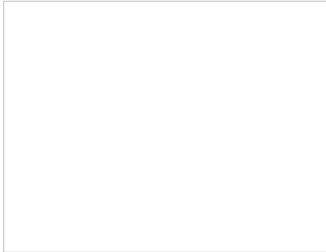


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Intimacy in *Mansfield Park*

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IN JANE AUSTEN'S *MANSFIELD PARK*, Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram both value seclusion, but of different kinds. Edmund values privacy, and Fanny values isolation. Edmund values the privacy of Mansfield Park and his family life, except for his romantic interest in Mary Crawford, shunning all intrusions from non-family. Fanny, shy by nature, values the isolation of the East room. She loves it because it is for most of the novel a place where the Bertram family leaves her alone. So while isolation indicates a single person alone, as Fanny likes to be alone in the East room, privacy indicates a small group of people, such as Edmund's family, into which the public is not admitted. There is a third kind of seclusion important to this novel: intimacy, the seclusion of two people. By the end of the novel, Edmund's privacy and Fanny's isolation have been dissolved by events beyond their control, and neither is comfortable with habitation in Mansfield Park or the East room. Both characters abandon privacy and isolation to join together in intimacy, and by doing so they are able to marry. Unlike privacy and isolation, which were present only in the house and the East room respectively, this new intimacy is boundary-less and is present wherever the two characters are. *Mansfield Park* describes isolation and privacy as forms of seclusion that are obstacles to intimacy and marriage. The novel presents intimacy as the ideal form of seclusion, boundary-less, and necessary for marriage.

Throughout most of the novel, Fanny isolates herself in response to any disruptive social interaction. In the first days at Mansfield Park, at the age of nine, Fanny retreats from the Bertram family in order to cry: “vain was even the sight of a gooseberry tart towards giving her comfort; she could scarcely swallow two mouthfuls before tears interrupted her, and sleep seeming to be her likeliest friend, she was taken to finish her sorrows in bed” (13). Days later, Fanny still remains isolated: “she was found one morning by her cousin Edmund, . . . sitting crying on the attic stairs” (15). While Fanny does desire isolation in response to social interaction, she needs a space more physically remote even than the attic stairs in order to feel secluded.

Fanny equates consolation with personal isolation before and beyond the *Lovers' Vows* incident. In her book *In a Fast Coach with a Pretty Woman*, Gloria Sybil Gross says that “hiding . . . becomes Fanny’s chief defense against an admittedly inhospitable world” (117). Austen establishes Fanny’s desperate need for isolation when members of the Bertram family and their friends entreat Fanny to take a part in the Bertram-family production of *Lovers' Vows*. Mrs. Norris commands her to take a part in order to please her cousins, “considering who and what she is” (147). Shocked, Fanny “went to bed full of it, her nerves still agitated by the shock of such an attack from her cousin Tom. . . . To be called into notice in such a manner . . .” (150). The next morning Fanny seeks solace in the East room, a place she can go “after any thing unpleasant below, and find immediate consolation” (151).

Fanny wants the East room to be a site of isolation where she can process emotions, both positive and negative, caused by flustering social interactions in the rest of the house. Full of plants, and books and her writing desk, “[t]he room was most dear to her”: “its greatest elegancies and ornaments were a faded footstool of Julia’s work, too ill done for the drawing-room, three transparencies, made in a rage for transparencies, for the three lower panes of one window, where Tintern Abbey held its station between a cave in Italy, and a moonlight lake in Cumberland” (152). Some critics disagree that the East room is a site of isolation, on the grounds that Fanny hosts Edmund and Mary in the room on separate and conjoined occasions. In “A Space for Fanny,” Melissa Edmundson argues that Fanny’s appropriation of the East room shows that “Fanny begins to be more comfortable in the house and makes strong attachments with members of the Bertram family.” The fact that Fanny prefers the East room to any other room, however, clearly indicates her social disinclination. Fanny experiences all emotions in isolation. Her uncle’s kindness “cost her some tears of gratitude when she was alone” (222). Later in the novel, when Fanny realizes that her unwanted suitor, Henry Crawford, is actually professing his love for her

right there in the sitting room, she is horrified and flees: “She had burst away from him. . . . She rushed out at an opposite door from the one her uncle was approaching, and was [later] walking up and down the east room in the utmost confusion” (302). Any social interaction in the East room is necessarily flustering to her, as Fanny “tremble[s]” at “the sound of [Sir Thomas’s] step in regular approach” (312).

Fanny quits her mode of isolation as a result Sir Thomas’s chastising her in the East room. The isolation of Fanny’s East room is damaged when Sir Thomas enters to discuss Henry Crawford’s proposal and forces Fanny to speak with him although he “perceive[ed] that she was embarrassed to a degree that made either speaking or looking up quite impossible” (313). Later “[h]e saw her lips formed into a *no*, though the sound was inarticulate, but her face was like scarlet” (316). In effect, the isolation and its safety are dissolved by this incident with Sir Thomas. For Fanny no longer finds isolation in the room: she is continually pressed into uncomfortable discussions throughout the house, on the subject of the marriage proposal, with Sir Thomas Bertram, Lady Bertram, Henry and Mary Crawford, and Edmund. Never again does she seek solace in the East room, despite “colour[ing]” (333), “shrinking again into herself, and blushing” (337), and living in “continual terror” (356).

Later in the novel, Fanny moves even further from isolation for the sake of intimacy between Edmund and herself, further weakening the importance of the East room. Fanny speaks with Edmund one wet Sunday evening after returning from her visit to her family (453), consoling him and informing him of the true, devious nature of Mary Crawford. After Edmund reveals his unpleasant final conversation with Mary Crawford, Fanny willingly reveals her own thoughts on Mary. This scene contrasts to Fanny’s unwillingness to interact in the house on previous occasions, when Fanny would desperately retire to the East room. To interact without thinking of the East room shows that Fanny has left her mode of isolation forever and is “now at liberty to speak openly” (459).

In the same way that Fanny establishes the East room as a site of isolation, Edmund establishes the entire Mansfield Park house as a site of privacy. Edmund feels passionately about the privacy of Mansfield Park, a privacy that should protect the family and those select few friends welcome within. It is suggested that either Tom Oliver or Charles Maddox, friends of the Bertrams from the local area, should be offered the unfilled part of Anhalt in *Lovers’ Vows* (148). Edmund finds the performance of *Lovers’ Vows* morally repugnant, but he joins the play in order that people from outside of Mansfield do not become involved.

Edmund says to Fanny: “This is the end of all the privacy and propriety which was talked about at first. I know no harm of Charles Maddox; but the excessive intimacy which must spring from his being admitted among us in this manner, is highly objectionable, the *more* than intimacy—the familiarity” (153-54). In his book *Between Self and World: The Novels of Jane Austen*, James Thompson overlooks the importance Edmund places on the desirability of a private circle of family and close friends: “in Austen, the extended family is not seen as a haven in a heartless world, but rather as something suffocating, a mediating stage between the larger public world and the private world of intimacy” (161). For Edmund, the importance of Mansfield as a place where the public may not enter frivolously is clear.

Towards the end of the novel, the stability of Edmund’s private world at Mansfield Park begins to come apart, necessitating abandonment, when a national newspaper publishes the details of Maria’s elopement, and he travels to London in search of his sister. The publication of such private details presents a stronger threat to Mansfield’s privacy than the admittance of Charles Maddox ever did. London destroys the privacy of Mansfield Park. The newspaper “announce[s] to the world, a matrimonial *fracas* in the family of Mr. R. of Wimpole Street; the beautiful Mrs. R. . . . having quitted her husband’s roof in company with the well known and captivating Mr. C.” (440). The act of publication destroys Mansfield’s privacy to the point where Edmund finds it uninhabitable. For the public has now been allowed into Mansfield Park via the newspaper, and Edmund must leave Mansfield Park in order to seek out Maria in the public world. Writing to Fanny, Edmund says, “There is no end of the evil let loose upon us” (443).

After Edmund abandons privacy, and Fanny isolation, both can join together in intimacy. Just as the East room is enclosed by Mansfield Park, Edmund’s new love encloses Fanny’s love. Edmund learns that he has “been so long the beloved of such a heart” (471) and responds by “being always with her, and always talking confidentially” (470). Edmund and Fanny no longer remain in their previous geographically-bound sites of privacy and isolation, Mansfield Park and the East room respectively. After marriage both leave the house of Mansfield Park that they may establish a new, global site of intimacy that is not tied to any one location.

Both lovers inhabit this new site of intimacy, though it is a non-physical location not found in any one room or house. Initially, the couple moves to Thornton Lacey, although the narrator notes that for Sir Thomas, “[a]fter settling [Fanny] at Thornton Lacey with every kind

attention to her comfort, the object of almost every day was to see her there, or to get her away from it” (472). The site of intimacy shifts closer to the Park when Dr. Grant dies and Edmund is able to take over the Mansfield living. Fanny and Edmund move into Mansfield parsonage, a location which becomes as “dear to [their] heart[s]” (473) as all previous locations, locations in which intimacy is now always present.

Emotional forces, such as the desires for isolation, privacy, and intimacy, interact at a level beyond the characters of Fanny, Edmund, and their family and friends. Isolation and privacy act against intimacy, and eventually give way to intimacy. Though simpler than the narrative of Edmund’s and Fanny’s making their way through various settings and obstacles, this larger narrative of emotional forces enhances the way we see their lives. As in all Austen novels, we see Austen’s assertion of intimacy through marriage as the most desirable way of living. In *Mansfield Park*, however, we see specifically the broad narrative of emotions interacting: the desire for privacy and the impulse to isolation act against intimacy. These emotions influence Fanny and Edmund; as long as the two characters are under their influence, they remain unmarried, bound to physical places, and to their separate selves.

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