Religious power and gift exchange in Jane Austin's Mansfield Park

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January 2001
Religious Power and Gift Exchange in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*

by

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A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Lehigh University

December, 2000
Thesis Signature Sheet

This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the Master of Arts.

7 Dec. 2000
Date

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Thank you to Dr. Jan Fergus for introducing me to Mansfield Park. Our brief discussions of the novel outside of class are what led me to write about it for class. Her guidance during the project as well as her encouragement of my "roundabout" entry into the analysis gave me hope that I was writing something truly interesting and worthwhile.

Thank you to my brother Joseph K. Barrett and my father Bobby Barrett for loving and supporting me through all my academic endeavors.
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Abstract

This paper argues that an examination of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* through the lens of religious power reveals that power increasingly resides in Edmund Bertram because of his privileged position as a minister and in Fanny Price because of her astute understanding of this system of power rather than in Sir Thomas Bertram, who is usually read as empowered by patriarchal and colonial power. Central to this argument is Marcel Mauss' concept of gift exchange, which predicates power upon one's ability not only to accept a gift but also to return a more elaborate and valuable gift for the one received. The workings of the Anglican Church during Austen's historical period correspond with Mauss' understanding of gift exchange in the way livings were established for clerics and in the relationship between the cleric and his congregation. When applied to the novel, this theory of religious gift exchange places Edmund and Fanny in positions of power because they are the only ones who are able to accept gifts and return them in excess. That is, they are able to give moral guidance, which becomes the unreturnable gift, to the other individuals at Mansfield Park. Thus, Sir Thomas, the original patron and patriarch of the novel, loses his power while Edmund and Fanny gain, for Sir Thomas ultimately acknowledges the faulty moral education he gives his children. Moreover, despite the fact that he reengages in the gift exchange by granting his consent for Edmund’s and Fanny’s marriage and that he believes that the eventual prosperity of the family is all his doing, the text undercuts him by making Edmund and Fanny the spiritual master and mistress of Mansfield Park.
Religious Power and Gift Exchange in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*

Religion and power in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* have been treated by critics separately but not together. This omission from *Mansfield Park* criticism is both curious and mistaken. First, the fact that critics have not treated religion as power is odd because the connection between religion and power has been hinted at by those who examine the nuances of power in Austen's social world. Critics interested in the tensions of imperialism in the novel have discussed religion only in terms of morality and ethics, which serve as tenets of imperialist power structures. Similarly, critics interested by issues of patriarchy have discussed the ways in which morality, established by empowered men, like Sir Thomas Bertram and Edmund Bertram, serves to contain, punish, or reward the female characters.

1 Edward Said, "Jane Austen and Empire," *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Terry Eagleton (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1989): 151. Said seeks to arrive at the ways in which pre-imperialist expansion writers like Austen situate themselves and their works in the larger context of the world, and he argues that the strategies of situation employed include positive representations of home, of a nation and its language, of correct order, of proper behavior, and morality. Moira Ferguson, "Mansfield Park: Slavery, Colonialism, and Gender," *Oxford Literary Review* 13 (1991): 135. Ferguson argues that the situation in Antigua is mirrored by the situation at Mansfield Park, that the women of the novel become the voices of the muffled African slaves, and that Sir Thomas' moral reformation dictates the way in which the immovable plantocracy of Austen's time should work to better the inhuman conditions of slavery. Joseph Lew: "'That Abominable Traffic': Mansfield Park and the Dynamics of Slavery"; *Mansfield Park: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticisms*; ed. Claudia Johnson (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1998): 506. Lew treats the contemporary theories of climate, which assert that the weather of the West Indies corrupted the personal and moral health of the English residents and that such moral decay followed the English planters on their return to England.

2 See Ferguson, 128. She claims that women who rebel against the established ethical and moral codes like Maria and Mrs. Norris are nullified and exiled. Maaja A. Stewart, *Domestic Realities and Imperial Fictions: Jane Austen's Novels in Eighteenth-Century Contexts* (Athens: U Georgia P, 1993) 33. Stewart asserts that "Austen's heroines attempt to remain stable moral protagonists while using and becoming themselves unstable and changeable currency," and she points
The idea that religion is a system of power as imperialism and patriarchy are seems an obvious conclusion to be drawn from the work already done, yet the conclusion has not been drawn.

Secondly, this omission in *Mansfield Park* criticism needs to be rectified because such a reading of religion as power will provide a very different interpretation of relations of power in the novel. According to Gene Koppel, when dealing with Austen’s texts critics generally concern themselves with declaring or disputing the idea that Austen’s morality is rooted in religion. When one reads criticism on religion in *Mansfield Park*, however, one find issues that move beyond the moral. Evangelicalism is a particularly popular topic for critics who want to situate Austen within her historical context. Related to Fanny Price as an example of this conflicted heroine. Anne Crippen Ruderman, *Pleasures of Virtue* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995) 162-3. Ruderman argues that the type of feminine power that Mary Crawford urges Fanny to claim, a power based on having a man whom no other woman could catch and on having tremendous wealth, is exactly the type that Austen would refuse to endorse, specifically as she would encourage happiness from virtue instead of power from non-virtue.


4 For discussions of Evangelicalism in *Mansfield Park*, see Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975) 241-3. Butler suggests that the novel echoes the conflict between the newly prosperous middle class, usually of Calvinist or Puritanical denominations and their former social superiors and that to identify the Evangelical overtones in the novel as radical would be misreading their presence, for Evangelicalism was essentially a conservative movement. Avrom Fleishman, *A Reading of Mansfield Park: An Essay in Critical Synthesis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1967) 20-1. Fleishman argues that Edmund’s final status as rector of the Mansfield parish is undermined by an improper education to enter the clergy, for he accepts the living at Mansfield while holding onto the living at Thornton Lacey, and this issue of multiple incumbencies was one of the major criticisms of Evangelicalism. Lionel Trilling; “Mansfield Park”; *Mansfield Park: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticisms*; ed. Claudia Johnson (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998) 429. Trilling mentions Austen’s sympathy toward Evangelicalism in a letter she wrote to her niece Fanny Knight and then asserts that her “religious opinion is but incidental to the affirmation that is being
topics include ordination, the relationship between contingency and
religion, traditional Christian morality, and Fanny as a Christian
heroine. In many of these cases, however, the critics report that
religion serves to support the social hierarchy. Therefore, religion
as it has been previously discussed has become a vehicle for the
conservative view of Austen. Yet studying the issues of religion and
power together yields a somewhat less conservative view of the novel’s
politics. In particular, an examination of religion as power in the
novel will work to give agency to characters that have traditionally
been viewed as subordinate to the power of the familial patriarch Sir
Thomas.

Central to an understanding of religion as a system of power is
the concept of gift exchange described by Marcel Mauss. In his view,
power stems from what is given by whom instead of being rooted in what
is denied by whom. According to Mauss, gift exchange was the basis
for the earliest forms of social organization. The exchange of gifts
created powerful and important relationships between individuals,
families, and tribes. However, the rules involved in gift exchange

made of the moral advantage of the profession of principle," which is
especially emphasized in the characters of MP.

5 For discussions of ordination in the novel, see Fleishman, 19­
21. He includes a discussion of the irony of Edmund’s ordination in
his comments on Evangelicalism. Also see Alistair Duckworth, The
Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen’s Novels (Baltimore:
Johns Hopkins UP, 1971) 61-3. Duckworth argues that Edmund’s
ordination, which embodies the debate on vocation, is of continual
importance to the novel, despite the fact that Trilling has been shown
to have misread a line from an Austen letter that seemed to pronounce
ordination the subject of the novel. For a discussion of religion as
contingency, see Koppel, The Religious Dimensions of Jane Austen’s
Novels, 63 and 67. Koppel argues that the fact that Edmund and Fanny
marry each other instead of Mary and Henry Crawford, respectively, is
due to the novel’s contingency, the "context of modern agnostic
thought that cause and effect ... is random, without higher
significance. ..." For more on Fanny as a Christian heroine
worked to establish a hierarchy in power. Such rules included an obligation to offer gifts, an obligation to accept gifts, and an obligation to return gifts that were more valuable than the gift received. If any of these rules were broken, then the persons involved in the gift exchange were no longer equal in power and were reduced to positions of subordination.  

Mauss, then, locates power in the ability to give, an untraditional view of power but also a completely valid one in terms of Austen’s novel. The language of Mansfield Park is particularly munificent. Words like “give,” “bestow,” “allow,” and “endow” abound in the novel, and they all suggest generosity in the way of gifts, whether tangible or intangible. Something must be given, bestowed, allowed, or endowed. Examples of such gift-giving are seen in Edmund’s gift to Fanny of the use of his horse, Sir Thomas’ gift to Fanny and William of a ball at Mansfield, and Fanny’s gift, on behalf of her sister Susan, to her sister Betsey of a silver knife. In each of these situations, the gift becomes the link in the power relationship between the giver and the recipient.  

But Mauss’ idea of gift exchange becomes more complex when it serves as the lens through which one investigates how religion becomes a power structure in the novel. The religion of Austen’s historical period operated on a system of gift exchanges, as Austen seems aware, characterized by humility, virtue, and self-knowledge, see Trilling, "Mansfield Park," 427 and Butler, 222.  


Mauss’ perception of power is non-traditional in the fact that most descriptions of power, even those related to imperialism and patriarchy in Mansfield Park, are based on denial. Empowered
for one place in the novel where the idea of gift exchange and
religion most obviously meet is in the scenario between Fanny, Edmund,
and Mary Crawford when both Edmund and Mary offer Fanny necklaces on
which to wear her brother’s cross. Mary offers Fanny an elaborate and
extravagant necklace for the purpose. Although she does not want to
accept the gift, Fanny is obligated to do so, an obligation that has
roots in the manners of the period, which are similar to the rules of
gift exchange. Such an obligation on Fanny’s part to Mary is one
thing, but Fanny’s obligation then extends to Henry Crawford, who is
the original gift giver:

“You must think of somebody else too when you wear that
necklace,” replied Miss Crawford. “You must think of
Henry, for it was his choice in the first place. He gave
it to me, and with the necklace I make over to you all the
duty of remembering the original giver. It is to be a
family remembrancer. The sister is not to be in your mind
without bringing the brother too.”

Fanny is aware of the power the Crawfords now wield over her through
her acceptance of the necklace. The ornate necklace, which does not
“agree with” the simplicity of William’s cross, represents an
undercutting of the religious power that the cross symbolizes.
Neither Crawford believes in the power of religion as an institution,
and their gift accentuates this fact. Therefore, Mary and Henry

individuals are able to take away from the disempowered, whether the
“thing” taken away is freedom, a voice, or a home.

8 Jane Austen; Mansfield Park: Authoritative Text, Contexts,
Criticisms; ed. Claudia Johnson; Norton Critical ed. (New York: W.W.
Norton, 1998) 178. Unless otherwise stated, all citations of
Mansfield Park are from this edition.

9 Ibid. 180. When Edmund gives Fanny his chain, she tells him
that his simple chain is more suitable for the cross from her brother:
“No, it [Mary’s necklace] is not handsomer, not at all handsomer in
its way, and for my purpose not half so fit. The chain will agree
with William’s cross beyond all comparison better than the necklace.”
through their gift are able to "cheat [Fanny] of her tranquility" and create a "change rather than a diminution of cares."¹⁰

However, after receiving Mary and Henry's luxurious necklace, Fanny receives from Edmund "a plain gold chain perfectly simple and neat."¹¹ The very fact that his gift is plain, matching the simplicity of the cross, suggests the nature of Edmund's religious influence. Edmund does not need a glittering gift to capture Fanny's appreciation. His gift does not become for her a question of unwanted obligation but of sincere gratitude: "I cannot attempt to thank you. . . thanks are out of the question. I feel much more than I can possibly express. Your goodness in thinking of me in such a way is beyond'."¹² Furthermore, the fact that Edmund's gift is termed a chain instead of a necklace reflects on the power of religion. Edmund's chain alludes to the imperial power that Sir Thomas wields over his Antiguan slaves. First, those slaves would have been accustomed to chains imprisoning them on the plantation and to the chains that bound them on the oversea passage from Africa to the Americas. Perhaps more important, though, is the established connection between religion and imperialism. Slavers and plantation owners invoked the Bible as the source for the practice of slavery. Yet imperialism's ties to religion often become secondary concerns; the discourse of religion becomes subservient to the discourse of imperialism. Religion is not seen to wield the same power as imperialism. The very fact that Edmund's necklace is coded as a chain, however, forces the reader to make the connection and take it farther. Religion is not just tied into the power of colonial

¹⁰ Ibid. 178-9.
¹¹ Ibid. 179.
discourse; it is power within itself. The chain that binds the cross to Fanny becomes a physical manifestation of religious power that is often overlooked. Thus, Fanny has a choice between the two necklaces, and she shrewdly selects Edmund’s necklace. Mary’s necklace can only bring her disquiet, and she knows this. Edmund’s necklace, however, can offer her a means to empowerment. By wearing his chain, Fanny becomes an agent for religious power. She is bound to that power, but she also becomes a willing spokesperson for that power. Already, Fanny shows an awareness of where power resides and how it is executed. Therefore, Fanny’s preference for Edmund’s chain over Mary’s necklace becomes a sign of religion’s authority as does the fact that the decision is eventually taken out of Fanny’s hands; Mary’s chain is too large for the cross. The ultimate power of religion and the religious figure reveals itself when Edmund’s neat and simple chain is the only one that will fit. Likewise, Edmund’s moral code is the only one that will fit his Mansfield congregation, the only one that will fit Fanny.

This example of the connection between religion and gift giving legitimizes the study of religion as an arena of power in Mansfield Park. In order to complete such a study, one must examine the structure of the Anglican Church in relation to gift exchange, apply that structure to the novel, discuss “morality” as the ultimate religious gift, and analyze the shifts in individual power that result from failure to complete the gift exchange so central to the workings of religion. Ultimately, by examining Mansfield Park through the lens of religious power instead of imperial or patriarchal power, one can better indicate both the true location of power in the novel, with

12 Ibid. 179.
Edmund and Fanny, not Sir Thomas, and the reasons for such location, namely Edmund's privileged position as a minister and Fanny's shrewd understanding of this system of power.

Although Austen makes very few direct references to the organization of the Anglican Church; enough insinuations about Edmund's living, his role as minister, and his relationship to his parishioners are given to make it necessary to understand the practical workings of the church that Jane Austen used as her source. According to Irene Collins, "The clergy who figured so prominently in Jane Austen's life and novels carved out their careers within a system of patronage . . . . (the bestowal of favours by persons with the necessary degree of wealth, influence or power)." Already, then, the idea of gift exchange is evident. Some private individual or institution selected a person to whom to give a living, and, in many cases the person granted the living was a family member. Thus, Sir Thomas has reserved two livings for his younger son, Edmund, though he is forced to sell the presentation of one to Dr. Grant. The Church of Austen's time did not just function under patronage but under a specific type of patronage, nepotism. Therefore, the exchange of power that is inherent in an exchange of gifts remains in the family, for the goal of people in power is to maintain that power. In giving his son a living, Sir Thomas acquires power.

Once the living is given to the preferred individual, however, under Mauss' concept of gift exchange, the gift receiver would have to return a gift of greater importance. In Austen's novel, each gift of a living comes with certain expectations on the part of the patron.

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One such expectation would be the clergyman’s satisfactory fulfillment of his role in the parish. Such concerns are evident in *Mansfield Park* when Sir Thomas converses with Henry Crawford about Crawford’s plans to improve Thornton Lacey, the living that Edmund will receive. Sir Thomas believes that a parish needs a minister who will be a full-time resident, for only such a minister can treat the various daily issues that naturally arise within a parish:

But a parish has wants and claims which can be known only by a clergyman constantly resident, and which no proxy can be capable of satisfying to the same extent. Edmund might, in the common phrase, do the duty of Thornton, that is, he might read prayers and preach, without giving up Mansfield park; he might ride over, every Sunday, to a house nominally inhabited, and go through divine service; he might be the clergyman of Thornton Lacey every seventh day, for three or four hours, if that would content him. But it will not. He knows that human nature needs more lessons than a weekly sermon can convey, and that if he does not live among his parishioners and prove himself by constant attention their well-wisher and friend, he does very little either for their good or his own.\(^{14}\)

Here Sir Thomas, as a patron, describes his expectations of Edmund. Edmund could confine himself to minimal parish work, but Sir Thomas’ expectations exceed the bare minimum. He expects Edmund to have a sophisticated sense of responsibility for his parishioners as well as a high degree of moral aptitude that will benefit himself and the people whom he “serves.” Of course, Edmund also desires to fulfill these expectations for himself. During the same conversation with Henry Crawford, Edmund states, “I have no idea but of residence.”\(^{15}\) Edmund, thus, seems intent upon fulfilling the expectations that accompany the living. By doing so, he returns the gift of the patronage. The gift-exchange is complete; both participants in the exchange are equal in status. Both attain positions of power.

\(^{14}\) Austen, 170.
Such mutual empowerment, however, is not capable of occurring in the other power relation within the Anglican Church’s structure. Once given the living, the clergyman enters another process of gift exchange between himself and his parishioners. In describing the gift exchange practices of archaic societies, including ancient Rome, Mauss asserts, “To give is to show one’s superiority, to show that one is something more and higher, that one is magister. To accept without returning or repaying more is to face subordination, to become a client and subservient, to become minister.” The terms “magister” and “minister” are particularly relevant to the cleric/parishioner design of the religious institution. Traditionally, the magister in Christianity is God, the one gift-giver who is infinitely superior, the one whose gifts can never be returned in excess. Therefore, all Christians would be ministers, but religion is a social construct of power relationships, so a hierarchy develops. The clergyman becomes the minister to the Lord’s magister. Where does that leave the parishioners, though? The parishioners are subservient to God, yet they are also subservient to the parish minister. The parishioners, then, are left to become ministers to the minister. In the religious hierarchy, then, they are the bottom rung simply because they are unable to return greater gifts than those that they receive.

Furthermore, the very nature of the gifts given in religious gift exchange makes such an exceeding counter-gift on the part of the parishioners nearly impossible. The minister gives sermons, gives

15 Ibid. 169.
16 Mauss, 72.
17 Edward Neill, The Politics of Jane Austen (New York: St. Martin’s P, 1999) 87. Neill asserts that the novel can be taken as about ordination or the ranking of characters, with some surprises as
himself as an example of moral living, and gives parishioners the avenues through which to reach God. All of these gifts are of a spiritual nature. On the other hand, the parishioners can only give material goods as counter-gifts. The war between spirituality and the material world can be traced back to Aristotelian philosophy, which greatly shaped the development of Western Christianity. In such philosophy, the spiritual is always more important and valuable than the material. For the duties, or gifts, rendered by the clergyman, he receives an income from two main sources, the tithe and glebe. The tithe was "the right of the clergy to receive a tenth of the annual gross product of all cultivated land in the parish." The glebe was "an area of land donated to the church . . . for the benefit of the incumbent. During the eighteenth century the area was frequently extended, for owners of newly enclosed land in the parish liked to free it from tithe by arranging to hand over a few acres to the church." However, of the two gifts, the only one that was certain was the glebe, for often, because of poor harvesting and other agricultural conditions, parishioners could not pay the tithe. Some individuals in the parish would even openly refuse to pay it. So, unable to return in excess the gifts that are given by the parish minister, parishioners are subordinated, disempowered in the system of religious power although they may feel empowered by what seems to be their "resistance." Moreover, even if the tithe were paid to where certain characters fall. This idea applies to the concept of religious rankings, who has power and who does not. For more on the connection between established religious philosophy and Aristotelian philosophy in Austen's novels, see Allen Dunn, "The Ethics of Mansfield Park: MacIntyre, Said, and Social Context," Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal 78.4 (1995): 486. Collins, 49-50. Ibid. 52.
consistently by every parishioner, this material gift would not exceed to the spiritual gifts offered by the minister, at least not in traditional religious ideology.

The religious world of *Mansfield Park* works in a manner similar to the external world. In the novel, a minister becomes "magister" to his parishioners. Although Edmund, the identified clerical figure in the novel, is not officially a minister through a good portion of the text, he is always a minister in waiting. The novel does not explicitly illustrate Edmund in his ministerial duties to his parishioners, but it does give a sense of the type of clergyman Edmund will be as well as what his relationship with his parishioners will be by casting the persons of Mansfield Park in the role of his parishioners. To each and every friend and family member, Edmund’s gift is the gift of morality, an appropriate gift for a future clergyman, and this gift becomes the unreturnable gift, the gift that the majority of the Mansfield group do not want to accept, much less to return in excess. While Sir Thomas is away in Antigua, Edmund attempts to remind his sisters and brother of proper behavior. When Tom, Maria, Julia, Henry, and Mary decide to perform *Lovers’ Vows*, he objects to the idea on moral grounds. To Maria’s insistence on the unobjectionable quality of the play, Edmund responds by reminding her of her social position as a moral leader: "'But in this matter it is you who are to lead. You must set the example. - If others have blundered, it is your place to put them right, and shew them what true delicacy is. - In all points of decorum, your conduct must be law to the rest of the party."21 The minister-in-waiting gives his moral advice, but the gift is rejected by Maria and the others involved in
the production of the play. Already, the Mansfield "parishioners" attempt to reposition themselves as working outside the rules of the religious system. Their subordination to the power of religion is expressed, however, in their sentiments concerning Edmund's eventual capitulation to and participation in the play. The Mansfield group decide to view Edmund's acquiescence as a "victory over Edmund's discretion," as a victory over his moral guidance, as a victory over his most valuable gift. They now have nothing "to disturb them in their darling project." What they do not realize, however, is that they are no longer disturbed in part because Edmund's participation sanctions their actions; his participation approves their plans. Indirectly, Edmund's participation brings some touch of morality to the production. Yet, even as the Mansfield group accept his approbation, they avoid participation in the gift exchange. They are again placed in disempowered positions even though they do not so perceive themselves. They can only accept, not give.

This failure to complete the gift exchange on the part of the Mansfield "parishioners" seems to result from a desire not to return the gift of morality bestowed by Edmund rather than any failed attempts to return the gift, however. The Mansfield group is like the nineteenth-century parishioner who simply refuses to pay the tithe. Their utter disrespect for religion and for the relationship between a clergyman and his parishioners is continually illustrated by their words and deeds. When the Mansfield group arrives at Sotherton, Maria comments to Mary that she is elated that the church "is not so close to the Great House as often happens in old places" for "The annoyance
of the bells must be terrible." Maria's statement reveals her nonchalant attitude towards the church and its gifts. The position of the church as patron to the parish is one that Maria does not appreciate. This type of sentiment, however, is most characteristic of Mary Crawford. When she discovers that Edmund is to be ordained, she states that "Men love to distinguish themselves, and in either of the other lines [law and military], distinction may be gained, but not in the church. A clergyman is nothing." Mary apparently associates power with social position and distinction. From her perspective, then, the clergyman at first seems to lack any particular influence. Her experiences living with her brother-in-law Dr. Grant, the minister of Mansfield Park, teaches her that a clergyman has "nothing to do but to be slovenly and selfish—read the newspaper, watch the weather, and quarrel with his wife. His curate does all the work, and the business of his own life is to dine." In other words, in Mary's mind, the clergy is not an acceptable career for any "man" because it makes him lazy and weak; it leaves him without power. Mary, though, does not recognize that power lies in the very act of gift exchange and that, of all the possible gifts in a traditionally Christian world, the gifts of the clergyman are the hardest to return.

Mary also does not recognize the way in which her own statements testify to the power of the minister and of religion. When Fanny is sent to Portsmouth, Mary writes to her that Edmund "moves slowly; detained perchance by his parish duties. There may be some old woman

23 Ibid. 110.
24 Ibid. 59.
25 Ibid. 66.
26 Ibid. 78.
at Thornton Lacey to be converted. 27 Mary's sarcasm cannot be ignored. The implication here is that Edmund, who is so desperate to marry her, is being negligent in his courting of her because he is too busy forcing religion on people including helpless old women. This statement, however, reinforces the idea that the church and its representatives are powerful. Edmund's influence expands beyond the walls of the church; he is a constant force in the lives of his parishioners. These parishioners must receive his sermons; they cannot return his gift even if they try. Similarly, the idea of Edmund's converting some old woman supports his power. An old woman, nearing the end of her life, will surely seek to maintain her role in the gift exchange central to religion. That is, an old woman will take Edmund's gift of moral rectitude, and she will make sure that she returns that gift with her tithe. She will accept the fact that her lesser gift makes her subservient to Edmund because the institution of religion deems it so. Theoretically, the old woman will be rewarded in the afterlife for her participation in the religious gift exchange. Mary, on the other hand, who is not flagrantly immoral but so stridently rebukes religion, is punished. 28 As Mauss suggests, such deliberate failure to participate in the gift exchange once the first gift has been given can result in great losses. 29 She, whose primary object of desire is Edmund, and who has Edmund's attention for the majority of the novel, is at the end denied him. Edmund marries Fanny

27 Ibid. 268.
28 Fleishman, 53-4. Avrom Fleishman suggests that Mary does not behave immorally; she just behaves under a different ethical system from Fanny and Edmund. Assuming that this idea is true, her value system becomes problematic because it contradicts other systems in the novel; in my reading it leads her to forego the religious gift exchange that is central to the working of the religious power structure that permeates the novel.
instead, and Mary is left with the loss of dignity and the loss of face that Mauss associates with "Failure to give or receive" or the "failure to make return gifts."\(^{30}\)

Against Mary's accusations, though, Edmund makes his own statements about the power of the minister in his relationship with his parishioners. Edmund cannot call "that situation nothing, which has the charge of all that is of the first importance to mankind, individually or collectively considered, temporally and eternally-which has the guardianship of religion and morals, and consequently the manners which result from their influence."\(^{31}\) The clergyman's power cannot be confined by numbers, space, or time. He is the keeper of all things sacred, a man who doles out spiritual and moral guidance to individuals who readily need them. According to Edmund, "A fine preacher is followed and admired; but it is not in fine preaching only, that a good clergyman will be useful in his parish and his neighborhood, where the parish and neighborhood are of a size capable of knowing his private character, and observing his general conduct."\(^{32}\) The clergyman's power extends beyond mere rhetoric, the ability to give good sermons and to inspire emotions with persuasive words. Instead, the clergyman's power lies in his ability to give of himself as an acknowledged servant of God and to give himself as an example of how to live the secular life in order to achieve the non-secular afterlife. The parishioners are obliged to accept the gifts of God's minister, who "ministers" to them.

\(^{29}\) Mauss, 40.
\(^{30}\) Ibid. 40.
\(^{31}\) Austen, 66.
\(^{32}\) Ibid. 66.
Not all of Edmund's Mansfield parishioners are hostile, however. Fanny, in fact, eagerly enters the gift exchange relationship with Edmund. Edmund's teaching of Fanny becomes the prime example of Edmund's ability to bestow the gift of moral guidance. When Fanny first arrives at Mansfield, "Nobody meant to be unkind, but nobody put themselves out of their way to secure her comfort," except for Edmund, who upon finding her crying on the attic stairs sits next to her and asks "Did she, in short, want anything he could possibly get her, or do for her?"33 Already, Edmund demonstrates his philanthropic bent; already he demonstrates the extent of his power to give while Fanny, at this point, can only receive and give ineffectual counter-gifts. From this first moment that he gives her his attention, that he gives her paper on which to write her beloved brother William, that he gives her his conversation and his listening ear, Fanny becomes bound to him: "From this day Fanny grew more comfortable. She felt that she had a friend, and the kindness of her cousin Edmund gave her better spirits with everybody else."34 Moreover, Edmund, and not Sir Thomas, is the one to give her education and a value system:35

He [Edmund] knew her to be clever, to have a quick apprehension as well as good sense, and a fondness for reading, which, properly directed, must be an education in itself. Miss Lee taught her French, and heard her read the daily portion of History; but he recommended the books which charmed her leisure hours, he encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment; he made reading useful by taking to her of what she read, and heightened its attraction by judicious praise. In return for such services she loved him better than anybody in the world except William; her heart was divided between the two.36

33 Ibid. 12-13.
34 Ibid. 14.
35 Ferguson, 123. Ferguson argues that the values that Fanny learns and adopts for herself are those of Sir Thomas as he is the patriarchal master of Mansfield Park: "Moreover, when Sir Thomas leaves for Antigua, she [Fanny] steps into his moral shoes. . . ."
36 Austen, 18.
For these gifts that Edmund bestows upon her during her youth, Fanny gives her love in return. Love is the only gift that Fanny has to give. She loves him utterly, both secularly and spiritually, and she looks to him in everything that she does. Yet while Edmund accepts her counter-gift, his attentions are easily distracted from her. With the arrival of Mary Crawford, Edmund’s concentration on Fanny falters as he begins to see in Mary a probable future wife. One example of such faltering concentration is seen in the way Edmund gives to Mary the use of the horse which he has previously given Fanny to use, and Fanny is left without a way to exercise for four days: “Vexed as Edmund was . . . he was still more angry with himself. . . . Nothing of this would have happened had she been properly considered.”37 Angry though he may be with himself for forgetting her, Edmund continues to forget her in small ways because Fanny’s love is not enough of a gift to make her an equal participant in her gift exchange with Edmund. At this point, she is disempowered.

Love is not the only gift that Fanny returns to Edmund, though. In fact, Fanny, under Edmund’s tutelage, develops a more consistent sense of morality than even he is able to maintain. Fanny steadily develops, then, into a character who can offer an appropriate gift to counter Edmund’s offer of moral guidance because his moral sense does waver on occasion. After all, he does participate in the play although he feels that the play production is morally suspect, and he does misconstrue Mary’s character. As Allen Dunn suggests, however, “His [Edmund’s] misjudgment of Mary demonstrates that he is not perfect, but Austen implies that his ability to remain somewhat

37 Ibid. 54.
critical while in the throes of love is a reflection of his superior character."38 What Edmund represents is a clergyman who maintains morality in his thoughts but who does not always translate that morality into deed. In other words, the "minister" needs a bit of ministering, and Fanny, who maintains her moral sense in her thoughts and actions, becomes Edmund's assistant "minister."39 Thus, Fanny, unlike the others at Mansfield, becomes able to return Edmund's moral guidance, advice, and example with interest.

On numerous occasions, Edmund receives moral succor from Fanny. When tempted to concede to the scheme of the Mansfield group to produce a play, Edmund goes to Fanny to explain why he feels he must act in the play. When Fanny still does not give her approval, Edmund beseeches her: "Give me your approbation, then, Fanny. I am not comfortable without it."40 Just as the others need the gift of Edmund's sanction to be undisturbed while acting in the play, Edmund needs the gift of Fanny's sanction to feel "comfortable." Likewise, after Mary Crawford's elimination as a possible wife, Edmund soon turns his amorous attentions to Fanny. The love that Fanny initially offers but that proves inadequate to keep his attentions from Mary Crawford now combines with her gift of moral consistency to create an altogether surpassing gift that Edmund accepts. While thinking about his desire to court her, Edmund considers that "Even in the midst of his late infatuation, he had acknowledged Fanny's mental

38 Dunn, 492.
39 This idea of Fanny as assistant minister works in another, more practical way. When she returns to Portsmouth and decides to bring back her sister Susan to Mansfield Park, Fanny literally assists Edmund in adding to the number of the Mansfield "parishioners," who actually become his on the departure of Dr. Grant.
40 Austen, 109.
superiority.\textsuperscript{41} Mental superiority here is not in reference to
telligence but to moral elevation. Edmund recognizes that Fanny has
been more consistent in her gifts of morality to him and the rest of
the family than he has been as the established “minister.” Therefore,
despite the fact that “She was of course only too good for him,” the
narrator tells the reader that Edmund “was very steadily earnest in
the pursuit of the blessing.”\textsuperscript{42} Edmund has given his moral guidance,
and now he gives his love. Fanny has given her own moral guidance and
love as counter-gifts, and now she has only to give her encouragement
to his suit, which she does.

This gift exchange that expresses one way in which religious
power works in the novel also defines the individual instances of
empowerment or disempowerment that the characters undergo in this
world. Sir Thomas, for example, moves from a position of power to a
position of subordination. At first, he is the master patron, who
arranges for Edmund the parish post at Thornton Lacey; he is the
father who “teaches” Edmund his moral and ethical sense. However,
Edmund returns Sir Thomas’ patronage by fulfilling his position as the
Thornton Lacey minister and later as the Mansfield Park minister after
his marriage to Fanny. In terms of Sir Thomas’ gift of moral
education, Edmund as well as Fanny easily returns that gift with a
more thorough and devoted moral education. This high quality of moral
guidance, particularly Fanny’s, is what Sir Thomas cannot return. In
the face of Fanny and Edmund’s moral gifts, Sir Thomas realizes that
he has mistaken his own ability to guide morally. He recognizes that
his children, “had been instructed theoretically in their religion,

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid. 319.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid. 319.
but never required to bring it into daily practice." Sir Thomas, the estate patriarch and patron, has a sense of his loss of control, and he realizes that the only way for him to attempt to regain that lost control is by re-engaging himself in the gift exchange of religion practiced so effectively by Edmund and Fanny. He must become virtuous and good in order to be able to wield the overarching authority of morality, ethics, and religion. One way in which he attempts this reengagement is through his desire for Edmund and Fanny's marriage:

Sick of ambitious and mercenary connections, prizing more and more the sterling good of principle and temper, and chiefly anxious to bind by the strongest securities all that remained to him of domestic felicity, he had pondered with genuine satisfaction on the more than possibility of the two young friends finding their mutual consolation in each other for all that had occurred of disappointment to either; and the joyful consent which met Edmund's application, the high sense of having realised a great acquisition in the promise of Fanny for a daughter, formed just such a contrast with his early opinion on the subject when the poor little girl's coming had been first agitated, as time is for ever producing between the plans and decisions of mortals, for their own instruction, and their neighbors' entertainment.

Ambition is what drives Sir Thomas initially, and that blind ambition is coded as morally corrupt. Sir Thomas' previous attempts to exchange Fanny for mercenary connections gives way to ethical understanding, an understanding that makes a marriage between Edmund and Fanny a good occurrence. Thus, Sir Thomas gives his consent to the marriage. In his mind, then, he has situated himself on the side of the "sterling good of principle and temper." So, he allows himself to believe that the eventual prosperity of the family lies with him. He "saw repeated, and for ever repeated reason to rejoice in what he

43 Ibid. 314.
44 Ibid. 320.
had done for them all."45 This is Sir Thomas' attempt to recoup his power. The text, however, still positions him only as a "minister" to the minister. Sir Thomas is still in a position of subordination. He gives his consent, but what he receives in return more than surpasses the gift. Sir Thomas acquires "domestic felicity," "genuine satisfaction," and "the promise of Fanny for a daughter." And in Fanny, what Sir Thomas is receiving is a continual model of moral guidance, a true mistress to govern over his spiritual life.

Edmund, who is not traditionally viewed as powerful, maintains a consistent level of authority. He is the sole identified religious figure in the novel. His life seems directed to the day of his ordination, a day after which the only patriarch that he will be subservient to is God. At Sotherton, Edmund hints at the idea that religious power surpasses all other forms of power when he responds to Mary's laughing comment that heads of households will force their servant to attend the domestic chapel service and leave behind their work and their pleasure: "That is hardly Fanny's idea of a family assembling,' said Edmund. 'If the master and mistress do not attend themselves, there must be more harm than good in the custom."46 Edmund's use of the terms "master" and "mistress" is particularly important since such terms can suggest the master and mistress of a domestic setting as well as the master and mistress of an imperial estate. In either case, the "master" and "mistress" and the power that they may wield are subordinate to the power of religion. The custom of families assembling for services is not harmful. What is harmful about such a custom is when the "master" and "mistress" do not

46 Ibid. 62.
engage themselves in the service and fail to acknowledge the power of religion.

Fanny is empowered by her participation in the gift exchange. She moves from a subservient position to one of authority. She can engage equally in the gift exchange with Edmund, the established clergyman, which is something that the other characters in the novel and real-life parishioners in the traditional Christian sense find hard to do. Fanny is wily enough to play the game, and she knows the rules. She is early aware of the power of religion. In responding to Mrs. Rushworth’s comment that the previous custom of attending service in the domestic chapel is ended by her late husband, Fanny says that the loss of such a custom is mournful:

"It is a pity," cried Fanny, "that the custom should have been discontinued. It was a valuable part of former times. There is something in a chapel and chaplain so much in character with a great house, with one’s ideas of what such a household should be! A whole family assembling regularly for the purpose of prayer, is fine!"

Fanny recognizes the influence of religion in shaping the operation of the home as well as the social world, and she works aggressively within the established system to see herself finally as equal to Edmund in terms of gift-exchange. Though she is tempted to be inconsistent in her moral beliefs, she remains steadfast to them. Family, tradition, and morality are central to any supposed reformation of the Mansfield Park environment, and all three of these elements are embodied in the system of religion. Through her faithfulness to each of them, Fanny brings good to Mansfield Park in the forms of Sir Thomas’ supposed reformation and general domestic tranquility, and she illustrates the authority of religious power. In

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47 Ibid. 62.
the end, she earns the bounty of the powerful. She marries Edmund, who actively courts her (his proposal is not any half-hearted gesture), and she gets an estate. And, as only Fanny and Edmund can realize the full potential of the estate, the estate symbolically comes into their possession. In this way, then, Edmund and Fanny inherit Mansfield Park, an inheritance that is "confirmed by a condition of moral worthiness that supercedes primogeniture." Furthermore, the Mansfield Park parsonage is allied with the "patronage of Mansfield Park" in the last paragraph of the novel, a paragraph that makes no mention of Sir Thomas, a further sign of his disempowerment. Mansfield Park, then, becomes the extended parsonage, and the perfection of everything within its view and patronage is due to the religious and moral example that Edmund and Fanny give to the place as its spiritual master and mistress.

As Edmund's equal, then, Fanny is not the passive, static, annoying character that critics have made her out to be. Even Lionel Trilling, who defends Fanny against such criticism by establishing her as an authentic subject, categorizes Fanny as fixed because authenticity suggests that she does not change. She is a changing character, and she is involved in a dialectical understanding of the

48 Dunn, 496.
49 Austen, 321.
50 Said, 161. Edward Said suggests that Fanny and Edmund return to Mansfield Park as its imperial master and mistress, for his argument connects the condition of the domestic estate to the condition of the Antiguan estate. I see that Said's use of the terms "master" and "mistress" reflects back on Edmund's use of the terms in his discussion at Sotherton, previously quoted. Edmund and Fanny represent a religious master and mistress, but the overarching power of religion simultaneously makes them representations of imperial and domestic master and mistress. After all, the assumption is that Edmund assumes the Mansfield parsonage while keeping the Thornton Lacey living.
power structure. Fanny gives and takes continually, and upon her final return to Mansfield Park, she is a different person from the little girl who arrived frightened and uncertain. She returns a wife, a woman whom everyone at Mansfield respects, and a woman who is unafraid to assume authority or exercise it. Moreover, Fanny arrives at this point not out of passivity but mental activity. Again, Fanny knows the rules, and she engages in the exchange.

In conclusion, examining *Mansfield Park* through the lens of religion as power, and what that entails, offers a different reading of the novel from those usually derived from a focus on religion. If religion becomes "the" power structure, it becomes a structure that includes imperialism and patriarchy. Instead of critiques emphasizing how morality is used to further imperial and patriarchal control, perhaps critiques could show the ways in which imperialism and patriarchal control fit into the mold of religious power. Similarly, the central issue of the religious power paradigm, the gift-exchange, seems to be applicable to the other power systems as well. The master-slave relationship as it appears in the novel as well as the gender politics can be approached from the perspective of the gift exchange. Secondly, this current study illustrates that religion

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52 Jean Baudrillard, "The End of Production," *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Ian Grant (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1993) 40. Baudrillard defines the master-slave relationship in terms of capitalism and argues that capital (the master) gives labor, which is equated with life activity in Marxist ideology. The only counter-gift greater than life that could end the subordination of the slaves is death. This notion of life as labor can be applied to the imperial master-slave dynamic in *Mansfield Park*. Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic of Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna P. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review P, 1975) 172-3. Rubin discusses the exchange of women as being part of the gift exchange described by Mauss and developed by Levi-Strauss.
does not have to be a tool for conservative critics only. Although religion may seem conservative in the fact that those who do not conform are punished, Austen is not strictly maintaining the status quo here. Fanny Price, who is a poor Portsmouth relative, is empowered through religious power. Instead of radically rebelling against the system as do her cousins Maria and Julia and the others, she works within the system, manipulating it to her own advantage, which is far from passive acceptance of the status quo. So when discussing Jane Austen, can anyone ever definitively argue that she either conservative or liberal? In this analysis, an anamorphic moment occurs in which the conservative becomes the liberal; religion does not just reaffirm the social hierarchy but blurs the lines of that hierarchy. Therefore, the categories established by Austen studies seem useless. These categories of conservative and liberal are of the mold of categorical imperatives that Trilling suggests get Fanny in trouble with modern critics. Such categories, then, should be done away with and interpretive modes opened as in the case of this analysis. Here, the discussion of religion as power elucidates some interesting nuances of character and situation in the novel that are interesting and valuable in their own right.

53 Trilling, Sincerity, 79.
Works Cited


About the Author

Nancy Cho Barrett was born in Pusan, South Korea on October 1, 1976. She was raised by Bobby C. Barrett, Paulihe Barrett, and Joseph Thomas Barrett. For her undergraduate education, she attended Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland where she received a B.A. in English and was graduated Summa Cum Laude as co-valedictorian with a 4.0 grade point average in June, 1998. Currently, Nancy teaches freshman composition at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania where she is finishing her M.A. in English and taking classes toward her Ph.D. In addition, she works as a writing consultant at the Lehigh University Center for Writing, Math, and Study Skills and serves as the graduate student representative to the English Department's Undergraduate Committee.
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