

How to Make Students Like Fanny Price

Approaches to Teaching Austen's *Mansfield Park*

Coedited by Marcia McClintock Folsom and John Wiltshire.

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5 B/W illustrations. Cloth. \$40. Paperback. \$24.

Review by Linda Troost.

This coedited volume in the MLA's Approaches to Teaching series joins earlier ones edited by Folsom on *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*. Like its predecessors, it is a solid book that will be useful to the instructor teaching the novel for the first time as well as to the seasoned full professor. *Mansfield Park* is a hard novel to teach. Students find it rough going because it is long, has relatively little dialogue, and has a lot of description. The characters do not fit into categories and take time to warm to (some students never warm to Fanny and Edmund). Distasteful things happen (children are abandoned, first cousins marry). There is a lot of strange social-class stuff going on. The film and television adaptations are odd.

This book will help with some of those issues. Like all the volumes in the series, it starts with an overview of classroom editions, digital resources, and adaptations. It also provides a potted history of the novel's critical reception, with particular attention to the past fifty years. A substantial introductory essay by the editors offers historical information on the navy, religion, and the slave trade as well as critical comments on subjects that students find challenging: introspection, Fanny Price, first-cousin marriage, and

Austen's coy final chapter. I found

Hat closeup from the DAR costume exhibit. Photo Courtesy of Gaye Stevick Foutch.



the explanation of evangelicalism, moral value, and the individual conscience especially illuminating.

The bulk of the volume is devoted to nineteen concise essays on four topics: "Classroom Strategies and Approaches," "Thinking about Fanny and Families," "Teaching About *Mansfield Park* in Literary History and Contexts," and "Teaching *Mansfield Park* in the Broader Postcolonial Context." The editors have ensured that each is highly readable. The essays are models of how to write as well as how to teach.

In the first section, I was taken with Laura Carroll's exercises that ask students to study illustrations to the novel to trace reception history and her suggestion to have students use different classroom editions so that illustrated covers, punctuation, explanatory notes, and textual variants, can be compared. For students of the digital age, studying textual matters and the packaging of Austen's novel is eye-opening.

Among the essays in Part Two are several with ways to get a handle on characters and generate empathy for Fanny and Edmund. Kay Souter writes about siblings, describing the three sets (Bertram, Price, Crawford) as "competing for assets." Showcasing dysfunctional families in "Darwinian struggle" is sure to fascinate students. Peter W. Graham takes on the Crawfords and the wishes of readers that the novel had ended differently.

Austen assumes contextual knowledge that modern students lack, so several essays address how to lessen that problem. Susan Allen Ford has students act or read aloud specific sections from *Henry VIII*, *The Task*, and Macartney's *Journal of the Embassy to China* so they can discover "Austen's elaboration of character through connections to the readers' knowledge of other texts." Penny Gay's students explore the "psychological situation" among the principal characters by acting out scenes from *Lovers' Vows*. Inger Brodey tackles landscapes, gardening, and moral

education with "visual tools" such as maps and Repton's *Red Book* drawings.

The final section comes with an agenda. Folsom and Wiltshire

are determined to stamp out simplistic uses of postcolonial theory and to put the debate on slavery and abolition into perspective. The included essays give instructors some nuanced approaches to pursue as alternatives to heavy-handed discussions of the Other. Lynn Voskuil has students explore "Said's notion of social space" by studying estate maps available in public archives (links provided) and thinking about Sir Thomas's and Henry Crawford's relationship to their social spaces and their tenants. Lisa Kasmer focuses on how to teach Austen's ambiguity about her "nationalist narrative." Instructors will appreciate her thumbnail synopsis of the theoretical debates by Said, Lew, and others on *Mansfield Park*. The volume concludes with Paula Loscocco's contextualizing of the novel within reading practices available in Austen's time.

Folsom and Wiltshire have assembled an international cast—United States, Canada, Australia—and produced an exemplary volume that has much to offer to teachers of Austen's novels as well as of other literary works. Several of these exercises can be adapted for use with other novels from the long eighteenth century.

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