

BOOK REVIEW

A Book of Difficult Beauty

Mansfield Park: An Annotated Edition

By Jane Austen, edited by Deidre Shauna Lynch.
The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press,
2016. ix + 532 pages.
120 color illustrations. Hardcover. \$35.00.

Review by Michael D. Lewis.

In July, I visited my grandmother. One day, while I was delighting in this book, she asked with concern, “Are you reading an atlas?” I quickly said “no” but realized that she had stumbled on a perfect metaphor. Just as an atlas guides us through a country and its various terrains, Deidre Shauna Lynch’s marvelous edition guides us through the features—biographical, political, stylistic—of *Mansfield Park*.

If the edition is a figurative atlas, it is sometimes a literal one, providing maps of Antigua and Portsmouth. It is sometimes a dictionary, making sure that we know Rushworth is called “heavy” because he is obtuse, not obese. It is sometimes a library, situating Austen in relationship to her contemporaries, such as Edgeworth, Radcliffe, and Burney. The library also includes obscure books: the 1819 *London Medical Dictionary* defines Tom Bertram’s “hectic symptoms.” It is often an art museum devoted to multiple genres. The portrait gallery includes Walter Scott, whom Fanny quotes in Sotherton’s chapel, and John Murray, who published the second edition of *Mansfield Park*. It also includes pictures of estates that might be models for Mansfield Park, photos of pen knives at Chawton and topaz crosses that Charles Austen gifted his sisters, and paintings of naval battles in which Austen’s brothers fought. These features create a wonderful reading experience, defining, and visualizing the literary, political, intellectual, material, and artistic world that shaped Austen and her novel. I have another apt metaphor: an encyclopedia.

Lynch’s elegant introduction makes significant points about the novel’s place in Austen’s oeuvre, its modification of popular narratives, and its vexing

heroine. The novel investigates the relationship between physical space and the psyche. Earlier novelists celebrated social mobility of heroines who remained virtuous and unproblematically gained access to bigger fortunes, houses, and senses of self. But Austen examines how Fanny’s mobility involves psychological costs, occasional difficulty being good, and fewer rewards than those received by, say, Elizabeth Bennet. In addition to questioning conventional ideas about morality and mobility, Austen experiments with the novel form by depicting a broad, indeed global, world, inviting her reader to meditate on colonized Antigua, modernized Portsmouth, and an expanding Evangelicalism. Austen trenchantly probes issues of class, power, and charity, without offering simple or satisfying conclusions. Her heroine’s development is no more satisfying, a situation which Lynch connects to the novel’s style. After granting access to multiple minds through free indirect discourse, Austen shifts exclusively to Fanny’s point of view at Portsmouth. There, Fanny both gains an independent perspective (longing for Mansfield) and continues to suffer (longing for Edmund), thwarting the reader’s desire for uncomplicated development and self-determination. In refusing to imagine unobstructed development, Austen creates a narrative strategy that James and Woolf inherit.

I hope this brief summary demonstrates Lynch’s keen attention to narrative form and its connections to literary and political history. *Mansfield Park* often frustrates its readers, but, in Lynch’s view, the novel intends to frustrate and is pivotal to our understanding of both Austen and the history of the novel. Lynch calls it a “book of difficult beauty.” I love this phrase and the idea that the novel’s value and experimentation are precisely how it disturbs its readers’ conceptions of power, home, morality, development. Fans of the novel will feel vindicated by this remarkable introduction. Detractors, I hope, will reconsider their views.

Lynch’s notes and excellently reproduced images work together to elucidate the

novel’s major concerns. After Sir Thomas returns from Antigua, we get

one of the most unsatisfyingly oblique references to slavery: Fanny recounts asking her uncle “about the slave-trade.” Although her question encountered “a dead silence,” Lynch fills that silence with multiple voices. A glorious note summarizes scholarly discussion about whether Fanny is an abolitionist and whether the Bertrams’ silence reveals guilt or moral confidence; it explains that Fanny would have encountered abolitionist ideas in her favorite poetry by William Cowper, who celebrated the abolition of slavery within England; it cites Mrs. Elton’s reference to “a friend to the abolition” in *Emma*. The preceding page also includes a portrait of Thomas Clarkson, an abolitionist whom Austen read and admired. This pairing weaves together critical debate, political and legal history, literary history, Austen’s life, and her novels. Lynch’s notes are extraordinarily succinct and informative, elucidating the novel’s major concerns.

Lynch’s edition contains so many riches that it seems greedy to want more. But I will wish for just a bit. Lynch calls *Mansfield Park* a turning point but contrasts this novel with both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*. If *Mansfield Park* turns away from *Pride and Prejudice*, what, exactly, is its relationship to the subsequent novel?

Every Janeite should own this splendid edition. Whether a veteran or first-time, devoted or resistant, reader of the novel, each of us has something to learn from and enjoy in Lynch’s edition. It is a wonderful conclusion to Harvard’s series of Austen’s novels.

Michael D. Lewis is an assistant professor of English at Washington and Jefferson College. He teaches and writes on nineteenth-century British literature.

