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# Degeneration and a “Queer” Lady:

## The Relationships of the Siblings in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*

Natsue Ambo

### 1. Introduction

In the views of imperialism and postcolonialism about *Mansfield Park* written by Jane Austen, Ania Loomba explains how Austen implies the unique “rhythm of postcolonialism” in the novel, which seems to be esoteric and nonpolitical work (Loomba 111). Moreover, Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, claims that *Mansfield Park* should be kept by the financial supports from colonized countries even if the Park is an isolated property, where it is segregated from the capital of the British Empire between 1837-1957. It means that the estate owned by Sir Bertram in the Antigua of Carib is supposed to be connected to the plantations for sugars maintained by the benefits from the slave labors (Said 89).

Exploring the fragments of the rhythm of postcolonialism in *Mansfield Park*, the play, *Das Kind der Liebe* (1791) by Elizabeth Inchbald, remarkably demonstrates the fragments of postcolonialism generated by the wealth which British people could profit from the colonized countries. Considering the implications of the British imperialism, what the play needs are not only the casting but also the leisure time to practice, labor forces and materials for the stage set. This is because the wasting of time for people in *Mansfield Park* consists of the indirect benefits from the British Empire and a stable wealthy lifestyle there. However, focusing on the relationship between the siblings in *Mansfield Park*, I question that there is a unique relation between the novel and the British Empire, which means that this novel should be more complicated and analyzed on the degeneration among the people in *Mansfield Park*. To think of the people’s wealth and the British Empire as analogous is to do each a disservice. The two may overlap in the novel, but they do have more complicated relations in terms of the degeneration.

In *Mansfield Park*, Austen sets herself a specific goal, using the intimate relationship of the siblings to represent what the symbol of wealth in the British Empire is during the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Through the effects of the play’s casting and the strong contrast apparent between the relationships of Henry and Mary Crawford, Fanny and William Price or Edmund Bertram, this essay will demonstrate these contrasting dynamics and the sibling’s intimacy. And, it will reveal the unhappy marriage of Henry and Mary’s foster parents, the degenerate life styles of the middle class included

the actions of the Crawford sibling, and the benefits provided to the sibling through British imperialism that all have a considerable impact on their sibling relationship and their immoral behaviors.

## **2. A shape of the journey for West Indies**

When considering the intimacy of the siblings generated by the effects of the imperialism, it is important to highlight the relationships between Fanny and William or Henry. To begin, William, Fanny's older brother, could become a naval midshipman because Henry helps William to achieve his career in order to impress Fanny favorably. Although the process of obtaining the position in the Royal Navy such as William's promotion implies the discriminatory nature of the British class, the essential point is that William attempts to keep in touch with his younger sister, Fanny, and visits her from Portsmouth to Mansfield Park.

William is a symbol of British imperialism because he has been sailing from the Mediterranean Sea to West Indies for seven years, only to come back to the Mediterranean Sea again (Austen 185). Considering Sr. Thomas Bertram's business, William and Sr. Bertram have left for the close destination, which means that there is an implication of the route to the unknown lands. Although William and Sr. Bertram have met each other for the first time in Mansfield Park, they can enjoy sharing their experiences on the outside of the Park. In other words, William and Sr. Bertram have the same role and their voyage are overlapped in the novel. Thus, it is suggested that there is a certain shape of a voyage or a route as a metaphor of the British imperialism.

Franco Moretti discusses the European conquest and a "shape" of the journey to Africa. Although Franco explains the different destination, Africa, from the places referred in *Mansfield Park*, he declares "the single, one-dimensional line that has been the standard sign of African explorations in map after map" (Moretti 58).<sup>1</sup> Also, in *Mansfield Park*, Williams's voyage such as Sr. Bertram repeatedly shows "the standard sign" of unknown lands to the people in the novel. Mansfield Park apparently becomes an isolated property; however, the park implies a fragment of the British Empire because of William's arrival and his story of the voyage as a member of Royal Navy.

## **3. The intimate relationship of Prices and a 'genuine feeling'**

When Williams discusses his experience to the people in Mansfield Park, his sister Fanny and Henry seem to be impressed. Williams from the rim settlement tells them the story about wars and

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<sup>1</sup> "The starting point is the same: a port, a garrison, a trading station along the coast: one of those 'rim settlements', as the geography of colonialism calls them, from which European conquest began. The endpoint is also the same: an isolated site in the interior of Africa, disconnected from every other route, on the border of the unknown, or of uninhabitable lands. And finally, the 'shape' of the journey is the same: the single, one-dimensional line that has been the standard sign of African explorations in map after map" (Moretti 58).

his experience; “He [William] had been in the Mediterranean—in the West Indies—in the Mediterranean again—had been often taken on shore by the favour of his Captain, [...] had known every variety of danger, which sea and war together could offer” (Austen 184-85). Fanny has already known about William’s experience because she used to get letters from William. However, she is interested in his story which demonstrates William’s masculinity as a member of the Royal Navy, such as when Williams talks about the dangers of the outside of Mansfield Park as the fragment of colonialism by the British Empire appears.

Moreover, in the case of Henry, he is also impressed by William’s story and has changed his attitude to Fanny. When Henry sees the sibling’s strong relationship between Fanny and William, there are free indirect speeches by Henry; “She [Fanny] had feeling, genuine feeling. It would be something to be loved by such a girl, to excite the first ardours of her young unsophisticated mind!” (Austen 184). Fanny’s “genuine feeling” (Austen 185) towards Henry seems to be pure similar to what young girls have. However, Fanny has admiration for William’s experience in the Royal Navy, which represents the power of the British Empire. Although the relationship between Fanny and William is said to be a pure one compared with the Crawford’s relation, Fanny’s admiration for William is indirectly based on colonialism by the British Empire.

In addition, in the scene of William’s experience, Henry has almost fallen in love with Fanny because of Fanny’s “genuine feeling”. As mentioned above, Fanny’s “genuine feeling” is generated from William’s experience in the Royal Navy, which is a symbol of the British Empire in the novel. Also, Henry’s feelings about William’s experience and toward Fanny also seem to be pure, however, he has been given “a different feeling” which is caused by “[t]he glory of heroism, of usefulness, of exertion, of endurance, made his own habits of selfish indulgence appear in shameful contrast” (Austen 185). In this context, “[t]he glory of heroism” symbolizes William’s masculinity to which Fanny is attracted, and also “Henry’s own habits of selfish indulgence” are juxtaposed to his feelings. In other words, from the story about William’s voyage, it is suggested that Fanny’s admiration to William, which is based on colonialism, Henry’s specific feelings for Fanny, and his “habits of selfish indulgence” are revealed.

#### **4. Fanny as a ‘queer’ and a sexual touching in *Das Kind der Liebe***

Focusing on descriptions about Henry’s habits of selfish indulgence in detail, the habits seem to be generated from the atmosphere of British imperialism and regency (1811-20). In addition, the degeneration related to the unhappy marriage and the distorted portrayal of family dynamics provides the readers a candid snapshot of 19<sup>th</sup> century London. In the time setting of *Mansfield Park*, there is an atmosphere of British imperialism and regency, and although London is one of the most prosperous cities, moral corruption runs rampant.

For example, it seems that there are clear distinctions<sup>2</sup> among classes of society, gender roles and stereotypes of a marriage and love which should include a moral relationship among British people. When Fanny keeps rejecting the approach from Henry, she is regarded as a queer girl because, in that time, she should be forced to become a heterosexual girl. Edward Kozaczka claims that “frustrated Henry Crawford uses the term to question Fanny Price’s sexual inclinations”: “‘What is her character?—Is she solemn?—Is she queer?—Is she prudish?’” (Austen 268). This is because “Henry Crawford is specifically questioning Fanny’s lack of sexual interest in him, and because the term “prudish” was itself a reference to sexual proclivities rather than just an attitude, it seems fair at least to speculate that Austen may have been using the term “queer” to connote non-normative sexual behavior.” This means that the time setting of the novel illustrates a standard that a girl or lady should be moral and adhere to a ruled marriage; therefore, Fanny is said to be “queer.”

In fact, in the practice of *Das Kind der Liebe*, Fanny’s gender role has changed: when Mary asks Fanny to practice together, Fanny plays a man who should be an object of the romantic interest instead of Edmund. On the other hand, Edmund looks for Fanny and tries to ask her to play a role instead of Mary (Austen 133). For Fanny, who has specific feelings towards Edmund, although it is difficult to be in a neutral position, she plays her role as an intermediary who becomes an understudy in the play. It means, as a matter of fact, Fanny is said to be a “queer”, however, she unintentionally supports a marriage between Mary and Edmund. Indeed, although Henry may have a stereotype about the ideal wife who can be obedient for him, from focusing on Henry’s “habits of selfish indulgence”, it is implied that he is not an appropriate man for women during this time.

According to Martha Bailey, “[p]re-marital sex was a risky activity for women in Regency England.”<sup>3</sup> It is not clear that Henry and Maria Bertram, who has already engaged Mr. Rushworth, have a sexual relationship such as an affair. However, Maria expects Henry’s proposal and has a close relationship. In brief, Henry’s relation with Maria demonstrates the degeneration and the contrasting types of marriages; a moral one and an immoral one at the time of the novel. When considering the scene of Henry and Maria, there is a distant sexual description: “Frederick [Henry] was listening with looks of devotion to Agatha’s [Maria’s] narrative, and pressing her hand to his heart, [...], he still kept his station and retained her sister’s hand” (Austen 137). The scene of touching by Henry projects that Austen uses *Das Kind der Liebe* as a meta fiction in order to carefully imply the ambiguous sexual contact.

According to Yumiko Hirono, Fanny observes the scene of the touching of Henry and Maria and notices that the play is not just the play; the performance of Henry and Maria is real and implies

<sup>2</sup> Edward Kozaczka (2009) insists that “Although it is true that the “homosexual” and the “heterosexual” did not exist as identity categories in Austen’s time, sexual practices were understood and judged as normative and non-normative—natural and unnatural, procreative and indulgent—and these categories of sexual practice existed in anxious tension with each other.”

<sup>3</sup> “The Marriage Law of Jane Austen’s World.” *Journal of the Jane Austen Journal On-Line: Persuasions*. vol. 36, no.1. 2015. Web. Mar 9th. 2019, [www.jasna.org/publications/persuasions-online/vol36no1/bailey/](http://www.jasna.org/publications/persuasions-online/vol36no1/bailey/)

their affairs. Fanny feels that there is a ‘scandal’ in Mansfield Park and seems to enjoy observing it. Therefore, Fanny’s mentality is not innocent (Hirono 40). Thus, by focusing on the marginal of the stages, it is clear that Fanny is not an innocent observer and her mentality is too complicated compared to the pure or ideal lady of Austen’s works in that time of the England.

### **5. The unhappy marriage as a culture of the depravation**

Analyzing the major distinctions between the different characters of *Mansfield Park*, it seems apparent that the main lesson for the readers is morality and class hierarchies. The wealthy like Henry has an affair with Maria during his leisure time or for pleasure. On the other hand, Fanny and Edmund could marry because they have moral senses. However, Raymond Williams advocates that the readers should remain skeptical when perceiving *Mansfield Park* as a lesson for conservative morality; although Austen criticizes the society in British Empire, she does not do so in terms of class society (Williams 156). In other words, Austen tries not to emphasize the dichotomic structures such as differences between wealth or poor people and moral or immoral people. Instead, she highlights that the hidden victims of 19<sup>th</sup> century London are those that are invaded in their morality by self-interest and deceit. After all, as the position of Fanny as a woman, Henry and Mary stand in a complicated position in the British society.

In the case of Mary and Henry, they are influenced on moral corruption by wealth, social status and the fashion trend of London. Indeed, Mary does not want Edmund to be a modest minister because she highly prioritizes social prestige and appearance. Rather than settling for a stable, mundane life, Mary seeks one that is filled with wealth and public recognition. On the other hand, Henry trifles with Maria and Julia Bertram’s feelings, which incites Fanny’s ill feelings towards him as she begins perceiving Henry as a disruption to peaceful family dynamics.

Nevertheless, the immoral characteristics of Henry and Mary find their roots in the death of their biological parents early on in their life. Raised by their new guardians, their uncle [the Admiral] favors only Henry, whereas their aunt takes care of Mary as the uncle acts adulterously (Austen 32). Therefore, the one-sided alienation of their adoptive parents and the uncle’s remarriage weakens Henry and Mary’s conviction for a love-based marriage. The uncle displays a lack of affection for his ex-wife and Mary and, in turn, fosters negative feelings for the uncle because his ex-wife passed away without having the chance to experience a happy marriage. Considering this, Mary and Henry possess a complex family background from their aunt and uncle’s unhappy marriage.

### **6. Mobility of practical materials for the siblings**

The unhappy marriage of the new guardians has strong effects on Henry and Mary’s values of marriage. Henry has an ideal type of a wife like Fanny, and Mary also seeks for a financially stable marriage. Moreover, if the wealth of Henry and Mary is generated from the global business by the

British Empire, the siblings unintentionally owe immense benefits to the British Empire and become more practical persons who may end up being exploited from their moral lifestyle and mentality.

Relatedly, Henry orchestrates a plan to marry Fanny in cooperation with Mary, where she gives Fanny “a gold prettily worked” (Austen 202) chains given by Henry while complimenting him on his brotherly affection to his younger sister. Henry gives Fanny the chains in order to attract Fanny’s mind with his wealth and aid Mary, suggesting that Henry and Mary use each other to advance their own agendas as common in the London middle class during this time. Moreover, Henry and Mary maintain a complicit relationship by taking advantage of Fanny’s pure morality to manipulate her perceptions of them. Ultimately, however, Mary remains unmarried and Henry’s proposal to Fanny is rejected because of his lack of moral values. It is suggested that the concept of a morally pure marriage has become an estranged concept for Mary and Henry, causing them to be the true victims of class society in London. From this consideration, it follows that Jane Austen urges the importance of morality by portraying these siblings as victims in 19<sup>th</sup> century England.

Furthermore, to be more specific, the reason that Mary helps Henry in his conquest for Fanny is not for his interest alone. This is because Mary wishes to maintain a relationship with the Bertram family to meet Edmund. In other words, Mary also uses Henry as a tool to marry Edmund and to develop a practical relationship with him. This relationship is in deep contrast to Fanny’s relationships with either William or Edmund. Initially, Mary lacks the ability to relate to the lower class, such as when she neglects farmers’ hardship when she tries to bring her harp by a cart (Austen 46). In the case of Fanny and Edmund, they are incapable of understanding Mary’s exclusive perspective and immoral relationships, as they believe that Henry and Maria should not be forgiven for their elopement by their relatives (Austen 360). Therefore, as a result, Mary could not marry Edmund, and Henry’s proposal to Fanny is rejected because of a lack of value of morality.

In the case of Fanny and William, their letters become a symbol of their strong relationship. On the other hand, the trigger of the plan of Henry and Mary is the chains as a practical material which implies their wealth. It may be possible that there is a difference between Crawford’s and Prices’ morality, so it is not sure that Fanny is a pure person<sup>4</sup>. Fanny is just an observer as a third person when the relationship of Mary and Edmund get worse and becomes the existence that emphasizes the immorality and the wealth of Henry and Mary. After all, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Mary and Henry are alienated from morally pure marriage, again suggesting that they are the true victims of class society in London. In other words, in *Mansfield Park*, it is recognized that there is a purity of Fanny which is opposite to the immorality of Henry and Mary, although there are complicated relations among the morality, immorality and the wealth rather than a simple

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<sup>4</sup> Yumiko Hirono analyzes the real image of Fanny. In fact, Hirono claims that Fanny has a strong opinion when Henry proposes to her, and rejects him. Although Fanny apparently seems to be a passive person about her marriage, she does not care about other character’s opinion even Sr. Bertram’s one and makes decision by herself. (Hirono 6).

dichotomy.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, in *Mansfield Park*, it seems that Austen sets herself a specific aim through the intimate relationship of the siblings to describe what the symbols of wealth and fragments of in the British Empire and colonialism are in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Through the effects of the play’s casting and the strong contrast apparent between the relationships of Henry and Mary, as well as Fanny and William, there are contrasting and complicated dynamics of the sibling’s intimacy. Considering the role of Fanny in the novel, she is represented as not only a pure girl but also a “queer” girl. It means that, in *Mansfield Park*, it is suggested that there are complicated relations about the moral or immoral marriages or gender roles, which is revealed by the role of Fanny and Henry’s stereotype.

Moreover, it is revealed that the unhappy marriage of Henry and Mary’s foster parents, the degenerate life styles of the middle class included the actions of the Crawford sibling, and benefits provided to the sibling through British imperialism all have a considerable impact on their sibling relationship and their immoral behaviors. Henry and Mary build a practical relationship to realize their ideal marriage for themselves. They are willing to help each other but do so only for their own self-interest. Ultimately, their lack of conviction in a moral marriage is due to the impact their surroundings have on them, such as the unhappy marriage of their relatives and the degenerate customs of the middle class in 19<sup>th</sup> century London. As a result, Henry and Mary are alienated from a happy marriage as exemplified by Edmund and Fanny. From this, Austen demonstrates the importance of pure morality and shines a light on the prevalence of hidden victims such as Henry and Mary in 19<sup>th</sup> century England.

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