

Literature and Film

A Guide to the Theory and
Practice of Film Adaptation

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Chapter 1

Improvements and Reparations at Mansfield Park

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When Miramax released *Mansfield Park* in 1999, the movie was greeted with outrage from critics and fans who found its emphasis on slavery unpalatable and unfaithful to the Jane Austen novel on which Patricia Rozema's film was based.¹ Customer reviews of the DVD version of the film on the amazon.com website carry many such expressions of anger: "I'm sure we all understand the vulgarity of slavery without needing to see it graphically displayed in a format that Austen herself would have refused to watch," wrote one viewer, referring to the scene in the film in which Fanny Price discovers Tom Bertram's sketchbook of brutal and pornographic scenes from the Bertram family's Antigua plantation; another viewer claimed, "The moral issue of slavery, not even addressed in the novel, is tossed in, seemingly on a whim."² "Rubbing slavery in the faces of the audience," wrote "hannah12," "misses what Ms Austen is about and why people still read her books. Ms Austen did not write about the political issues of the 18th–19th centuries. She wrote about relationships."³ In other words, politics is still "what some read [and watch] Austen to avoid," as Claudia Johnson put it in her review of Rozema's film in the *Times Literary Supplement*.⁴

However, while outraged fans imagined Jane Austen rolling or spinning in her grave in response to Rozema's *Mansfield Park*,⁵ in many ways the film's emphasis on the slavery subtext in Austen's novel was simply the logical outcome of the revisionist historiography and literary criticism of the past twenty years or so that has placed the question of slavery at the center of discussion of early nineteenth-century British history in general and of Austen's *Mansfield Park* in particular, and has placed this hitherto least appreciated of her novels at the center of the Jane Austen canon. While individual critics certainly disagree about both the importance and the meaning of Austen's references to the Bertrams' Antigua plantation in the novel, historicist interpretations of *Mansfield*

Park, in terms of its place in the discourses of slavery and imperialism, have become hegemonic in academia, even if they have made little headway in such forums of Jane Austen criticism as the massively popular Republic of Pemberley website.⁶ Revisionist work on the history of slavery, abolition, and the rise of industrial capitalism has fed into Austen criticism. In *Culture and Imperialism*, the reference point for all later criticism of *Mansfield Park*, Edward Said cites the work of Robin Blackburn, C. L. R. James, and Eric Williams as enabling his own analysis of Jane Austen's novel.⁷

Historians have approached abolition and emancipation as many-sided phenomena, so that it is hardly controversial nowadays to argue, for instance, that emerging humanitarian and liberal attitudes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – the hallmark of the abolitionist movement in Britain – helped to pave the way for new forms of imperialism, and in particular the “civilizing mission,” of the later nineteenth century.⁸ Consequently, the liberal and humanitarian Jane Austen was an obvious candidate for inclusion in this new complex historiography, as an exemplary recorder of the multiple relationships between domestic and colonial in the interregnum between the first and the second British empires, and of some of the ways in which colonial questions were actually central to the elaboration of new English cultures in the nineteenth century.⁹ The sophistication and irony of this historiographical approach – in which it is sometimes hard to tell the good guys from the bad – appeared to match the intricacies and ironies of *Mansfield Park* itself. And so Rozema's film picked up on and validated this academic approach. As John Wiltshire puts it in his recent book on Austen adaptations, “The film is the apotheosis of these variously political readings of Jane Austen: it certainly represents a meeting point or site of infiltration by academic commentary into the mass media.”¹⁰

However, while the film appears to validate academic hegemony over *Mansfield Park*, and over Jane Austen in general, against the middlebrow inhabitants of the Republic of Pemberley, in fact, if we read the Jane Austen criticism carefully, we can see a curious parallel between fan outrage at Rozema's film and academic disappointment with Austen's novel. Despite the undoubted importance of the revisionist histories of British slavery, and despite their formal analogy to the difficult structure of Austen's novel itself, it is nevertheless a common experience of modern readers of *Mansfield Park* that, for all its subtlety, what the novel lacks is precisely a simple, heroic narrative of abolition. Faced with the complexities of plot, character, and narrative point of view in the novel, readers often experience disappointment, loss, and even a sense of infidelity to an imaginary “original” story of slavery – just as viewers of film adaptations routinely complain of movies' unfaithfulness to “the book.”

One of Jane Austen's heroes, the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, provided one of the best-known versions of that simple historical narrative. In his *History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade*, first published in 1808, the movement to outlaw the buying and selling of Africans in the transatlantic slave trade is famously likened to a river. A fold-out map of the history of abolition is included in Clarkson's book, with the names of famous abolitionists attached to streams or tributaries, linking up to form a large body of water: “The torrent which swept away the Slave-trade.”¹¹

Readers and critics of *Mansfield Park* have often longed for another kind of story, one as clear cut and sweeping as Clarkson's river. Austen's careful laying bare of the complex system of suppression, evasion, and silencing necessary for the comfortable life of the English gentry dependent on wealth derived from slavery – the careful staging of the silence of the Bertrams in response to Fanny's famous question about the slave trade, for example – actually carries the force of an active silencing, suppression, and evasion on the part of the novel.¹² If Jane Austen really "loved" Thomas Clarkson, as she once declared, then she should have made Fanny's opposition to slavery as explicit and courageous as her opposition to the attentions of Henry Crawford. "It would be silly," writes Edward Said, "to expect Jane Austen to treat slavery with anything like the passion of an abolitionist or a newly liberated slave."¹³ And yet this is often precisely what modern readers wish for and expect. While we may recognize, and take pleasure in, the multiplicity and ambiguity of the events of this historical period and of Austen's novel, we still long for history as simple story – for Clarkson's river of justice running toward victory – just as viewers of Jane Austen adaptations sometimes long for history as an elegant and simple tale of "relationships," manners, and pretty country houses, validating the notion that "Jane Austen's novels have a pervading modesty."¹⁴

Thus, while academic viewers and readers are quick to scorn the popular language of "fidelity" as a way of understanding film adaptations – and quick therefore to dismiss fans' anger at Rozema's film's "betrayal" of Austen's tale – we ought also to be aware of our own investment in particular versions of history, and not necessarily the versions that are "good for us," or sanctioned by the protocols of academic historiography. Robert Stam points out that there is a "grain of truth" in the language of fidelity and betrayal in relation to film adaptations; that it speaks to a certain loss of "our own phantasmatic relation" to the cultural object that viewers of film versions of classic novels experience.¹⁵ And what is crucial here is that this fantasy of control is itself a result of the fact that history is produced, disseminated, and consumed at many different sites, of which the academic discipline of history is only one, and often not the most important one, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot has usefully reminded us in his book *Silencing the Past*.¹⁶ The genre of the Western lies behind Trouillot's rhetorical question: "Is it really inconsequential that the history of America is being written in the same world where few little boys want to be Indians?"¹⁷ Likewise, film and television are undoubtedly the most influential elements in the establishment of slavery as a crime against humanity. Behind our contemporary dissatisfaction with Austen's version of Fanny Price, and with the novel's equivocation on the question of slavery, lie *Roots*, *Eyes on the Prize*, and images of civil rights protests in the US South in the 1950s, all of which helped to establish slavery as an unambiguous historical evil.

I believe, however, that a careful historical reading of Austen's novel will show that this apparently simple and unambiguous narrative of emancipation is, in fact, more complex than it seems; that the price we pay for agreeing that slavery was an historical evil is a complicity with an understanding of history that imagines the liberal subject as autonomous, self-fashioning, and always capable therefore of "improvement." An analysis

of Austen's novel – in which "improvement" is a key figure – shows that the idea of "emancipation," which relies on this modern subject for its ethical charge, grows out of this Janus-faced figure of improvement, one employed by proslavery and abolitionist writers alike. In other words, a new reading of *Mansfield Park*, the novel, reveals the multiple and sometimes contradictory presuppositions that lie behind contemporary belief in the simple narrative of slavery. In this respect, this chapter endorses historical specificity and complexity over simple narratives, but in it I also hope to show that simple narratives always have complex and contradictory components.

However, I think that an emphasis on the complexities and ambiguities of the apparently straightforward narrative of emancipation might also have the unintended effect of causing us to overlook, marginalize, or dismiss an emergent common sense in the contemporary world: the simple narrative or logic of reparations for slavery. I imagine a future "new historicist" looking back at Rozema's film version of *Mansfield Park* would notice that it appeared in the midst of a great upsurge of interest and activism around the question of slavery reparations, just as critics of Austen's novel have repositioned it in the context of debates over emancipation in the 1810s and 1820s. In other words, perhaps an attentiveness to the new simple narrative of reparations will sometimes draw us away from the elitist pleasures of complexity and ambiguity. I conclude by arguing that Rozema's film constitutes both an evasion of, but also an engagement with, this new logic of reparations.

Improvements

Since the publication in rapid succession of Alistair Duckworth's *The Improvement of the Estate* (1971) and Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* (1973), it has been a critical commonplace that the problem of "improvement" lies at the center of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*.¹⁸ As has been often noted, improvement in the novel is ambiguous: careless improvements to country estates are deprecated, while the careful improvement of Fanny's mind is welcomed. Less frequently remarked upon is the fact that this confusion parallels and is informed by the contemporary debate over improvement in the British West Indies, in which the improvement or "melioration" of slaves' moral and material living conditions was linked to "improvements" in estate management and agricultural practices. Tracing these connections reveals some of the complicated beginnings of the modern figure of the autonomous liberal subject, who is crucially defined by his or her capacity for improvement, and the simple narrative of emancipation which requires this improvable subject as the precondition for the historical rejection of slavery.

Mansfield Park was published at the moment of emergence of a new form of historiography requiring this liberal subject as both its precondition and its endpoint – the form of historiography that became "common sense" to later readers. As noted by Mark Salber Phillips, this new historiography prefigured later social history by representing "worlds

of social experience and inward feeling that were hard to translate into the traditional narrative conventions . . . Eighteenth-century narratives were already concerned with commercial life and everyday manners, with the experiences of women, 'primitives,' poets, and others not involved in statecraft."¹⁹ Austen's novel stands at the crossroads of a new modernity, and a new understanding of history, one marked, as David Lloyd argues in an important essay on the Irish famine, by "a dominant historical conception of human development . . . [that] is not merely an ethical ideal but an end that regulates historical method and evaluation, from the selection and legitimation of archives and sources to the organizing modes of narrative."²⁰ A re-reading of the novel in this light allows us to see some of the complicated streams from which this historical river of common sense flowed.

The proper register for the evaluation of improvement – moral, intellectual, architectural, and political – is rarely present in *Mansfield Park*. The word is almost always presented to the reader in free indirect discourse, from which we need to disentangle character, narrator, and implied author's value judgments, often a thankless task. Are we meant to recoil at Sir Thomas Bertram's apparently lecherous and certainly acquisitive judgment of Fanny on his return from Antigua: he notices, with "decided pleasure," how Fanny has grown while he has been away, and when she blushes, finds himself "justified in his belief of her equal improvement in health and beauty" (p. 123)? If so, then the reader is compelled to question the invocation of improvement as a positive term to describe the changes in Fanny's mind and character after her transfer to Mansfield Park: the narrator comments that Fanny's cousin Edmund's attentions, and his book recommendations in particular, "were . . . of the highest importance in assisting the improvement of her mind, and extending its pleasures" (p. 18). Again, while clearly the bumbling aristocrat Rushworth is a fool for thinking that cutting down the avenue of trees at his Sotherton estate constitutes "improvement" (p. 40), on the other hand, what is the reader to make of Edmund's warm embrace of the "spirit of improvement abroad" (p. 230) amongst clergymen that allows them to preach more dramatically, and, perhaps, more effectively? Clearly, improvement is an ambiguous, even Janus-faced, figure in *Mansfield Park*: it looks toward both past and future, mediating them without allowing a stable point of reference. At times, the novel appears to endorse improvement as positive change; at others, improvement appears to be little more than a synonym for vandalism and social control. Through the figure of improvement, then, the novel stages the difficult problems of how and when to change inherited social and cultural forms without thereby undermining their power to stabilize family and community structures: how, in other words, to manage and govern the effects of the past in the present, without risking sudden and potentially revolutionary innovation and change.

We see this in a little-noticed moment of dialogue in the novel, an apparently casual conversation that in fact bears the weight of these questions of improvement, development, and the new historiography. After Sir Thomas's return from Antigua, Fanny and Mary Crawford strike up a new kind of intimacy, with Fanny paying frequent visits to her new friend at the parsonage owned by Mary's sister and brother-in-law, the Grants. Walking in the parsonage's shrubbery, Fanny suddenly breaks into her longest speech of

the novel up to that point, in which she rhapsodizes on the improvements Mrs Grant has made since taking over the parsonage from the Norrises: "This is pretty, very pretty . . . every time I come into this shrubbery I am more struck with its growth and beauty. Three years ago, this was nothing but a rough hedgerow along the upper side of the field, never thought of as anything, or capable of becoming anything; and now it is converted into a walk, and it would be difficult to say whether most valuable as a convenience or an ornament" (p. 143). These are proper improvements: Fanny admires Mrs Grant's "taste" and comments: "There is such a quiet simplicity in the plan of the walk! Not too much attempted!" (p. 143). The conversation has a symbolic importance that the reader can only guess at this stage: the parsonage will eventually be the home of Fanny and Edmund at the end of the novel, and these improvements in fact represent the obliteration of all traces of the parsonage's previous tenants, Mr and Mrs Norris.

However, this particular narrative of improvement actually resonates little with modern readers – certainly to judge by the lack of attention this passage has received in writing on *Mansfield Park* – who, in this as in so many other aspects of the novel, in fact think more like Mary Crawford, who, "untouched and inattentive, had nothing to say" (p. 143) in response to Fanny's remarks about the shrubbery. I would suggest that an attentive reading of these passages, however, provides important clues for understanding the vexed question of improvements in relation to the narration of history. Fanny continues her speech with a disturbing meditation on the past and on memory: "Perhaps, in another three years, we may be forgetting – almost forgetting what it was before" (p. 144). She goes on to muse about "something more speakingly incomprehensible in the powers, the failures, the inequalities of memory . . . [which] is sometimes so retentive, so serviceable, so obedient; at others, so bewildered and so weak; and at others again, so tyrannic, so beyond controul!" (p. 144). But while Fanny worries about memory, Mary Crawford, the emerging modern subject, lives in the new register of history – which is always the history of the modern subject. While Fanny remembers the words of "my uncle's gardener" (p. 144) on the rich soil of the parsonage grounds – invoking customary practice, community memory, and a rural caste system – Mary replies, "To say the truth . . . I am something like the famous Doge at the court of Lewis XIV; and may declare that I see no wonder in this shrubbery equal to seeing myself in it" (p. 144). Mary's narcissistic self-insertion into the narrative of history – in keeping with her London roots and her modern tastes – is excessive enough to enable us to see that this is in fact the structure of all modern historical narratives.

Christopher Kent has made the important observation that the French Revolution "ushered in the age of historicism. Jane Austen lived and wrote at the threshold of this new era of and for history."²¹ Here Mary Crawford reaches back before the French Revolution in the interests of a modern history, one entirely at odds with Fanny's invocation of the wonders of nature, or the local wisdom of her uncle's gardener.²² The result is a particularly striking emblem of the ambiguous figure of improvement. On the one hand, the novel's emphasis on Fanny's education, moral and intellectual, and the creation of a modern, liberal subject through the discipline of *history* carries with it as its underside

the creation of the egotistical, materialist modern subject, Mary Crawford; on the other hand, Fanny's emphasis on communal *memory*, estate improvements in accord with nature and social custom, carries with it as its shadow the preservation of a social and economic system that produces the likes of Mrs Norris, a heavy-handed, patriarchal gentry society that stifles and suppresses Fanny's creativity and imagination. This ambiguity becomes even more complicated and resonant when we factor in the debate over improvement taking place simultaneously in the pamphlet literature on abolition and emancipation in the Caribbean.

Just as in *Mansfield Park*, in both abolitionist and pro-slavery pamphlets and books, some of which Austen undoubtedly knew of and read, "improvement" also joins rather than separates land-based and subject-based discourses: the improvement of the West Indian estate becomes inseparable from the "improvement" of slaves' conditions, religious understanding, and level of civilization. For example, in James Stephen's *Reasons for Establishing a Registry of Slaves in the British Colonies*, published in 1814, the same year as *Mansfield Park*, this leading abolitionist writer sought to co-opt the position of West Indian planters who claimed that their chief interest was improving both the living and working conditions and the moral character of their slaves. He argued that abolitionists hoped to encourage ideas and practices that would "operate in the mind of the master; inclining him powerfully for his own sake, to promote the happiness, and improve the conditions of his slaves."²³ This "melioration" or improvement of the slaves' condition is seen as part of a more general improvement of the sugar estates, and thus ultimately of British power itself. In order to encourage the benevolent master who "would improve the moral conduct of his slaves, and render their lot more cheerful, by the all-powerful prospect of freedom" (p. 53), the British government needed to understand the economic circumstances of post-abolition planters who would have to make "great sacrifices" in order to:

keep up or enlarge a declining gang [of slaves] by means of native increase. A great diminution of labour, especially among the females, is essential to that change: so are a more liberal and expensive sustentation [sic] of the slaves in general, [and] a more chargeable care of infants and invalids . . . It was not known or considered [before abolition of the slave trade], how few planters, comparatively, are in circumstances to afford such improvements, or have even the present capacity to make them. (p. 40)

It was this kind of abolitionist thinking that led, ultimately, to the large-scale compensation of West Indian planters in 1833 when slavery was finally abolished (although it was replaced for five years by the quasi-bondage of "apprenticeship"). Here, however, I cite it as a sign that *Mansfield Park* was hardly the only text in 1814 to link the improvement of the estate to the moral and material improvement of its subservient population, and to do so in the name of a benign form of social regulation, especially of female reproductive capacity. It is, we should remind ourselves, at the moment of Sir Thomas Bertram's return from Antigua, from dealing with the "recent losses" (p. 19) of his West Indian

estates after abolition, that he comments so favorably on Fanny's improvement in health and beauty, and so quickly moves to sell her off in the gentry's marriage market.

In Rozema's film, this analogy between Fanny and Sir Thomas's slaves is made explicit: bridling at Sir Thomas's post-Antigua offer of a ball to showcase her value as a potential wife, Fanny flees, pursued by Edmund, to whom she declares, "I'll not be sold off like one of your father's slaves."²⁴ We should be wary, of course, of making too quick analogies between West Indian chattel slavery and the position of lower-class women in England in the early nineteenth century. Nevertheless, a "benign, though insensible revolution in opinions and manners," as Stephen summarizes the abolitionists' goal for West Indian slaves (p. 37), is also an apt description of the change Fanny goes through at Mansfield Park. The costly "improvements" that Stephen outlines for West Indian estates in the gradual transition to freedom are all necessary changes in Sir Thomas's estate management when back in Northamptonshire, especially in regard to Fanny: "a great diminution of labour, especially among the females . . . [and] a more liberal and expansive sustentation of the slaves in general" closely echo the novel's, and Sir Thomas's, escalating critique of Mrs Norris's parsimony (not allowing Fanny a fire in her room, for example) and unnecessary extraction of labor from Fanny. Readers' frustration with Fanny's apparent passivity stems from the challenge of a novel which denies to its protagonist the authority over her own destiny, and yet leads her to a kind of freedom all the same, just as Stephen hoped for "an emancipation, of which not the slaves, but the masters, should be the willing instruments or authors" (p. 37).

In retrospect, therefore – looking back from the period when emancipation became common sense – "improvement" comes to look like a perverse and ironic strategy for maintaining the status quo, for prolonging the brutality of slavery by a hypocritical cover of humanitarian interest in the slaves' bodies, minds, and labor conditions. Such a conclusion, for example, seems perfectly justified for the slave codes passed by planter-dominated Caribbean local assemblies in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such as the one passed by Antigua and the other Leeward Islands in 1798, which spoke insistently of improvement but changed little or nothing on the ground.²⁵ However, historical hindsight may also be a kind of blindness – hindering us from seeing the extent to which the idea of improvement has become part of the structure of our own psyches and social lives, blocking our view of its historical emergence at a particular moment, and in a particular contest over its meaning and value. We are tempted to see only hypocrisy in proslavery discourse about improvement because in fact we need to maintain the fiction of the autonomous liberal subject of whom improvement is always possible. Instead, the tussle over subjecthood, enslavement, and improvement played out, albeit sometimes in diffuse and displaced forms, in *Mansfield Park*, allows us to rethink some of our own assumptions about these same questions, to undo some of the common sense that links narratives and ideas of human development/improvement, the autonomous subject, and the structures of power that produce and constrain that subject.

Not, of course, in order to endorse proslavery arguments, but in order to understand more clearly the ways in which the language of humanitarianism, education, and the improvable

subject are in fact the preconditions for the new forms of suppression and exploitation emerging in the early nineteenth century, the new forms that come after that moment called “emancipation.” James Ramsay, in one of the most famous early abolitionist tracts, makes this link strikingly clear. In the preface to his book, he states the goal of the abolitionist movement:

To gain to society, to reason and religion, half a million of our kind, equally with us adapted for advancing themselves in every art and science, that can distinguish man from man, equally with us made capable of looking forward to and enjoying futurity . . . The people, whose improvement is here proposed, toil for the British state. The public, therefore, has an interest in their advancement in society. And what is here claimed for them? Not bounties, or gifts from parliament, or people; but leave to become more useful to themselves, their masters, and the state.²⁶

What is so troubling, therefore, about *Mansfield Park* in the post-emancipation moment, but what also allows it to become the most important Austen text in the current critical matrix, is that it resists the lure of the improved, liberal subject (Mary Crawford) even as it also calls into question the values of a rural England that was passing away in the commercialization of agriculture in the early nineteenth century (Sir Thomas, Mrs Norris). The novel allows the reader to re-examine some of the presumptions of history as progress or improvement, without succumbing to the lure of the anti-historical nostalgia that imagines “Jane Austen” as a sign for a cozy, stable rural society.

Mansfield Park, in other words, allows us to see some of the complicities and complexities of our understanding of history – and to do so without undue reverence for the memory of what Mary Crawford calls “the sturdy independence of your country customs” (p. 43). In his essay on the aftermath of the Irish famine, David Lloyd argues that the “dominant historical conception of human development,” which we have traced back to the moment of *Mansfield Park* and the debates over improvement and emancipation, “bears, moreover, an idea of the human subject which is the product of that narrative and the ideal of the discipline itself [i.e., history] – the disinterested subject of modern civil society. The legitimacy of any given historical utterance is proportional to its coherence with the emergence of such a subject.”²⁷ So re-reading the novel allows us to glimpse the multiple, ambiguous lineaments of the apparently commonsensical, progressive narrative of history in which the triumph of the improvable bourgeois subject requires that “emancipation” appear at the beginning of the narrative – that rejecting slavery (as Austen’s novel notoriously declines to do) is the *sine qua non* of modernity and the emergence of “the disinterested subject of modern civil society.” Lloyd’s essay also shows how popular memory, while inextricably overlaid and tied up with official historical narratives, nevertheless provides evidence of ways of surviving oppression and tyranny, ways of “living on,” in Lloyd’s terms.²⁸ The problem of *Mansfield Park* therefore is not merely the problem of slavery, or the problem of the novel’s undecidable attitude toward slavery, but the problem of how we might recover alternative narratives to the narrative of

liberal, humanitarian emancipation – different ways of “living on” – without losing ourselves in the wilds of Fanny’s unkempt memory in the shrubbery, “bewildered,” “weak,” “tyrannic,” and “beyond controul,” as she describes it (p. 144). In the final section of this chapter, I suggest some ways in which an analysis of the film version of *Mansfield Park* might lead to an understanding of “reparations” as a form of living on – attentive to both history and to memory without reconstituting the “disinterested subject.”

Reparations

Tim Watson

Patricia Rozema’s film *Mansfield Park* acknowledges a debt to recent revisionist history in many ways: while it is flagrantly unfaithful to its fictional predecessor (incorporating little of Austen’s dialogue or narrative language, for example), the movie follows closely the main thrust of contemporary historiography. The project of social historians of all stripes to recover and represent the experience of “the people,” rather than their political and military leaders, is sanctioned in Rozema’s film in its rethinking of the traditional country-house costume drama: as Rozema put it in the commentary for the DVD version of the film, she began her screenplay by asking the question, “Who’s paying for the party?”²⁹ The answer, made explicit in the film in an appropriately preachy moment from Edmund, is the slaves in Antigua: “We all live off the profits, Fanny, even you.”³⁰ When the elder son, Tom, returns early, and drunk, from his and Sir Thomas’s trip to Antigua, he falls from his horse, and in response to Edmund’s question “What of Antigua?” replies: “Ah, Antigua and all the lovely people there paying for this party.”³¹ As the director put it in an interview, “I actually believe that this [*Mansfield Park*] was her [Austen’s] meditation on servitude and slavery . . . She was kind of exploring what it is to treat humans as property, women, blacks, and the poor especially.”³²

Mansfield Park positions itself in explicit opposition to the nostalgic cult of the English country house, a genre drawn on by all other Austen adaptations, even those, such as Ang Lee and Emma Thompson’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), that seek to temper such preciousness with careful attention to the place of servants’ labor in maintaining such mansions.³³ Rozema’s film uses a ruined manor house (Kirby Hall) for the exterior shots of Mansfield Park, and in its interior shots makes sure that some of the bleakness of even a grand house comes across to the viewer. (Nevertheless, a materialist reading of the conditions of production of the film would note that the film’s producers thank in the credits both English Heritage and the National Trust, prime institutional movers in the heritage industry of which the film is ostensibly a critique.) In the first shot of the house at night, it bulks dark and foreboding in the distance, dwarfing its new inhabitant, Fanny Price. Once inside, the camera resists almost entirely the impulse of costume dramas to dwell on details of furnishing, dress, and decoration.³⁴ Fanny is given a whirlwind tour of the house by Mrs Norris in which rooms are pointed out but denied to both Fanny and the viewer, in which corridors and bare walls are swept through in an unsettling

way, and in which one of the few moments of rest is provided by a view through a window to a section of the building in visible disrepair: "Oh, that's the west wing," Mrs Norris explains, "soon to be repaired, if Tom could set aside his horses and the dice for long enough."³⁵

This problem of repair, of fixing the problems of the past in the present, is both a theme in the film (which ends with a shot of the west wing under reconstruction) and a precondition for the making of the movie in the first place, as it seeks to repair both the historical and historiographical errors of the past: building British and American societies on the profits of slavery, and then denying the fact in historical narratives of the past. Tom, the elder son, with abolitionist sympathies and a drinking problem, becomes the film's focal point for representing this dilemma. The film oscillates between treating Tom as a figure of playful fun, falling down drunk and pettishly rejecting his father's orders, producing the jagged but irreverent self-portrait on the landing that Mrs Norris dismisses on Fanny's house tour as "very modern," and Tom as a figure of emotional weight, caught in an intolerable position between his filial duty as heir and his abolitionist sympathies, producing the sketches of West Indian plantation life that so shock Fanny and the viewer with their frank depiction of the violence of slave societies, and lapsing into serious illness as a bodily sign of the psychic trauma he has endured. In this respect, Tom uncannily represents the paradoxical contemporary relation to the idea of history that political theorist Wendy Brown describes in her book *States of Injury*: on the one hand, we have become accustomed to the idea of historical narratives as arbitrary and playful, written from the point of view of particular interests, while, on the other hand, we experience the full weight of history as force, as "immeasurable heaviness" penetrating and even destroying the innermost recesses of the psyche: "We know ourselves to be saturated by history, we feel the extraordinary force of its determinations; we are also steeped in a discourse of its insignificance."³⁶

Thus, on the one hand, Rozema's film version of *Mansfield Park* marks the heaviness of history, forcefully disrupting and denying the cozy image of elegant, prettified Jane Austen as a refuge from politics, while, on the other hand, the film registers the insignificance and arbitrariness of history and historical narrative, especially in its closing sequence in which the camera flies jauntily as it wraps up the stories of each character with Fanny's cheeky voice-over: "It could have turned out differently, I suppose . . . but it didn't . . ."³⁷ There is an especially severe disjunction between, on the one hand, this light-hearted, even sprightly voice-over, with the swooping pleasures of the helicopter-borne camera angles, and, on the other hand, the touching father-son reconciliation scene between Sir Thomas and Tom that immediately precedes this final sequence. The actual verbal content of Fanny's final voice-over emphasizes the fact that Mrs Norris has become an "hourly evil" – a rare example of Austen's original text appearing unaltered in Rozema's film – and that Sir Thomas has given up his business in Antigua only in order to "pursue some exciting new opportunities in tobacco."³⁸ History is made light of and even trivialized – "it could all have turned out differently, I suppose" – at the same time as it appears inescapable – "but it didn't" – and the damage done irreparable.

The slave-holder Sir Thomas's heartfelt apology to the abolitionist Tom, as the latter appears to be dying, which comes immediately before the playful closing sequences of the film, is explicitly designed as a resolution to the slavery subplot in the film, as Rozema acknowledges in her audio commentary for the DVD, where she says that she added the apology scene at the last minute because the question of slavery had been left without closure. "I'm sorry, Tom, I'm so sorry," are the last words of dialogue in the film before the camera takes off on its final spin to wrap things up – a moment of seriousness and historical weight, and a suggestion of the need to heal and repair emotional and historical wounds, even if the Antiguan slaves themselves who continue to pay for the party are still invisible offstage.³⁹ This gesture to the "immeasurable heaviness" of history is, however, immediately undercut by the film's comic resolution, in which Sir Thomas and Tom's reconciliation is made possible by their partnership in the new business venture in tobacco, another slave-grown crop. The latter moment, although played for laughs in the film, in fact ties the stereotypical "Englishness" of the Jane Austen phenomenon firmly to the realities of US consumption, since tobacco was predominantly a mainland American, rather than West Indian, crop – and thus the imagined afterlife of the film mimics its joint British (state) and US (corporate) funders, the BBC, the Arts Council of England, and Harvey Weinstein's Miramax company.

Tom's recovery from his illness is indicated by his position in the closing tableaux, working on the books of the new tobacco business, directly underneath the workers repairing the (still rather forlorn-looking) west wing of Mansfield Park. It would be easy, and doubtless partly correct, to read this closing image of repair and healing between the white father and son as an evasion, rather than a resolution, of the slavery theme: the Antiguan slaves themselves must remain offstage, content to be represented by Tom, the English abolitionist-businessman (in his sketches, and now in his account books), who earlier in the movie appeared unaccountably in blackface. However, the ironic comedy of the closing scene also undercuts the ostensible message: tobacco companies are the contemporary equivalent of "slave-holders" in British and American culture, and moreover, the massive damages awarded against tobacco companies in lawsuits brought against them in the late 1990s turn the theme of repair back against its apparent object in the film and raise the specter of slavery reparations. The legal claims against US tobacco companies explicitly form the basis for the movement in the United States to claim reparations for slavery in a major lawsuit to be filed against the federal government and US corporations that can be shown to have profited from slavery before 1865.⁴⁰

The case for slavery reparations has been gathering strength in the past few years, prompted partly by the success of these tobacco lawsuits and the large damages won in court by black farmers against the US Department of Agriculture and by Jewish World War II slave laborers against German corporations in the late 1990s, and partly by the wave of public apologies offered by state actors for historical wrongs throughout the 1990s, such as Queen Elizabeth II's apology to New Zealand's Maori population, British prime minister Tony Blair's apology for the Irish famine, and President Bill Clinton's half-apology for the African slave trade.⁴¹ In the United States, the debate was sparked by

the publication in 2000 of Randall Robinson's book-length call for reparations, *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*.⁴² But the case for reparations is a global phenomenon, and has potentially global consequences, as was amply demonstrated by the tortuous discussions of the need for Western apologies and reparations for slavery and colonialism at the United Nations World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa, in September 2001.⁴³ The temporary result of the conference was to effectively sideline or suppress the call for reparations, in a compromise final declaration that stated that "slavery and the slave trade are crimes against humanity and should always have been so" – a form of words that avoided the more sweeping "slavery was a crime against humanity" and was designed to protect European and US interests from future lawsuits – and simply "noted" that "some States have taken the initiative of regretting or expressing remorse or presenting apologies" for slavery, a form of words that replaced an earlier text that specifically endorsed "reparations" themselves.⁴⁴ But it seems clear that reparations in some form will eventually be paid; reparations have become, or will soon become, the new common sense about slavery, race, and history, and Rozema's film can be interpreted as a partial response to this new cultural and historical imperative.

The danger, however, is that the search for reparations will merely reconsolidate the structures it appears to contest, leaving its beneficiaries forever attached to an image of themselves as historical victims, wounded subjects denied even the liberal promise of "improvement." The quest for reparations risks becoming, in Wendy Brown's terms, "a practice which reiterates the existence of an identity whose present past is one of insistently unredeemable injury. This past cannot be redeemed *unless* the identity ceases to be invested in it, and it cannot cease to be invested in it without giving up its identity as such, thus giving up its economy of avenging and at the same time perpetuating its hurt."⁴⁵ But Rozema's film, although on one level it evades the question of reparations altogether, as I argue above, also suggests a possible way out of Brown's double bind. The ironic invocation of "freedom" in the flight of the camera in the closing sequence of the film and the playful self-reflexivity of Fanny's "it could all have turned out differently, I suppose" at first suggest the constraints of any adaptation, compelled to retain some "fidelity" to its "original." However, I suggest that we might also take this statement at face value. It, history, *could* all have turned out differently. The film opens itself up to a certain freedom in its reference here to the arbitrariness both of the events of history, and of the way in which they are recorded and passed down. The possibility emerges of reparations that do not simply fix or freeze the subject: the momentary freezing of the subjects in the closing tableaux of Rozema's *Mansfield Park*, before they shake themselves and continue with their lives, represents therefore a moment of possibility rather than determinism.

Wendy Brown suggests the possibility of a model of subject formation that recognizes contingency in the form of desire, in the form of the "I want" rather than the "I am," a form of subjectivity that is neither the "disinterested subject" of modern civil society nor the frozen victim of reparations:

What if “wanting to be” or “wanting to have” were taken up as modes of political speech that could destabilize the formulation of identity as fixed position, as entrenchment by history, and as having necessary moral entailments, even as they affirm “position” and “history” as that which makes the speaking subject intelligible and locatable[?] . . . The subject understood as an effect of an (ongoing) genealogy of desire, including the social processes constitutive of, fulfilling, or frustrating desire, is in this way revealed as neither sovereign nor conclusive, even as it is affirmed as an “I.”⁴⁶

Perhaps Brown’s formulation might be productively applied to the debate over reparations. The complications of historical production, the modernist or postmodernist embrace of historical contingency, the recognition of the multiple sites of historical reconstruction, academic and mass market, film and novel – all these are implied and embraced in Brown’s equation. And yet the “simple” ethical narrative is not thereby obliterated – it still exerts its power, just as it does when we lament the “unfaithfulness” of a film adaptation, or the “simplistic” understanding of history. We can still say, with Fanny/Jane Austen of Joan of Arc: “They should not have burnt her[,] but they did”;⁴⁷ we can still say, of slavery, it is a debt as yet unpaid. Randall Robinson, in his book *The Debt*, compares the lack of attention paid to the history of slavery and the slave trade to the millions of dollars spent on historical costume dramas on film.⁴⁸ While clearly *Mansfield Park* qualifies as another diversionary “costume drama,” it also suggests the possibility that film historiography is not always part of the problem, but can disrupt conventional historiographical wisdom and suggest new directions in the future for thinking about the past.

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Notes

- 1 *Mansfield Park*, dir. and scr. Patricia Rozema (Miramax Films/HAL Films/BBC Films/Arts Council of England, 1999).
- 2 “Austen Rolling in her Grave!,” June 28, 2001, and dharting, “Mansfield Park Meets Alice in Wonderland,” June 28, 2001 (amazon.com customer reviews: *Mansfield Park*, accessed July 22, 2001).
- 3 hannah12, “Janie’s Darkest Tale?,” June 3, 2000 (amazon.com customer reviews: *Mansfield Park*, accessed July 22, 2001).

- 4 Claudia L. Johnson, "Run Mad, but Do Not Faint," *Times Literary Supplement* (December 31, 1999), 16–17, quotation on p. 16. See also Johnson, "Introduction," in Patricia Rozema, *Mansfield Park: Final Shooting Script* (New York: Talk Miramax, 2000), pp. 1–10, quotation on p. 4.
- 5 "This production had nothing in common with the book and must have Jane Austen spinning in her grave." Pat Martinson, "Pure Garbage!," December 17, 2000 (amazon.com customer reviews: *Mansfield Park*, accessed July 22, 2001).
- 6 See, for example, Fraser Easton, "The Political Economy of *Mansfield Park*: Fanny Price and the Atlantic Working Class," *Textual Practice* 12: 3 (1998), 459–88; Moira Ferguson, "Mansfield Park: Plantocratic Paradigms," in Moira Ferguson, *Colonialism and Gender Relations from Mary Wollstonecraft to Jamaica Kincaid: East Caribbean Connections* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 65–89; You-me Park and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (eds), *The Postcolonial Jane Austen* (London: Routledge, 2000); Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), pp. 80–97; Brian Southam, "The Silence of the Bertrams: Slavery and the Chronology of *Mansfield Park*," *Times Literary Supplement* (February 17, 1995), 13–14; Maaja A. Stewart, *Domestic Realities and Imperial Fictions: Jane Austen's Novels in Eighteenth-century Contexts* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993); Ruth Vanita, "Mansfield Park in Miranda House," in Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (ed.), *The Lie of the Land: English Literary Studies in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 92–9. The Republic of Pemberley can be visited at www.pemberley.com. On "Janeites" more generally, see Claudia L. Johnson, "The Divine Miss Jane: Jane Austen, Janeites, and the Discipline of Novel Studies," in Deidre Lynch (ed.), *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Devotees* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 25–44.
- 7 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, pp. 94–5.
- 8 See, for example, Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher (eds), *Anti-slavery, Religion, and Reform: Essays in Memory of Roger Anstey* (London: Wm Dawson; Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1980). See also Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776–1848* (London: Verso, 1988). For a valuable collection of source material, see Peter J. Kitson and Debbie Lee, *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period*, 9 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999).
- 9 See, for example, Susanne Seymour, Stephen Daniels, and Charles Watkins, "Estate and Empire: Sir George Cornwall's Management of Moccas, Herefordshire and La Taste, Grenada, 1771–1819," *Journal of Historical Geography* 24: 3 (1998), 313–51.
- 10 John Wiltshire, *Recreating Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 135.
- 11 Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, 2 vols (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1808), vol. 1, p. 259.
- 12 Fanny asks her uncle, Sir Thomas Bertram, about the slave trade after his return from Antigua, but the conversation goes nowhere: "There was such a dead silence!," as Fanny recalls in a subsequent conversation with her cousin Edmund. Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (1814; New York: Norton, 1998), p. 136. Further references to the novel are to this edition, and will be given parenthetically in the body of the chapter.
- 13 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 96.

- 14 jenn818, "Jane Austen Disrespected!," April 23, 2001 (amazon.com customer reviews: *Mansfield Park*, accessed July 22, 2001).
- 15 Robert Stam, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation," in James Naremore (ed.), *Film Adaptation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), pp. 54–76, quotations on pp. 54, 55.
- 16 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), pp. 19–30. See also Robert A. Rosenstone (ed.), *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); and Vivian Sobchack (ed.), *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event* (New York: Routledge, 1996), especially Hayden White, "The Modernist Event," pp. 17–38.
- 17 Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, p. 22.
- 18 Alistair M. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971); Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).
- 19 Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740–1820* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 342–3. See also Jonathan Lamb, *Preserving the Self in the South Seas, 1680–1840* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), esp. ch. 1, "Political Theories of the Self," pp. 17–48.
- 20 David Lloyd, "Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?," *Interventions* 2: 2 (2000), 212–28, quotation on p. 222.
- 21 Christopher Kent, "Learning History with, and from, Jane Austen," in J. David Grey (ed.), *Jane Austen's Beginnings: The Juvenilia and Lady Susan* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), pp. 59–72, quotation on p. 59.
- 22 See also Easton, "The Political Economy of *Mansfield Park*," p. 473.
- 23 [James Stephen,] "Reasons for Establishing a Registry of Slaves in the British Colonies," *The Pamphleteer* 7 (1816), 33–85, quotation on p. 37. Stephen's pamphlet was originally published in 1814, and reprinted in this journal two years later. Further references will be given parenthetically in the body of the chapter. Moira Ferguson also makes a connection between Austen's novel and the simultaneous campaign to establish a registry of all slaves in the British West Indian colonies. See Ferguson, *Colonialism and Gender Relations*, p. 67.
- 24 Rozema, *Mansfield Park: Final Shooting Script*, p. 63.
- 25 *An Act More Effectually to Provide for the Support and to Extend Certain Regulations for the Protection of Slaves; to Promote and Encourage their Increase, and Generally to Meliorate their Condition* (St John's, Antigua: John Hardcastle, 1799).
- 26 James Ramsay, *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* (London: James Phillips, 1784), p. v.
- 27 Lloyd, "Colonial Trauma," p. 222.
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp. 219–20, 223–28.
- 29 Patricia Rozema, "Audio Commentary," on *Mansfield Park*, dir. and scr. Patricia Rozema, DVD version, 2000. The critique of the "great house" is not new, but it has gathered steam since the "heritage industry," in both Britain and North America, has placed the manor house at the center of a particular version of Britain's past. See, for example, Ronald Fraser, *In Search of a Past: The Rearing of an English Gentleman, 1933–1945* (New York: Atheneum,

- 1984); Williams, *The Country and the City*; Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985). See also Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (New York: Knopf, 1989).
- 30 Edmund's line is quoted from the DVD version of the film. The text of the published screenplay is somewhat different, tending to emphasize Fanny's abolitionist sympathies. While Edmund is troubled by the "inroads" the abolitionists are making in Antigua, Fanny wonders about the slaves who "must miss their families," as she sometimes does herself. Edmund replies, "Their misery seems to require more than a few weighty sighs, but . . . at the same time Mansfield Park is entirely dependent on the profits of that operation . . . It's not, it's not . . . clear." Rozema, *Mansfield Park: Final Shooting Script*, p. 33 (ellipses in original).
- 31 Ibid., p. 45.
- 32 Randall King, "New Austen Film No Plain Jane," November 29, 1999, JAM Movies Database (www.canoe.ca/JamMoviesArtistsR/rozema_patricia.html, accessed July 22, 2001).
- 33 *Sense and Sensibility*, dir. Ang Lee, scr. Emma Thompson (Columbia Pictures/Mirage, 1995). See also Emma Thompson, *The Sense and Sensibility Screenplay and Diaries: Bringing Jane Austen's Novel to Film* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1995). Servants, usually silent and almost always unnoticed by the first-time viewer, appear in almost every shot of *Sense and Sensibility*, sometimes providing a subversive counterpoint to the prettiness of Lee and Thompson's film. An intriguing comparison would be to the omnipresent Japanese "tourists" in *The Spanish Prisoner*, David Mamet, dir. and scr. (Jean Doumanian Productions/Magnolia Films/Sweetland Films, 1997).
- 34 As Claudia Johnson notes, "Austen's novels are indifferent to this kind of specificity," Johnson, "Run Mad," p. 16.
- 35 Rozema, *Mansfield Park: Final Shooting Script*, p. 24.
- 36 Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 71.
- 37 Rozema, *Mansfield Park: Final Shooting Script*, p. 141 (ellipses in original). The phrase, slightly modified as "it could all have turned out differently, I suppose," is repeated in the completed film (although not in the published screenplay) as the camera pans up above the final tableaux of characters to focus on the sunlight streaming (but setting) through the still unrepaired gaps in the west wing of Mansfield Park.
- 38 Rozema, *Mansfield Park: Final Shooting Script*, pp. 140, 144. Austen's narrator describes the change in Sir Thomas's opinion of Mrs Norris: "He had felt her as an hourly evil" (Austen, *Mansfield Park*, p. 319).
- 39 Rozema, *Mansfield Park: Final Shooting Script*, p. 139.
- 40 Willie E. Gary et al., "Making the Case for Racial Reparations," *Harper's* (November 2000), 37–51.
- 41 On this spate of historical apologies, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Abortive Rituals: Historical Apologies in the Global Era," *Interventions* 2: 2 (2000), 171–86.
- 42 Randall Robinson, *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* (New York: Penguin/Plume, 2000).
- 43 See, for example, Dennis Brutus and Ben Cashdan, "Reflections on Durban," *The Nation*, September 11, 2001 (www.thenation.com, accessed September 24, 2001); Serge Chalons et al., *De l'esclavage aux réparations* (Paris: Editions Karthala, 2000); Chris McGreal, "Give Them Hard Cash," *Guardian*, September 3, 2001 (www.guardian.co.uk, accessed September 6, 2001); Manning Marable, "An Idea Whose Time Has Come," *Newsweek*, August 27, 2001

- (www.msnbc.com/news, accessed August 26, 2001); Faiza Rady, "Playing It Cool," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, September 13–19, 2001 (www.ahram.org.eg/weekly, accessed September 24, 2001); Dudley Thompson, "Reparation Is a Demand for Justice," *Jamaica Gleaner*, October 9, 2001 (<http://jamaica-gleaner.com>, accessed October 12, 2001).
- 44 Quotations taken from *Durban 2001: United Against Racism*, the official newsletter of the World Conference Against Racism Secretariat, issue 6 (October 2001), p. 4 (www.unhchr.ch, accessed November 26, 2001).
- 45 Brown, *States of Injury*, p. 73, emphasis in original.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- 47 Rozema, *Mansfield Park: Final Shooting Script*, p. 29.
- 48 Robinson, *The Debt*, p. 54.