

## **“IMPROVED COUNTENANCE”: CAPITALIST RELATIONS IN *MANSFIELD PARK***

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“He, who before was the money-owner, now strides in front as capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his labourer. The one with an air of importance, smirking, intent on business; the other, timid and holding back, like one who is bringing his own hide to market and has nothing to expect but—a hiding.”

—Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume One*

Jane Austen’s 1814 novel *Mansfield Park* is often described by scholars and readers alike as her most complex and least-liked work (Sutherland vii). Departing from the charismatic protagonists which have come to define Austen’s work, *Mansfield Park* concerns itself with Fanny Price, a poor and timid child. Fanny is removed from her home and sent to Mansfield Park, the country estate of her wealthy uncle, Sir Thomas Bertram, and the novel reveals the brutal consequences of being a member of the working class amongst the elites of rural England. While the language to explain Fanny’s displacement is cloaked in Austen’s distinct propriety, it remains clear that Fanny is purchased by the Bertrams, stolen from her family, and made to serve the extravagant halls of Mansfield Park.

The novel begins with an examination of the marriages and lifestyles of the three Ward sisters—Mrs., Mrs., Lady—with an emphasis on their specific economic situations. Fanny’s mother is ostracized from Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris because of her “untoward” marriage with a marine (Austen 5). The man’s last name is Price, a not-so-subtle gesture toward their proximity to financial precariousness and their working-class status (Austen 5). Mrs. Norris suggests that she and Lady Bertram should take Fanny after receiving a letter from their sister detailing her family’s woes: “[Mrs. Norris] seemed to be wanting to do more: and at length she could not but own it to be her wish that poor Mrs. Price should be relieved from the charge and expense of one child entirely out of her great number” (Austen 7). This is the first instance where Fanny’s removal from Portsmouth is mentioned, revealing that the entire situation is rooted in Mrs. Norris’s “wish” to alleviate the Price’s “expense” of a child. The word “wish” illustrates the power Mrs. Norris and Lady Bertram wield over their sister: a whim to rid themselves of familial guilt leads to a child being taken from her family. Fanny’s departure was not a mutual decision between family members but a form of economic coercion on the part of the Bertrams. Also, notably, at this idea’s genesis, there is no distinguishing between the Price children—Mrs. Norris does not have a particular fondness for Fanny and does not wish to spend time with her. Rather, this quote discloses how Mrs. Norris understands the Price children as a unit of “expenses,” indistinguishable from each other.

As Kathryn Sutherland notes in the introduction to *Mansfield Park*, Austen's writing is remarkably economically and materially focused, never shying away from the explicit details of a character's class position and how this becomes directly expressed in their countenance and status (Sutherland x). However, what is alluded to but never addressed are questions of what *exact* economic system is at play. While Karl Marx's *Capital* was published over 50 years after *Mansfield Park*, his analysis of capitalism remains immensely useful, not only for grasping the context of *Mansfield Park* but for comprehending what issues Austen is grappling with and working through in her writing.

This essay seeks to analyze the supposedly "non-economic" domestic sphere of *Mansfield Park* as entangled and conditioned by capitalist relations. In *Mansfield Park*, these relations are put into relief by their absence. Throughout the novel, Austen displays no interest in the struggles of the working class, despite Fanny's proletarian background. Rather, Austen perpetuates the ultimate capitalist myth through a revisionist model of exception: the story of a poor girl plucked by the elites because she was remarkably productive and virtuous. Through Austen's omissions, we are able to see the implications of capitalism outside the immediate circuit of commodity production and how this circuit reproduces itself in the domestic sphere. While in 1814 Austen did not possess Marx's language to interpret capitalism, she was nonetheless aware of how the new mode of production was transforming agrarian and aristocratic life and seemed to respond with a severe moralistic outlook on the shifting value system upending her world. Unearthing the hostile class relations of *Mansfield Park* reveals an underground nexus wherein those deemed "non-elite" are either ignored completely or reduced to mere objects.

Despite never having known Fanny, the Bertrams brace themselves for a caricature of a working-class girl, a child brimming with infectious impropriety. Making arrangements for Fanny's arrival, Sir Thomas warns his family that, due to Fanny's impoverished upbringing, she may be an indecent fit for their family, and explicitly states that her time in Mansfield Park is completely conditional upon her temperament and manners. To Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris, Sir Thomas says that they must "prepare [themselves] for gross ignorance, some meanness of opinions, and very distressing vulgarity of manner" (Austen 11). The Bertrams' prejudices do not simply reveal a certain insensitivity, but rather disclose how the stark division of labor between the ruling class and the working class produces these malicious generalizations. By accusing Fanny of "ignorance" and "vulgarity," the Bertrams consign Fanny to prejudiced generalizations of the working class, a people with "one uniform social status," all of whom are only valued by the capitalists for their labor-power, a commodity in itself, and the capacity for one to work, "which exists only in [the working class's] living body" (Marx 321). Capitalism has a long history of linking commodification to the working poor's corporeality—the working class's "economic bondage" is negotiated and "concealed" through this process of selling and

replenishing their labor power, analogous to the commodity circulation chain (Bhattacharya 8). Periodically, the worker must sell their labor-power and is thereby shackled to the “oscillations in the market-price of his labour,” exactly as a commodity is dependent upon its exchange value (Bhattacharya 8). It is through this physical process of selling one’s labor power, an undertaking the ruling class is distinctly exempt from, that the division of labor is most noticeable and where prejudiced assumptions of vulgarity and ignorance come into play.

Not only are the Bertrams politically and materially powerful, their class position becomes naturalized through ideology. Raymond Williams’s 1976 book *Keywords* provides a useful catalog of vocabulary and its Marxist orientations. While there is much debate over the word *ideology*, this essay will understand ideology as “the system of ideas appropriate to [a certain] class,” one of many definitions proposed by Williams (Williams 157). *Mansfield Park*, then, perpetuates a decisively conservative ideology in favor of the ruling class. As Marx tells us in *The German Ideology*, the “thinkers” of the ruling class were “its active conceptive ideologists, who make the perfecting of the illusion of the class about itself their chief source of livelihood”—Austen may very well be understood as one of these thinkers (Marx 173). Throughout the course of the novel, Fanny begins to accept, and then advocate for, the ruling class’s ideological hegemony.

Prior to Fanny’s arrival in Mansfield Park, her life was devoted to completing domestic tasks and preparing to become a worker herself, the processes working class families are systematically entangled in. The labor involved in becoming and being a worker is strenuous and all-consuming, and notably labor that the ruling class does not involve themselves with. This phase of Fanny’s life is grounded in the realm of (re)production, drawing upon Lise Vogel’s social reproduction theory, which asks, “Who produces the worker under capitalism?” (Bhattacharya “Social”). In Vogel’s book *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* she strives to create a unitary theory that explains the peculiarity of women’s oppression under capitalism. In *Capital*, Marx outlines how the working class (re)produces themselves on both an individual and generational basis. Labor-power, which is the capacity for one to work, is not a given; rather, through a variety of social processes (e.g., the procurement of food, maintenance of the household, education, bearing children) labor-power is continually renewed and then sold to the capitalists for a wage (Marx 336). The burden of social reproduction falls particularly hard on women, because the labor they perform is essential, yet unpaid. Vogel explains, “Social reproduction requires that a supply of labour-power always be available to set the labour-process in motion” (Vogel 144). The continual renewal of a labor force is critical to the capitalist’s ability to extract surplus value from their workers, and thus they have a direct investment in the social reproduction of the workforce; this process must continue without “any breaks or stoppages to the continuous circuit of production” (Bhattacharya 8). Therefore, if we examine *Mansfield Park* as a microcosm and salient example of these relations, it

becomes clear that by purchasing Fanny, the Bertrams alleviate the Price's family troubles so that they will (re)produce their labor-power all the more efficiently.

As both Marx and Vogel tell us, the family-unit in capitalism is an especially important site where labor-power is repeatedly replenished (Vogel 147). Within the family, there tend to be members who do not participate in the production of commodities yet are still embedded in the fabric of social reproduction and require a certain amount of maintenance themselves. Some of these members include "children, the elderly, or a wife," and while they may not "themselves enter into surplus-production as direct producers, a certain amount of labour-time must be expended for their maintenance" (Vogel 149). Fanny is ten years old when she is bought by the Bertrams, thus in Portsmouth she was markedly not a "direct producer" in her family and had needs (food, water, shelter) that must have been met. Once Fanny is removed from Portsmouth, less labor-time will be expended by the workers in her family for her upkeep. Capitalists manipulate the working class's daily life, and consequently their ability to extract surplus labor, by "reducing the cost of living of the working class" yet still seeing an "increase" in "relative surplus," because, over time, this will cheapen the value of the working class's labor (Bhattacharya 14).

While the Bertrams are invested in the Price's increasingly productive renewal of their labor-power, and this may be happening on a more immediate level, Vogel also reminds us that the "diminished expenditure of labor in the house is accompanied by an increased expenditure of money" (Vogel 70). Over a longer period of time, Fanny's absence will actually contribute to her family's poverty—they no longer have an extra set of hands for completing domestic tasks and must now spend more money to renew their family's labor-power. This works in favor of the bourgeois family in numerous ways. It depreciates the value of the working-class family's labor-power because the burden for reproducing it is increased, and it introduces more capital into the economy through their "increased expenditure of money" (Vogel 70). But, perhaps, the most effective and insidious result is that "people cannot be liberated as long as they are unable to obtain food and drink, housing and clothing in adequate quality and quantity" (Marx 169). If the Prices must more acutely focus on their immediate survival, they are distracted from ever achieving a meaningful class consciousness and thus their revolutionary potential is negated.

Since the Bertrams understand Fanny as an expense, there is a shadowy and arbitrary number that looms just below her role in the household. Her arrival in Mansfield Park is enabled by a purchase, and through this purchase she becomes a commodity. A commodity, following Marx, is an object that has ascended its use-value (an object's function) to take on an exchange-value, which becomes expressed through price (Marx 321). Price is an opaque, a fluctuating abstraction and not necessarily related to the value of an object, the usefulness it provides, nor the labor that was involved in producing it. Particularity is emptied and all that is left is equivalency. As Marx tells us, "It is only by being exchanged that the products of labour acquire, as

values, one uniform social status, distinct from their varied forms of existence” (Marx 321). With this understanding, Fanny’s arrival in Mansfield Park ushers her into the commodity space, a rupture from her previous self that was undeniably a worker. Recognizing this rift, Fanny is “exceedingly timid and shy” upon her arrival, and Austen references Fanny’s desire to shrink or disappear countless times throughout the novel (Austen 13). To understand Fanny as a commodity is to recognize that her arrival in Mansfield Park is caused by an exchange that empties her of all particularity; her life in Portsmouth is forgotten, and there is no attempt to grapple with her history nor her emotional turmoil.

[Fanny’s] elder cousins mortified her by reflections on her size, and abashed her by noticing her shyness; Miss Lee wondered at her ignorance, and the maid-servants sneered at her clothes; and when to these sorrows was added the idea of the brothers and sisters among whom she had always been important as play-fellow, instructress, and nurse, the despondence that sunk her little heart was severe. (Austen 15)

Fanny’s cousins see her as something small and inadequate, as if she appeared at Mansfield for their amusement and possesses no history nor inner life. What is also noteworthy is Austen’s mention of the maid-servants scoffing at Fanny’s clothes. While Fanny does perform free labor for her family in Mansfield, aligning her with the Mansfield workforce, she is also kept separate from the realm of the servants, placing her in a more nebulous position in the estate’s social order. Fanny is both property and forced laborer, meanwhile the servants are only laborers. The Bertrams view Fanny as a one-dimensional attendant and commodity, but, of course, Fanny saw herself as occupying a multiplicity of roles in Portsmouth: “play-fellow, instructress, and nurse” are all identities that remain concealed in Fanny’s slight frame and terrified sensibility (Austen 15). Upon arriving at Mansfield, she is stripped of her multiplicity and assigned an arbitrary value, as is an object during production when it is transformed into a commodity.

A commodity’s exchange-value is always subject to oscillations, and Fanny is no different. Throughout her time at Mansfield Park, she becomes a more respectable member of the estate, and, when discussing this elevation, Austen often uses the word *improve*. As Ellen Meiksins Wood notes in her article “The Origins of Capitalism,” capitalism’s roots can be traced back to England’s agrarian economy with a property-owning class and tenants who cultivated the land. In the history that Wood traces, she notes that the word *improve* emerges as a way to describe doing “something for monetary profit” instead of our more general understanding as “to make better,” which comes much later (Meiksins Wood 106). Therefore, as Fanny’s social status rises and her improvement is recognized, it is through an explicitly financial lens.

Fanny is most notably improved after Sir Thomas returns from Antigua and discovers his family rehearsing the scandalous play “Lovers’ Vows.” Fanny is the only person at Mansfield Park who predicted his dissatisfaction, and this situation that noticeably “improves” Fanny’s standing in the household. Later, Edmund repeats his father’s praise to Fanny: “But the truth is, that your uncle never did admire you till now—and now he does. Your complexion is so improved—and you have gained so much countenance!” (Austen 183). Fanny’s esteem at Mansfield Park is directly linked to the Bertrams’ discernment of her “improved” complexion and a “gained” countenance (Austen 183). It is unreasonable to assume that Fanny’s appearance drastically changed during Sir Thomas’s absence, but rather, through Fanny affiliating herself with Sir Thomas, the master of the house, he notices her potential and discerns her loyalty. Fanny’s newfound beauty reflects her promotion in Mansfield’s hierarchy, which can also be seen as a symptom of her exchange-value becoming interwoven with her physicality. According to Terry Eagleton’s analysis of Austen in *The English Novel*, Austen believes “the material or external can and should be an outward sign of the inner or moral” (Eagleton 110). The language Edmund uses to relay his father’s praise for Fanny is inflected with profit—both through the implicit financial terminology as well as emphasizing purely physical features that further commodify her.

Fanny’s unrelenting self-control and careful maintenance of her status prove to be successful tools for her ascendance into upper echelons of English society. For Austen, her characters’ moral integrity is where their worth lies. “Lovers’ Vows” was seen as not only offensive, but morally bankrupt to Sir Thomas and Fanny because of the many affairs that drive its plot forward. As Eagleton notes, Austen believed the aristocracy’s waning power was brought about by their moral corruption and abandonment of traditional beliefs, illuminating the conservative spirit that guides the novel’s ideology (Eagleton 107). On that account, the highest praise Austen can afford Fanny is to imbue her with a strict and implacable moral compass, and this is translated to her increasing value within the estate. After the “Lovers’ Vows” incident, Fanny becomes worthy enough to abandon her impoverished beginnings and become an emblem for what the survival of the ruling class depends upon, according to Austen, which is the maintenance of traditional beliefs.

Although Fanny had not predicated the free market’s ability to override moral obligations. Her esteemed status is short-lived once Fanny declines a proposal from a wealthy businessman, Mr. Crawford. The landowning gentry of rural England—the class the Bertrams belong to—were in fact part of the oldest capitalist class, thereby straddling traditional aristocratic values while still participating in the liberal marketplace. Fanny rejected Mr. Crawford because she assumed it would be immoral to marry someone she did not love. Unlike before, when Sir Thomas and Fanny were morally aligned, Sir Thomas does not approve of Fanny’s actions because he values investing in capital more than a moral compass. Sir Thomas becomes uncertain of

Fanny's loyalty to the family, and he decides to re-evaluate her role in Mansfield Park. He devises a plan to send Fanny home to Portsmouth so that she may reflect on her ingratitude. Sir Thomas communicates the nature of the expedition in terms of familial bonding, yet this journey is distinctly meant to serve as a punishment. Sir Thomas is well aware that Fanny has grown accustomed to Mansfield Park's luxuries and hopes this trip will "incline her to a juster estimate of the value of that home of greater permanence, and equal comfort, of which she had the offer" (Austen 342). Until this point in the novel, the primary action has taken place in the halls of Mansfield Park, therefore displacing Fanny to a new location of lower means—one that will make her "heartily sick" by the end of her visit—allows the reader to see Fanny's complete transformation and the realization of her emptied-out identity, the result of her initial commodification (Austen 342).

Sir Thomas's authority is never questioned by his family because his plantation in Antigua is lucrative, and he is able to support his family's opulent life at Mansfield Park. Sir Thomas is determined to send Fanny to Portsmouth, despite Lady Bertram's objections, since she will be left unattended and unaccommodated in Fanny's absence. Yet, her protests fall flat, for Sir Thomas is the "master at Mansfield," and when he "had really resolved on any measure, he could always carry it through" (Austen 343). He convinces Lady Bertram to temporarily release Fanny through "submission" because he has no need for "conviction" (Austen 343). The label of "master" afforded to Sir Thomas in Mansfield Park, rather than only contained in the plantations of Antigua, demonstrates that his ownership of the means of production in the British colonies extends his authority in the domestic sphere as well. Fanny unquestionably respects his authority and even "kissed the hand of her uncle with struggling sobs" as she leaves Mansfield for Portsmouth (Austen 346). Fanny no longer fears Sir Thomas as a worker may with their boss, like she did at the beginning of the novel. Instead, Fanny has begun to idolize him, a moment that captures her exalted transformation and ushers in a new phase of their relationship.

Fanny's commodification has irreparably changed her relationship to her family. While the prospect of the trip initially thrills Fanny, she is also rattled by the remembrance of "what she had suffered in being torn from [her family]" (Austen 343). Recalling being "torn," or purchased, still fills Fanny with sorrow, demonstrating the sliver of awareness Fanny still holds at this point in the novel. Despite her steady rise in English society, there are still vestiges of pain and trauma from her exchange that persist. Yet, despite this shred of knowledge, Fanny is also struck by what a burden she must have been to her family, how she may have "been unreasonable in wanting a larger share than any one among so many could deserve" (Austen 344). Fanny's removal from Portsmouth remains painful, yet her memory has been conditioned by the Bertrams' value system such that she internalizes her own needs in terms of "shares," and justifies her purchase through a capitalist lens of efficiency. However, Fanny's initial excitement is misplaced and the desire to reconnect proves hollow. For

when Fanny arrives in Portsmouth, she is instantly repulsed by her family's manners and their small, cluttered home.

Fanny's loss of particularity, as well as her championing of the ruling class, is most keenly felt in this pivotal section of the novel. When Fanny first arrives in Portsmouth, she is struck by her own father's lack of dominance, distasteful habits, and overall ineptitude, recalling similar accusations made by the Bertrams against Fanny prior to her arrival. Fanny's father figures are intentionally positioned against each other (Sir Thomas commanding a country estate and Mr. Price bumbling around a small cottage), revealing once again that the domestic sphere is governed by a hierarchy of economic domination. When Fanny returns to Portsmouth, her home is teeming with new siblings and old relatives, all of whom require an (re)introduction. Mr. Price's arrival is first connoted through sound: Fanny hears his "loud voice preceding him" as he enters the hallway towards the parlor (Austen 352). Then, a series of awkward actions ensue: he "kicks away" his son's "portmanteau" and his daughter's "band-box," then calls out for a candle, but "no candle was brought" and he continues anyways (Austen 352). Fanny pays close attention Mr. Price's clumsy entrance and the silence at his request for a candle. These actions are all performed in a home that Fanny describes as an "abode of noise, disorder, and impropriety" (Austen 361). Eagleton's earlier note proves relevant here as well; according to Austen, the material is supposed to reflect one's interior landscape (Eagleton 110). Therefore, the disarray of Portsmouth is evidence of her family's unseemliness and indecency. Fanny candidly notes that she "could not respect her parents" and goes as far to call her father "dirty and gross" (Austen 361). Fanny's contempt and disgust for her childhood home and father eventually justifies her abandonment of them. Rather than seeing her home's squalor as a tragic symptom of poverty and exploitation, she views the filth as her family's vulgarity and boorishness incarnate. These descriptions are all directly juxtaposed to romanticized memories of Mansfield Park, which Fanny recalls as a place of "cheerful orderliness" where "every body's feelings were consulted" (Austen 363). Fanny's memory is clearly distorted—she conveniently forgets the years she spent at Mansfield constantly terrified, ridiculed by her family, and performing free labor for them. Fanny's twisted memories reveal that Sir Thomas's wishes have been granted. Fanny has reached actualization in her long process of capitalist conditioning and is ready to forget the working poor once and for all, no matter if they are her own family.

It is important to mention Austen's own class position and how her comfortable, privileged lifestyle impacted her novels. While Austen herself was not extraordinarily rich, her family was still deeply connected to the wealthy gentry (Eagleton 102). As Eagleton notes, she "strongly identified with that class's traditions" yet she "found [herself] exposed and insecure" (Eagleton 102). Austen's simultaneous insider/outsider position sheds light on Fanny's fervent loyalty, as well as her desperation for security. While an author's biographical information can be



superfluous for understanding a text, it is significant to note Austen's economic situation so that we may understand who this text was truly intended for (members of the upper class) and how the systematic exclusion of the working poor in *Mansfield Park* was most likely a direct reflection of Austen's own obliviousness to the working class in her lifetime.

By the end of the novel, Fanny becomes elevated to the model of capitalist exception, thus transitioning from the circulation sphere to the realm of ideological (re)production. Through Fanny's inescapable participation in social reproduction, alongside being placed in a 'commodity' zone, Fanny becomes mythologized as the ideal English capitalist wife. After Fanny's disastrous expedition to Portsmouth, she returns to Mansfield Park and finds it in chaos. Maria has had an affair with Mr. Crawford and Tom, the eldest son, has fallen gravely ill. The tragedies and scandals that transpired at Mansfield during her absence establish Fanny as the moral core of the estate. The Bertrams need her moral principles, and more than just their reputation is at stake: their entire property relies upon a sensible, steady heir. Austen insists that the gentry must reassert their power through financial and moral stability, and Fanny is the model of this paradigm. Fanny's moral integrity is not only admirable, but *necessary* for the gentry maintaining economic security. Upon her return, the Bertrams greet Fanny with unrivaled delight, now seemingly aware of her essential role in the conservation of their status. When she is back in Mansfield Park, she instantly feels "useful" and "beloved" by her family (Austen 428). Fanny has passed Sir Bertram's test: after Portsmouth, she has a newfound gratitude for Mansfield Park's opulence and a renewed disgust for the working poor. Sir Thomas, witnessing her intensified allegiance to the gentry, meets Fanny's return with "perfect approbation" and "increased regard," thus situating Fanny in a position where she can finally be considered as a sensible and wise choice for Edmund (Austen 428). Again, the increase in her exchange value becomes visible, affecting the way the Bertrams interpret Fanny's material being. While Fanny was naturally endowed with qualities that would prove useful to her social mobility, she also had to work tirelessly for the Bertrams' respect—becoming well-read, refined in aristocratic manners, waiting on her aunt—and therefore, at the end of the novel, Fanny's prosperity is well-earned with "no doubts of her deserving" (Austen 437). This sense of worth and justification plays into the capitalist narrative that devout productiveness is the key to a narrowly defined idea of success. By the end of the novel, Fanny's marriage can be seen as the culmination of moving beyond commodification and social reproduction.

Edmund realizes his love for Fanny after coming to terms with Mary Crawford's bourgeois flippancy and unscrupulousness, paralleling the Bertrams' larger recognition of Fanny's moral stability as key to their continued prosperity. The rest of Edmund's family came to this realization much later than he did. Edmund was the only Bertram who always had "regard" for Fanny due to her "claims of innocence and helplessness" (Austen 436). Edmund's admission that Fanny's "innocence" and

“helplessness” were her finest qualities reinforces her commodification. As mentioned previously, when Fanny first arrived at Mansfield Park, she was fearful and unworldly, the result of her individuality being wiped clean, and this is precisely what Edmund reveres the most. Being at first emptied-out and then eventually bursting with capitalist loyalty and aristocratic beliefs establishes Austen’s ideal social mobility model. One must escape the realm of social reproduction, become commodified and consigned to an exchange value, and finally become used by the capitalist class as a mythologized tool. Referring to Edmund’s realization that he loves Fanny, the novel asks, “What could be more natural than [this] change?” And the answer is, indeed, nothing (Austen 438).

In the last part of the novel, after news of Mansfield’s chaos has reached Fanny and she is on her way home, there is a sense that Fanny unknowingly foresees her impending good fortune, as shown by the presence of her sister Susan, a character the narrative has intentionally likened to a young Fanny. When Susan arrives with Fanny, she is met with Mrs. Norris’s distinct hostility and Lady Bertram’s disinterest, yet despite this unwelcoming welcome, Susan is nonetheless “provided with happiness” and could even “[stand] against a great deal more indifference” (Austen 417). Susan’s unshakeable kindness and gratitude in the face of the Bertrams’ animosity sets Susan up for filling Fanny’s place and further bolsters the capitalist notion that the working poor’s obedience to the gentry will serve them handily in the end. When Fanny marries Edmund, she leaves an opening as to who Lady Bertram’s attendant will be, and, conveniently, Susan is already there to fill her shoes. Susan then “remained to supply her place” and became the “stationary niece,” a position she was “equally well adapted and “delighted to be so!” for it by a readiness of mind, and an inclination for usefulness” (Austen 438). It is almost unimaginable that this role could be filled by anyone other than a woman, and Susan’s apparent joy at becoming a “stationary niece” establishes that she is going to be placed in the commodity realm upon Fanny’s ascendance, the next objectified servant/property in the Bertrams’ orbit. Yet, Susan is made to be distinctly separate from Fanny in one very important way, and this is the fact she will be “stationary”—the gentry only has room for *one* rags-to-riches story, and Susan is not invited to be the next Fanny as far as actually moving out of the working class. Rather, as social reproduction tells us, there must always be a renewal of labor-power without “any breaks or stoppages” and thus the void that Fanny leaves necessitates a replacement (Bhattacharya 8).

When the Bertrams finally welcome Fanny into their family as one of their own, it is in *their* best interest. Fanny’s shifting value—at first only being prized for the labor she expended on assisting Lady Bertram and then becoming a crucial element to their economic security—reveals how Fanny can never escape being regarded in explicitly financial terms. Sir Thomas reflects on his new daughter as a “great acquisition” and that his initial “liberality” in inviting her to Mansfield Park had a “rich repayment” (Austen 438). The purchase of any commodity can be seen as an

investment in its exchange value, and that is precisely what happened to Fanny. Now a respectable member of the family, Fanny will be critical in protecting their social and economic position; she has thoroughly “repaid” her debts and become a veritable asset (Austen 438). Fanny’s consistent and economic value also asserts that while she may be married to Edmund and eventually run Mansfield Park, she will always be separated from the Bertrams because of her origins in the working class. While Fanny may have shed her uncouth beginnings from her conduct and social circle, she has nonetheless been forced to serve as an ideological tool for the capitalist class, and her past life will trace itself onto everything she does. Fanny must do better, work harder, and be more principled than her Bertram counterparts, and the possibility that she can be discarded at any point faintly lingers.

Fanny’s rags-to-riches story, while a long and enduring capitalist myth, is also inflected with Austen’s own ideas about the ideal model of exception. The novel ends with a declaration that Fanny has lived up to her potential and has become the perfect wife and accountant. Austen reveres methodical financial investments, a well-organized domestic sphere, and an unbreakable moral compass and work ethic. Austen assures the reader that Fanny and Edmund were

equally formed for domestic life, and attached to country pleasures, their home was the home of affection and comfort; and to complete the picture of good, the acquisition of Mansfield living by the death of Dr. Grant, occurred just after they had been married long enough to begin to want an increase of income, and feel their distance from the paternal abode an inconvenience. (Austen 439)

Fanny’s happy ending is disciplined and flawless. After years of being conditioned by the Bertrams to be the perfect domestic manager of a country estate, Fanny has finally fulfilled her destiny. The mention of Fanny and Edmund only wanting an “increase of income” after they have been “married long enough” assures the reader that the Bertrams’ discernment of Fanny as the key to financial stability was correct (Austen 439). Austen negotiates between bourgeois ideology, which condones risky investments for big fortunes, and aristocratic ideology, which relies solely on the land for their wealth accumulation. Oscillating between these two realms, Austen finds her happy medium in Fanny and Edmund, two characters that prioritize traditional aristocratic values and conventions while also looking to increase their fortune. Fanny is no longer a worker, although she relies on them and their resources. She is simultaneously amongst the ideologues exploiting the masses through capitalist fictions while also being the crux of these myths.

Many point to Austen as a proto-feminist, a writer who championed equal rights for women at a time when many were hostile to such ideas. While this is somewhat true, Austen’s gestures towards Fanny deserving equal access in Mansfield Park are more or less a “call for capitalism to fulfill its pledge to promote free

competition in every arena” (Vogel 114). As Vogel notes, working class women have no need to fight for their entry into capitalist economic life, as “they are already there” (Vogel 115). Social reproduction falls primarily on the shoulders of working class women, and it is a responsibility that is essential for the economy’s growth and yet utterly unrecognized. Traditional gender roles necessitate that women must assist with reproducing their husbands’ labor-power, not to mention their own. Vogel combines feminist and Marxist frameworks within social reproduction theory and provides a sturdy foundation for revolutionary politics. While Austen is advocating for bourgeois women’s greater participation in the liberal and marriage marketplace, Vogel is making a radical appeal for gender equality that challenges class and gender relations.

While Marx and Austen may have had nothing else in common, both thinkers were concerned with capitalism’s instability and self-gratification. Put into relief by Austen’s exclusions, *Mansfield Park* demonstrates the working class’s brutal, silent, and incessant exploitation. Uncovering Fanny’s initial involvement in social reproduction—implicated in the process of reproducing labor-power, one’s corporeal capacity—to her eventual transition into the commodity sphere—an extension of capitalism’s ability to reduce humans to products—to finally becoming an ideological weapon herself reveals the painfully meticulous ways capitalism seeks to invade the working class’s psyches and turn them into docile subjects. Exposing the consequences of Fanny’s exchange and how this transforms her into a fervent proponent of capitalist values reveals that despite a marked physical separation between the domestic and economic spheres, the mechanisms of capitalism are embedded in every belief and relation of *Mansfield Park*. Now, having brought her own hide to the market, Fanny, *smirking*, can begin to collect the hides of others.

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