes to the greater purpose of the novel in that “Austen feels there is an appropriate temperamental difference between the ideal couples she establishes in her parsonages and the ideal couples that she establishes in her estates” and that Sense and Sensibility is “a carefully constructed social and religious commentary,” one that shows Austen’s expectations of clergy couples and how they should differ from gentry couples (64). To Austen, people must balance feeling and reason, and “the appropriate balance is slightly different in the religious sphere among the clergy and the secular sphere among the laity” (63), meaning that the religious sphere could not rely on feeling over reason as much as the laity could. Austen expects Elinor and
Edward to be examples of the exertion and restraint she sees necessary in the clergy. By being these examples during their many trials throughout the novel, Elinor and Edward are established as ideal for each other and the church.

While the revised *Sense and Sensibility* shows an increased importance of religion for Austen since she composed *Northanger Abbey*, it is in *Mansfield Park*, published in 1814, that readers see exactly what Austen hoped for the future of the clergy and their wives. MacDonagh argues that Austen’s “private writings suggest . . . though merely as an impression—that her religious seriousness increased as she aged, and in particular in the final decade of her life” (4). Knox-Shaw refers to this time as “the period of her [Austen’s] new-found piety” but points out that, even during this time, her “sense of mischief remain[ed] irrepressible” (168). While Elinor exemplifies Christian self-denial and shows how it leads to happiness as a clergyman’s wife, Austen is more severe about the importance of self-denial in Fanny Price, and Fanny further proves “Elinor’s belief that pleasure cannot be the standard of good behavior” (Ruderman 129). Michael Wheeler argues that the idea of striving for holiness and atonement begins in Marianne Dashwood’s character and is continued more strongly in Maria Bertram’s, but that in both cases Austen “let[s] other pens dwell on guilt and misery” and makes their desires for atonement less prominent than other aspects of the plot (413). Marilyn Butler contends that “[t]here can be no doubt that many of the central themes of the book [*Mansfield Park*] have been modified by the spirit of Evangelicalism”—again, Evangelicalism as “an influence for religion and morality” rather than the modern-day concept of Evangelical—and that this spirit is seen in many of Fanny’s responses to the Crawfords, in her view of the chapel at Sotherton, in her description of the stars, and in her rejection of Henry Crawford. Butler continues:
But more important, the Evangelical concept of the Good Life—visibly Christian, humble, contemplative, serviceable—is realized in Fanny, while it is markedly absent from the restrained, undemonstrative demeanour of Elinor; for Elinor openly to display piety would have been felt in the world of *Sense and Sensibility* as a breach of social decorum. (243)

This open piety is what makes *Mansfield Park* different not only from *Sense and Sensibility* but from all of Austen’s other novels. *Mansfield Park* is Austen’s chance to focus on the type of clergymen the changing Church of England needs and what qualities their wives should possess. Readers who dislike Fanny and Edmund ignore their purpose. They are not Darcy and Elizabeth, nor are they Knightley and Emma; they are the future of the Church of England. And, of course, readers who prefer Mary Crawford over Fanny Price are missing Austen’s point completely. As Gary Kelly explains:

> Later readers’ preference for Mary over Fanny exemplifies a secularization of literary culture since Austen’s day that has made it difficult to understand how Anglicans such as Austen would have considered it vital in the [French] Revolutionary aftermath to fill country vicarages with Edmunds and Fannys rather than Henrys and Marys. (156)

Thus, Edmund and Fanny play a stronger role than any other couple in Austen—even stronger than other clergy couples—because they are the people who must fill country vicarages as the Church of England continues to evolve in the nineteenth century.
Examination, Exertion, and Exemplification: *Mansfield Park*

Critics agree on the importance of *Mansfield Park*’s presentation of the Anglican Church as a whole as well as its presentation of an individual’s religious life. Jan Fergus describes it as Austen’s most didactic novel, one that “explores feeling in relation to conduct, judgment and principle in order to educate the reader into a fuller awareness of all three” (130). Rather than simply affirm that these aspects are important, *Mansfield Park* sets out to educate readers in how better to regulate their own feelings. Butler describes the Christianity of *Mansfield Park* as having “both an inner and outer dimension,” being “ardent and pietistical as well as practical” but still not Evangelical (243), while “requir[ing] the individual to adopt a role of social utility within an ordered social framework, for to perceive the orderliness of this world is a first step to perceiving a grander order” (242). Ruderman describes the very atmosphere of the novel as religious (125) and contends that *Mansfield Park* is the novel in which Austen takes two ideas she has presented in previous novels, gratitude and the need for one to reflect, and presents them in a way that is religious, as she did not in her previous novels (124). Wheeler points out that the only time Austen uses the word “priest” in any of her novels is in *Mansfield Park* (409), and MacDonagh argues that the importance of *Mansfield Park* is in its expression of the changes of the time as witnessed by an author who was a clergyman’s daughter (16), changes that reflect “the literature of principle and the Church of conscience, each of which was to flourish so profusely in mid-nineteenth century England” (2). MacDonagh goes so far as to read *Mansfield Park* as a near allegory of the changes in the Church: Edmund represents the clergy while Mary Crawford represents the secular population; Edmund’s first defense of his calling is not spiritual, but his second shows that he sees the “clergyman as social moulder,” one who models good
conduct and principles; and Henry Crawford represents those who treat the church as a stage for role-playing, in contrast to Edmund’s principled, spiritual view (7-9).

Despite the importance of religion to this novel, the way it is presented in *Mansfield Park* is typical of Austen: subtle and implied rather than blatantly stated. Readers may find this subtlety confusing, even counterintuitive, but it, too, is typical of Austen. However, *Mansfield Park* is more overt in some matters of the clergy due to the major issues facing the church when Austen composed the novel. MacDonagh argues that “[c]lerical discipline; improvement, moral and behavioural; the priest as gospel-preacher; the ‘duties’ of the parish and their failure in the city . . . these were the burning issues for the serious in 1812-13; and to each, the response in *Mansfield Park* is, almost classically, moderate” (14). What sets *Mansfield Park* apart from other novels is that it embodies the “middle way” of Anglicanism, emphasizing the importance of religion while cautioning against any overly religious showiness, reflecting “medianism erected into a principle of theological interpretation” (19). None of Austen’s other novels focuses on religion to this degree.

From Austen’s first descriptions of Edmund Bertram, it is clear that he is her most serious clergyman. He has “strong good sense and uprightness of mind,” making him most fit “for utility, honour, and happiness.” From the time the reader is introduced to Edmund, it is clear that “[h]e was to be a clergyman” (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 21). Throughout Fanny’s childhood, it is Edmund who is kind to her and guides her tastes, and he is often the only Bertram who worries about her, such as when she spends a day suffering from a headache but is forced to continue doing chores for her aunts (68). He is also the only Bertram to put Fanny before himself, insisting that she join the day trip to Sotherton in his place when it appears there is not enough
room for them all to travel, and he treats Fanny with kindness, providing a horse for her to ride, procuring a chain for her to wear with William’s cross, and seeking her advice.

But Edmund’s role in the novel is not limited to his kindness toward Fanny or becoming her future husband. Edmund represents Austen’s ideal clergyman for the changing Church of England. He is polite in all conversations, even with those with whom he disagrees (usually the Crawfords). He emphasizes the guidance of the parish priest, insisting that a priest live in his parish among his congregants, and he also connects with the laity, making reasonable comments regarding the length of church services and the idea of an assured living affecting men’s decisions to take orders. Edmund also realizes the faults of some clergymen, namely those who are not truly suited for the church. He describes how a clergyman should behave: that he should be plain-spoken, not of high fashion, and not too ostentatious, never treating the pulpit as a stage or having a parsonage that is more formal than welcoming. Most important, Edmund describes the clergy as the guardians of morals and manners: “as the clergy are, or are not what they ought to be, so are the rest of the nation” (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 87), and making it clear that he embraces the idea of “clergyman as social moulder” (MacDonagh 8). Edmund’s words and actions in certain situations reflect these beliefs, especially during the scene at the chapel at Sotherton, his conversation with Mary about whether or not it is a sacrifice to take orders, and his conversations with Henry regarding improvements to Edmund’s future parsonage and the role of the pulpit. Edmund is a clergyman who focuses on “[t]he religion of the heart and act, with which the book is implicitly absorbed,” but it is worth noting that this focus “did not require any departure from or even much new emphasis in the received and commonplace teaching” of the church in Austen’s time (MacDonagh 14). Thus, the character of Edmund Bertram is not a call for some drastically new and improved clergy; rather, he shows what Austen believed
Anglicans should learn from the past and use to shape the future of the church. Like the remarks on religion in Austen’s other novels, these comments are artistically rendered rather than explicitly stated.

During the scene at the chapel at Sotherton, Mary Crawford makes disparaging comments about attending chapel and being forced to pray. She believes that the discontinuation of daily prayers is an improvement, that “the obligation of attendance . . . is a formidable thing,” and that young women at chapel are often “starched up into seeming piety, but with heads full of something very different” (Austen, Mansfield Park 82). Edmund disagrees with her, but he is polite in doing so. He is honest about the difficulty of prayer—“We must all feel at times the difficulty of fixing our thoughts as we could wish”—while revealing Austen’s belief that Anglicans needed the guidance of the clergy, gently asking, “but if you are supposing it a frequent thing, that is to say, a weakness grown into a habit from neglect, what could be expected from the private devotions of such persons?” (82). He thinks that being in a chapel with other people praying can help an individual who is struggling to pray, but he notes that services that are too long can “be sometimes too hard a stretch upon the mind.” It is important to note that throughout this conversation, Edmund speaks to Mary as one member of the laity to another; he does not simply say, “I’m going to be a clergyman. Defer to my expertise.” Though he disagrees with Mary, he still values her thoughts and does not try to distance himself from her or make her uncomfortable by telling her that he will become a clergyman. It is only later in the chapter when Julia says she wishes he had already taken orders that Mary learns of Edmund’s future career.

Later in the scene at Sotherton, Austen creates the opportunity for Edmund to state many of Austen’s own thoughts regarding appropriate clergymen rather than imply them. At this point, the group has gone outside into “the wilderness,” and Edmund is tempted there. Referring to “the
wilderness” and creating a scene of several temptations alludes to the Bible and *Paradise Lost*, but again, these allusions are suffused in the chapter, not overtly stated (Sutherland xxxv). After learning Edmund is to be a clergyman, Mary is embarrassed yet continues to be rude; Edmund, on the other hand, continues to be polite and to try to reason with her. Mary says that no one *chooses* to take orders and that “[a] clergyman is nothing” (86). In response, Edmund makes a clear, direct statement about a clergyman’s role:

> A clergyman cannot be high in state or fashion. He must not head mobs, or set the tone in dress. But I cannot call that situation nothing, which has the charge of all that is of the first importance to mankind, individually or collectively considered, temporally and eternally,—which has the guardianship of religion and morals, and consequently of the manners which result from their influence. (86)

Edmund realizes that to be a clergyman does not mean focusing on the pleasures of this world, such as social status or clothing, but focusing on eternity, becoming guardian of his parishioners’ “religion and morals” and the manners that result from them. He argues that individual clergymen who do not take this part of their jobs seriously are at fault, not the church as a whole, and he points out that one must look to a *country* clergyman, not one in London because “[w]e do not look in great cities for our best morality” (87). He sees the importance of the priesthood “as a moral calling, even while he acknowledges the need for serious clerical reforms” (Byrd). Edmund shows Austen’s own preference for clergymen who take their jobs seriously and reveals that she felt those were more easily found in the country than in the city. Mary continues providing the opportunity for him to do so, stating that “[o]ne does not often *see* much of this influence and importance in society” (emphasis added), and asking, “how can it be acquired where they are so seldom seen themselves?” (87). Through this conversation, Austen argues that
people often overlook the influence and importance of clergymen, and she emphasizes that the clergy must be part of their parishes by not practicing absenteeism. Edmund’s response is “Austen’s clearest statement on the Church and its clergy,” as it demolishes Mary’s claim that clergymen are nothing “not merely with superlatives, but with superlatives that cannot be overreached” (White 24). It is Edmund who makes the most compelling argument, not Mary, and his argument emphasizes how the practices of the country clergy should shape the morals of England. This scene also establishes the Crawfords as the opposition to what Austen thought was right, “bring[ing] out for the first time in full the gulf between the Crawfords and religious orthodoxy,” mainly because “Mary thinks only of the immediate convenience to individuals who might have had to attend; while Fanny and Edmund have two concerns—the well-being of the individual . . . and the social validity of established forms of worship” (Butler 225). Fanny’s obvious support of Edmund’s argument shows that the two of them share concerns and beliefs and helps the reader see that Mary Crawford is not suited for Edmund, temperamentally or spiritually. Edmund and Fanny share a similar appalled reaction to Mary’s inappropriate joke about rears and vices (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 57). Their shared reactions to moral and religious situations show Austen’s own opinions of how the clergy and their wives should behave and how they should regard the church.

Austen provides Edmund with another opportunity to speak on behalf of respectable clergymen when Mary Crawford refers to taking orders as a sacrifice. After Edmund assures her that he is taking orders voluntarily, she baits him into another disagreement: “It is fortunate that your inclination and your father’s convenience should accord so well. There is a very good living kept for you, I understand, hereabouts” (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 101). Here, Mary introduces a controversial aspect of becoming a priest in Georgian England. For many men who decided to
take orders, there was already a living set aside for them. Many of them were younger sons of the landed gentry, and their fathers planned for them to become rectors of their churches. This raised the question of whether men were taking orders because they felt called to the church or because they had always been expected to do so and were assured a living. It was a controversial issue, but Edmund—speaking for Austen—is rational. He says that he probably was biased by knowing there was a living waiting for him, but he sees “no reason why a man should make a worse clergyman for knowing that he will have a competence early in life” (102). Edmund knows he was biased but believes it was blameless, and he goes on to argue against Mary’s claim that it is better for men to become soldiers and sailors because they are seen as brave, pointing out that the perceived bravery is a temptation to bend men toward the armed forces, while clergymen are not swayed by such temptations. Once again, Mary’s description of lazy, indolent priests, which are represented by Dr. Grant in the novel, gives Edmund the opportunity to distinguish individual clergymen from the church as a whole, recognizing that it is not the church in need of reform so much as it is certain priests.

During his conversation with Henry Crawford about possible improvements to Thornton Lacey, Edmund echoes several of his earlier statements, to which he adds his thoughts regarding absenteeism. Much like his statements to Mary regarding how a clergyman should dress, Edmund says that a country parsonage should not be ostentatious and that he “must be satisfied with rather less ornament and beauty” (Austen, Mansfield Park 224). Edmund goes on to say that not only must such a home satisfy him, but it must also satisfy those who care about him, implying Mary. This hint is not lost on Mary, who is listening to their conversation. Henry continues to push for progress, arguing that the house already has “the look of a something above a mere parsonage-house,” that it is “capable of much more,” a house Edmund can give “a higher
character” and raise into place, making it “the residence of a man of education, taste, modern manners, good connections.” He says that Edmund can create in the house “such an air as to make its owner be set down as the great landholder of the parish by every creature travelling the road” (225). His insistence on these so-called improvements opposes Edmund’s preference for a home that is welcoming rather than imposing, one that is suited to a clergymen who does not place himself above his congregation in rank but considers himself a part of it. This leads to Sir Thomas joining the conversation with his thoughts on absenteeism. In Austen’s time, many parish priests practiced absenteeism, leading services on Sundays but living elsewhere, not truly being part of the parish community. Though it was common practice—something Austen’s own father practiced early in his career—it is clear that Austen thought clergymen should live in the parishes they served. Sir Thomas introduces this idea, saying he hopes and believes “that Edmund will occupy his own house at Thornton Lacey” instead of allowing Henry to rent it (228). He then gives Edmund the chance to comment. Edmund replies with a staunch yes, ruling out any other possibility: “Certainly, sir, I have no idea but residence.” Interestingly, it is not Edmund who expounds upon this idea but Sir Thomas, saying clergymen must be “constantly resident” (228) and going on to explain, “[Edmund] knows that human nature needs more lessons than a weekly sermon can convey, and that if he does not live among his parishioners and prove himself by constant attention their well-wisher and friend, he does very little either for their good or his own” (229). Sir Thomas and Edmund agree upon the importance of the church drawing on the wisdom of the past and that only resident clergymen can prove their values by putting them into practice, but, as Oliver MacDonagh points out, there is a generational difference between Sir Thomas and Edmund. When Sir Thomas describes the role of the priest, he “lacks all spiritual reference,” as opposed to Edmund’s earlier discourse, in which “the
notions of salvation, of eternity and of theological instruction were at least minor characters in
the cast” (9). Sir Thomas and Edmund may agree about absenteeism, but Edmund is imbued with
a spiritual sense that his father (and his father’s generation) lacks.

Edmund finds another chance to discuss the role of the clergy when Henry mentions
reading aloud, an important skill during the Regency Period. Edmund says that not many
clergymen have studied reading aloud, despite its importance, but that this is mainly true of the
past. According to Edmund, “[t]here is now a spirit of improvement abroad” and that it is
different now than it was forty years ago because priests realize “that distinctness and energy,
may have weight in recommending the most solid truths” (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 314). These
truths are Biblical truths, of course, but because this is Austen writing, that detail is left to the
reader to infer. Henry Crawford takes this idea to the extreme, making it seem as though he sees
a pulpit as simply another type of stage, fit for performances and attention-seeking, but Edmund
does not agree with this assessment. Thus, the only change Austen explicitly recommends is that
clergymen consider the gravity of the readings and sermons and read them to their congregations
with that gravity in mind. This is not a drastic change, but if readers are to believe Edmund, it is
a subtle change that will make a difference and help reinvigorate the church. Clergymen are the
conduit of the Word and must be selfless, not selfish, as made clear in Edmund’s explanation.
Henry’s focus on himself and his own charisma underscores this important difference in their
characters.

Edmund communicates several of Austen’s personal beliefs about the clergy, but he is by
no means a perfect person (or character). He may have provided Fanny with a horse, but he
neglects her need for exercise by giving Mary Crawford preference and not interfering when she
has monopolized the horse, keeping Fanny from having a chance to ride. He regrets this failure
on his part and vows not to let it happen again (70), but that does not change the fact that he did
forget Fanny, however momentarily. Edmund is easily distracted, a fault that affects him
throughout the novel (Byrd). When his brother suggests performing *Lovers Vows* while Sir
Thomas is overseas, Edmund initially opposes it, taking every opportunity to try to convince
Tom to change his mind and seeking the support of his other family members (only Fanny
agrees). But Edmund changes his mind when Mary becomes involved, claiming he changes his
mind because he wants to protect the reputations of the ladies and that it is only “the appearance
of inconsistency” on his part (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 142). His most significant fault is pursuing
someone as improper for a clergyman’s wife as Mary Crawford. Despite her shortcomings, such
as her imprropriety in speech and her open disdain of the clergy, Edmund continues to admire her,
hoping to change her mind about the clergy and thus be enabled to marry her. This kind of
thinking is problematic. But readers should appreciate that Austen did not try to create an
idealized priest in Edmund. Instead, she created a character who seems human, one who faces
temptations and makes mistakes but learns from them. Austen does not call for Anglican
clergymen to be perfect; she calls for them to be human.

Even so, many readers find it difficult to believe that Edmund changes his mind about
Mary and falls in love with Fanny so quickly. After admiring one woman for so long—and one
who is vastly different from Fanny Price—how could he change his mind and his heart, and so
suddenly? Perhaps an earlier conversation provides part of the answer. Early in the novel,
Edmund has a conversation with Fanny about how men think and behave when they are in love.
They are discussing Henry Crawford and which Bertram sister he admires. Fanny is perceptive
about Henry’s real desire for Maria, yet she is cautious in her speech, confiding, “If Miss
Bertram were not engaged . . . I could sometimes almost think he admired her more than Julia,”
to which Edmund responds, “I believe it often happens that a man, before he has quite made up
his own mind, will distinguish the sister or intimate friend of the woman he is really thinking of
more than the woman herself” (109). Perhaps in his admiration and pursuit of Mary Crawford,
Edmund was truly thinking of Fanny. Using Edmund’s own analysis of suitors, this would make
sense. Edmund says only kind words about Fanny throughout the novel, pointing out that it
would be difficult for a man to argue with her (105) and calling her “the perfect model of a
woman” (322), one who is “firm as a rock in her own principles” (325). And after Maria has
dashed the hopes of her family, Edmund welcomes Fanny home as “My Fanny—my only
sister—my only comfort now” (413), revealing that she is his only comfort but that he has
always thought of her as his sister. It is only after he realizes Fanny’s morals and values—
especially as compared to Maria’s—and after Fanny has been away that he realizes his true
feelings for her are romantic, not fraternal. Despite Edmund’s thoughts, this explanation is
difficult for many readers to accept and remains a problem with this novel.

While Edmund’s sudden love for Fanny is understandably problematic, what is more
problematic is modern readers’ preference for Mary. To prefer Mary to Fanny is to miss
Austen’s point. Some readers may like Mary because of her wit; however, it is clear that her wit
is not charming but is indicative of a deeper moral issue. As Edmund points out in the Sotherton
chapel, “[her] lively mind can hardly be serious even on serious subjects” (82). *Mansfield Park* is
Austen’s most serious novel. It does not have the atmosphere for wit and charm, like *Pride and
Prejudice* does for that of Elizabeth Bennet, nor does it champion those qualities. Perhaps
readers overlook Mary’s less desirable actions, such as scheming for a husband—originally Tom
Bertram due to his being “the eldest son of a Baronet” (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 40)—arguing
that in marriage “there is not one in a hundred of either sex, who is not taken in” (44), and
admitting that she was brought up “with the true London maxim, that every thing is to be got with money” (56). Mary even calls herself selfish, albeit jokingly, claiming, “Selfishness must always be forgiven you know, because there is no hope of a cure” (65). The narrator describes Mary’s “beauty, wit, and good humour” (61), but the novel seems suffused with the reality underlying the proverb that “charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised” (*King James Bible*, Prov. 31:30). Austen would never refer to the Proverbs 31 woman explicitly in her fiction, but her characterization of Mary makes it clear that she is not the type of woman who should be in a country vicarage.

Mary’s comments in the chapel at Sotherton and her suggestion that Edmund is taking orders as a sacrifice further prove her wrongness for marrying clergy, as do many of her other actions. During the rehearsals for *Lovers Vows*, Mary takes on the role of Amelia, a character she describes as “a forward young lady” who “may well frighten the men” (*Austen, Mansfield Park* 134). Not only does she participate in the play, but she chooses a role that is obviously inappropriate for a young woman. Later in the novel, she makes it clear that she intends to be rich, claiming everyone intends the same for themselves (197), and she bemoans her lack of influence over Edmund (211). While listening to Edmund and Henry discuss improvements to Thornton Lacey, Mary plays a game of Speculation (both literally and figuratively), a game she intends to win but ends up losing. Mary hoped Henry would convince Edmund to “improve” the parsonage as Henry saw fit, but she realizes she is “no longer able in the picture she had been forming of a future Thornton, to shut out the church, sink the clergyman, and see only the respectable, elegant, modernized, and occasional residence of a man of independent fortune” (229), a picture that “entirely excludes any sense of religious responsibility” (Duckworth 54). This failed attempt at changing Edmund leads Mary to ridicule his choice of
occupation throughout the rest of the novel, making more disparaging comments about the clergy and telling him she will never dance with a clergyman (Austen, Mansfield Park 248). Modern readings of Mary that praise her and prefer her to Fanny reflect that secularization Gary Kelly deems integral to recognizing in Austen studies (156). Mary may charm readers at first, as she does Edmund, but, like Edmund, readers should see through her by the end of the novel. Edmund is able to see that Mary lacks morals and propriety when she describes her opinion of Henry’s and Maria’s adultery as being no more than mere folly. Edmund says that Mary showed “[n]o reluctance, no horror, no feminine—shall I say? no modest loathings!” and he is appalled and disgusted by finally recognizing her true character (422). Fanny reacts similarly to Edmund and even describes the fracas as a horrible evil and a sin, making her the only character to use explicit religious terminology when discussing it (MacDonagh 11). Thus, readers should acknowledge Mary’s faults and realize that Fanny is Austen’s true heroine.

Mary’s and Fanny’s characters are presented in direct opposition to each other, further proving Austen’s intent to make Fanny her true Christian heroine. In the chapel at Sotherton, Fanny defends the importance of prayer, while Mary makes inappropriate jokes. When Edmund defends the clergy, Fanny underscores his thoughts with a hearty, “Certainly!”, which is “a gesture rare in Austen’s novels . . . an implicit ‘hear, hear’ after another’s speech” (White 25), while Mary maintains that Edmund “is fit for something better” (Austen, Mansfield Park 88). Fanny embraces Edmund’s profession, but Mary never does, “for she is never able to admit what she would consider a loss of significance in her own eyes” (Hardy 61). Mary has no respect for clergymen. She is able to defend soldiers as being brave, but she cannot find any redeeming qualities in priests. Fanny, on the other hand, believes that the priesthood requires exactly the best qualities and energies in a man (Reddy 52). When Mary suggests that Maria should live
with Henry in hopes of increasing the chance that he will marry her, “Edmund and Fanny register total disgust at the idea” (White 155). The narrator, often outspokenly judgmental in this novel, makes the differences clear:

in every thing but a value for Edmund, Miss Crawford was very unlike her [Fanny]. She had none of Fanny’s delicacy of taste, of mind, of feeling; she saw nature, inanimate nature, with little observation; her attention was all for men and women, her talents for the light and lively. (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 76)

Fanny is the narrator’s preference in this case, as she is when she and Mary disagree about whether Edmund’s name is pitiful or noble (195). Some readers may prefer Mary because of her modern, secular qualities, but they must separate their own inclination toward her from Austen’s purpose, which is made clear in the differences between Mary and Fanny.

The cause of the differences between them is as important as the differences themselves. *Mansfield Park* shows Austen’s careful consideration of education and nurture and how these aspects contribute to a person’s conduct. As Kathryn Sutherland points out in her introduction to the novel, “In its pervasive concern with the relationship between education, manners, and moral judgment, *Mansfield Park* extends the lessons of the schoolroom into the choices formed in adult life” (xix), choices that are evident in Edmund, Fanny, and Mary, as well as in Maria and Henry. At Sotherton, Edmund describes conduct as “the result of good principles” (87). The Crawfords learned much of their behavior from their uncle the Admiral, “a man of vicious conduct, who chose, instead of retaining his niece, to bring his mistress under his own roof” (39), prompting Mary to request to stay with the Grants. The Admiral’s conduct becomes an important influence on how Mary and Henry are shaped as adults, as Mary says when she describes her fear that Henry was quite spoiled by the Admiral’s lessons (41), a fear she feels once again when they
discuss Henry’s pursuit of Fanny. She advises Henry to get away from the Admiral before his
manners and opinions are affected by him, advice that Henry waves off due to his difference in
opinion regarding the Admiral (272). Despite giving this advice, Mary has already been
negatively affected by the Admiral’s manners. When Henry runs off with his mistress and Mary
neglects to see the wrong in this elopement, it is clear that their moral education from the
Admiral was severely lacking.

Henry’s and Mary’s nurturing was very different from Edmund’s and Fanny’s. When
Edmund reflects on whether or not knowing he had a living if he became a clergyman biased
him, he says, “I was in safe hands. I hope I should not have been influenced myself in a wrong
way, and I am sure my father was too conscientious to have allowed it” (102). Sir Thomas
reflects on his own conscientiousness after Maria and Henry run off together, admitting “his own
errors in the education of his daughters” (429) but realizing how “the excessive indulgence and
flattery of their aunt had been continually contrasted with his own severity” and that their real
disposition had been unknown to him (430). He describes their faults in Christian terms
(Sutherland xx), believing that his daughters “had been instructed theoretically in their religion,
but never required to bring it into daily practice” (Austen, Mansfield Park 430). Fortunately, Sir
Thomas knows that he succeeded in raising Edmund properly (though readers can see how
Edmund was not insusceptible to the shallow charms of Mary Crawford), as well as Fanny,
realizing she “was indeed the daughter that he wanted” (438). Of all the characters in Mansfield
Park, Fanny is the one who gains the most from her education, puts her religion into practice,
and exemplifies for both the other characters and the reader what Austen believed was right for
someone who might become a clergyman’s wife.
Fanny is often dismissed by readers because she is different from other Austen heroines. She is not witty like Elizabeth Bennet, nor is she headstrong like Emma Woodhouse. She is the “pious heroine [who] has tried the patience of many readers and critics” since *Mansfield Park* was first published (Wheeler 407). In *Jane Austen and the Didactic Novel*, Jan Fergus offers a different approach for understanding Fanny. Rather than compare her to other heroines, readers “must correctly judge her painful position at Mansfield and be conscious of all the difficulties she must contend with there.” Fergus points out that “the childhood of no other Austen heroine receives such attention” as Fanny’s and that Austen does this in order to give the reader the appropriate background for understanding Fanny (126). The room in which Fanny feels most comfortable is the “school-room; so called till the Miss Bertrams would not allow it to be called so any longer” (*Austen, Mansfield Park* 139), foreshadowing how Maria Bertram will disregard what she learned when she was young. Fanny finds “immediate consolation” in the school-room (140) and it is where Edmund seeks advice from her. Unlike Maria, Fanny learns *and exercises* the morals she has learned, and the differences between Fanny and the Bertram girls highlight the surprising advantages Fanny has, namely humility and self-knowledge. As Marilyn Butler explains, “Humility is obviously an appropriate virtue for the Christian heroine; but equally important in Jane Austen’s canon is, as always, the impulse towards self-knowledge. Fanny’s sense as a Christian of her own frailty, her liability to error, and her need of guidance outside herself, is the opposite of the Bertram girls’ complacent self-sufficiency” (221). Fanny’s humility is further developed through the many trials she faces in the novel, and it is clear in her journey to her parents’ home in Portsmouth how deeply she was affected by her youth at Mansfield Park. Fanny is shocked and dismayed by her family’s lack of manners, but readers must infer that she would have behaved exactly like her family if she had not been raised at Mansfield Park.
That is not to say that being raised at Mansfield Park is easy for Fanny. It is quite the opposite. Fanny’s struggles begin even before she arrives, with Mrs. Norris urging Sir Thomas to take Fanny in but cautioning him not to let her think she is equal to his daughters. This is exactly how Fanny is raised, feeling “[k]ept back” by everyone but Edmund (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 22) and becoming so humble she blushes at the slightest praise (26). Fanny is physically weak throughout her childhood, and as an adolescent, she struggles with being self-conscious and anxious, but this “is a risk Austen deliberately runs” because her intention with *Mansfield Park* was “to write a novel in which responses and judgment are highly problematic, for the characters and for the reader” (Fergus 127). Rather than focus solely on Fanny’s physical delicacy, readers must notice that her delicacy of mind is actually a strength rather than a weakness because a “genuine delicacy is a strong form of propriety necessary for making the finest distinctions, especially in the feelings of others, and for determining the appropriate response” (Tave 38). Fanny is hurt—even jealous—when she sees Edmund and Mary flirting, and she knows that Edmund’s offer of her horse to Mary is part of his pursuit of Mary. Even so, Fanny keeps her feelings to herself and has the sense to give the mare a break from exercise, putting Edmund, Mary, and the horse before herself (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 64). She realizes her own struggles against discontent and envy (70), but, like Elinor Dashwood, she keeps them to herself. When Edmund and Mary leave her on her own in the wilderness outside of the Sotherton chapel, she does not complain; instead, she exhibits grace toward other characters who feel excluded, namely Julia and Mr. Rushworth when they are left behind by Maria and Henry (94), apologizing for their absence and wishing she could “say something more to the purpose” of making them feel better about the situation (95). Like Elinor, Fanny *has* strong emotions but is able to regulate them. It is clear how much Fanny loves and admires Edmund, especially when
she clings to his half-finished note about the chain for her cross, which she saves as “the dearest part of the gift” while realizing “she might never receive another” note from Edmund and knowing “it was impossible that she ever should receive another [letter] so perfectly gratifying in the occasion and the style.” But Fanny also knows how much Edmund admires Mary, and Fanny is described as “[h]aving regulated her thoughts and comforted her feelings” by a “happy mixture of reason and weakness” (245), a practice she exerts often when faced with trials. Fanny is a special heroine because she is “Austen’s most Christian heroine,” one who embodies constancy, humility, gratitude, and faith (Tarpley 257). Perhaps her humility is why so many readers dislike Fanny and describe her as a priggish snob, but those readers overlook Fanny’s constant fear of upsetting others or hurting their feelings, issues she worries about several times in the novel, as well as her ability to stand staunchly by her principles, an act that is never easy for Fanny. This staunchness is hidden in her timidity, but it exists and is central to her character. Those readers also overlook the narrator, who is much more judgmental about characters’ behavior than Fanny.

Fanny has keen insight into the human experience. She is conscious of herself and those around her in a way the Bertram sisters and Mary Crawford are not (Hardy 63), and she exerts restraint and shows emotional maturity throughout the novel. Fanny proves that emotional maturity is “the prerequisite for a Christian disposition” and that this maturity “has everything to do with establishing a balance between the life of the mind (reason) and the life of the heart (feeling), usually with reason bringing feeling under a kind of necessary control” (Giffin 139). Her emotional maturity is clear in the way she faces struggles, especially those that involve other characters’ feelings. Fanny knows that performing Lovers Vows is wrong, but she worries about seeming judgmental toward her cousins and feels guilty and hurt when Mrs. Norris calls her “obstinate, ungrateful girl” when she refuses to participate (Austen, Mansfield Park 137).
struggles with her own desire to see the performance (123), but she remains steadfast in her conviction that what her cousins are doing is wrong and does not change her mind. This is no easy feat; Fanny feels “undecided as to what she ought to do” and experiences increasing doubts. She worries that she is hurting “some of those to whom she owes the greatest complaisance” (141). She is further shaken when Edmund agrees to participate—leading to more struggles with envy when he rehearses with Mary—but still Fanny remains firm. Unlike Edmund, Fanny “understands what is happening because she knows the cross-purposes among the prospective actors, as Edmund does not, and therefore sees, as he does not, even more specific reasons why there is a moral problem” (Tave 40). It is also important for readers to note Fanny’s very human reaction to Edmund’s and Mary’s evident disagreement at the ball. They do not part on good terms, and when Fanny observes this, she is “tolerably satisfied.” She realizes that it is “barbarous to be happy when Edmund was suffering. Yet some happiness must and would arise, from the very conviction, that he did suffer” (Austen, Mansfield Park 257). Fanny knows it is wrong to rejoice while Edmund is upset—and to rejoice at the very issue that upsets him—but she cannot help feeling that way. Like Edmund, Fanny is flawed, but these flaws only contribute to her human frailty and the depth of her thoughts, making her more convincingly real.

Critics often refer to this depth as Fanny’s delicacy of mind. This delicacy contributes to her role as “a Christian heroine: meek, poor in spirit, pure of heart, merciful, seeking for righteousness” (Ruderman 125). Fanny loves virtue and tries to be virtuous, doing right by others and feeling as though she does not deserve what she has been given, but she also realizes that she is not always virtuous. This keeps her from being smug and makes her more realistic. It also makes her interesting to compare with characters who think they are virtuous and are less aware of their shortcomings than Fanny is of hers (84). Fanny’s learning experiences in how she relates
to others are integral to her Christian education (Anderson). She does not become rich or powerful, but this is because “Mansfield Park’s ending looks, ultimately, to a higher than early reward,” something readers see when they realize that “in spiritual terms . . . terms laid out in the New Testament . . . Fanny, perhaps more than any other heroine, possesses the potential to become ‘rich toward God’” (Tarpley 255). Fanny claims all people have “a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be” (Austen, Mansfield Park 383), and her efforts throughout the novel exemplify her struggle to listen to that guide. Michael Giffin describes Fanny’s efforts and struggles as a “crucible of suffering,” one he sees as “a disposition unique to Fanny as a Christ-like character.” Giffin likens Fanny to Jesus, describing “similarities between [her] journey and the one undertaken by Jesus who—because of his humanity—had to be educated and had to experience life in order to grow into his maturity and empowerment,” but he makes it clear that Austen is not over-inflating Fanny’s importance or trivializing that of Jesus; she “is simply acknowledging that Jesus is an exemplary model for Anglicans in every age” (139). This same “crucible of suffering” is what shapes Fanny’s moral character, providing several opportunities for Austen to show how Anglican women should react to burdens they face, making Fanny the ideal wife for Edmund.

Several instances show Fanny’s most positive traits. When Sir Thomas returns from Antigua, he praises Fanny, but praise makes her uncomfortable. Fanny is described as “not liking to complain” (Austen, Mansfield Park 247), and she is overcome with gratitude over the slightest kindness, such as Lady Bertram sending her lady’s maid to help Fanny get ready for the ball (even though she is already dressed). She is humble, believing that the distinction of the ball in her honor is too great (254), and she prays for Edmund’s happiness even when she fears that it
will not include her (244). She is able to be happy in the midst of suffering, trusting that her mourning will be turned into dancing without Austen quoting chapter and verse.

Descriptions of several of Fanny’s best traits come from an unlikely source: the Crawfords. Henry is the character who uses the word “religious” to describe Fanny, and he uses it in a positive way, ending a long description of what he admires about Fanny with that very word (271). During this conversation, Henry professes to be serious about being a changed man and seeking someone who is wholesome and good, but his actions at the end of the novel negate this claim. Still, Henry and Mary are the characters who realize Fanny is “all gratitude and devotion” (269), that there is “not a better girl in the world,” even that Fanny “is not like her cousins” and has not thrown herself at Henry. Mary points out Fanny’s “gentleness and gratitude of . . . disposition” and says “if there is a girl in the world capable of being uninfluenced by ambition,” it is Fanny (270). The Crawfords go on to describe Fanny as gentle, modest, sweet, patient, and understanding, and as having manners that “were the mirror of her own modest and elegant mind.” Henry realizes she has “a steadiness and regularity of conduct,” “a high notion of honour,” and “an observance of decorum as might warrant any man in the fullest dependence on her faith and integrity” (271). But Mary underestimates Fanny’s steadfastness in abiding by her principles when she assumes Fanny “will never have the heart to refuse” Henry (270). Nonetheless, the very traits the Crawfords list as reasons why Henry should marry Fanny are the same traits Austen sees as making her right for marrying Edmund instead, traits that reflect many aspects of the New Testament without quoting it, as Austen never would have done.
Conclusion

Like Edward and Elinor, Edmund and Fanny are married only after they have each suffered trials and burdens. Because they handled these situations with Christian restraint and sense, they are rewarded with each other in marriage. Giffin points out that “[t]he marriage of Fanny and Edmund occurs only after a series of trials and tribulations and revelations that are part of the universal Christian story of fall and redemption” (129). Fanny is reminded time and again that she is not in the same social class as her cousins and feels jealous of and discouraged by Mary Crawford, but she retains her sense of Christian restraint throughout. As a result, she is rewarded with Edmund. The two couples are established as having ideal clerical marriages, and “[t]he ideal marriages that Austen establishes in the parsonages of Delaford and Mansfield represent reason tempered by feeling, which is appropriate to a clergy couple that is meant to be a sign to the community that is more religious than worldly” (Giffin 34). Austen has higher standards for clerical marriages than she has for marriages of the laity, and she uses the Ferrarses and the Bertrams to communicate these standards. These are not the only marriages that are successful or important; many other marriages work out well in the novels, but Austen clearly delineates between “an effective first lady of an estate [and] an effective clergy wife of a parish” because “Austen has a particular sense of the temperamental appropriateness of a secular marriage among the laity and a clerical marriage among the clergy” (Giffin 34). The temperaments of the Ferrarses and the Bertrams are proven to be calm, restrained, humble, and sensible. They are not without emotion; they are able to temper their emotions with reason. This tempering of emotion is integral to the success of these clerical marriages, and this tempering is what Austen argues is necessary for real clerical marriages.
While Fanny and Elinor are very similar and their stories have similar endings, it is important to note that Fanny is more fully developed in terms of manifesting what it is to be an ideal Christian and an ideal wife of a clergyman. Marilyn Butler describes Elinor as “an apprentice job compared with Fanny” (246), and Michael Giffin goes so far as to give Fanny the “added significance of being a trope of redemptive good (that is, the ‘suffering servant’, the messiah, or the ‘anointed one’)” and points out that Austen places her “in an estate and a parish that are in need of redemption” (127). He sees the similarities between Elinor and Fanny, but he argues that Fanny is the only character who serves this tropological function and that she is created to embody this idea of Christian redemption that was so important to Austen (127).

Fanny is more openly pious than Elinor, but this is due to the different social atmosphere of *Mansfield Park*. In *Mansfield Park*, Austen creates a social situation in which Fanny can be more openly pious, especially in scenes such as the one in the chapel at Sotherton. When “[l]ooked at in an ecclesiastical light, *Mansfield Park* seems to leap forward—or half forward—to the literature of principle and the Church of conscience” (MacDonagh 2). Fanny’s “piety plays an important part in the growth of her confidence and moral stature” (Knox-Shaw 189), and this growth is integral to her character and her role as a clergyman’s wife, as well as being intentional on the part of Austen. *Mansfield Park* is truly Austen’s “social and religious commentary” (Giffin 127), and Butler calls it “the most visibly ideological of Jane Austen’s novels.” *Mansfield Park* has “a central position in any examination of Jane Austen’s philosophy as expressed in her art,” and “is all the more revealing because here she has progressed far beyond the technical immaturity of the period when *Sense and Sensibility* was conceived, to a position where she can exploit to the full artistic possibilities of the conservative case” (219). Austen is also “more severe in *Mansfield Park* about such things as the importance of self-denial than she is
elsewhere” (Ruderman 128). She has created an appropriate atmosphere for religious thought, and she provides just that. She believes that clergymen should feel called and committed to the church and that they should exhibit Christian elements of restraint and humility. She believes that their wives, too, must embody these traits, and shows this through Fanny’s obvious suffering.

While Austen’s views on religion may be more subtle than overt, they are still impossible to ignore. She realized what changes were going on in the Anglican church during her time, and she had opinions about these changes. She had high standards for the clergy and their wives and what she saw as proper for them to exemplify to the laity. Austen’s fiction is shaped with the church and these standards in mind, but because she did not see fiction as the appropriate venue for overt, didactic religious commentary, she made hers more subtle, especially in the early Northanger Abbey. Sense and Sensibility and the marriage of Elinor and Edward is an example of her attempt at this subtle inclusion of religious opinion, but Mansfield Park and the marriage of Fanny and Edmund shows when Austen truly achieves it. Mansfield Park is her most didactic novel, one that educates readers what the ever-changing Church of England must consider when filling its parsonages and choosing its leaders.
Works Cited


Vita

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