“Blessed Are the Peacemakers”:
*Mansfield Park* and Jane Austen’s Mediation for Religious Tolerance

David Owen
*Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona*

“Incline us oh God! to think humbly of ourselves, to be severe only in the examination of our own conduct, to consider our fellow-creatures with kindness, and to judge all they say and do with that charity which we would desire from them ourselves”

*Jane Austen, Prayer III* ¹

“Every man is sent by God into the World to work out his own Salvation, and to take care of that in the first Place, and then to promote the Salvation of others, as much as in him lies”

*John Tillotson* (1630-94), Archbishop of Canterbury, *Works* ²

Within Austen studies, the once groundbreaking work by D.W. Harding (*Regulated Hatred*) and Marvin Mudrick (*Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery*)³ created a certain perception of the writer that, to no small extent, still holds today with many readers. And this is in spite, on the one hand, of the very great strides in Austen criticism that have

Notes


² 326. “Archbishop of Canterbury in the late seventeenth century, [Tillotson’s] sermons were a model for preachers in the eighteenth” (Michael Wheeler. “Religion”. *Jane Austen in Context*. Todd, Janet (Ed). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2005, p. 408), and therefore can be read as a moral and theological basis for much of the Anglican discourse that Austen, daughter and sister of clergymen, was closely familiar with.

³ D.W. Harding. *Regulated Hatred and Other Essays*. Lawlor, Monica (Ed). London & New Jersey: The Athlon Press, 1998; Marvin Mudrick. *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968 [1952]. Harding’s essay was first published in 1940 in *Scrutiny* and was significant in radically breaking with the widely held contemporary view of a ‘gentle Jane’ mildly and affectionately laughing along at the idiosyncrasies of her society. In its stead, Harding’s view posits a frankly subversive writer who aims to ridicule the very society of which she formed part and which (later as her readers) so avidly enjoyed her fiction. Mudrick published his study in 1952; in a sense it follows the line established by Harding in that it delineates a solitary, defensive writer who uses the rhetoric of irony to draw attention to the discrepancy between her actual society and what she felt it ought to be. Both views are positive in recognising a professional writer who engages directly with the socio-political realities of her time; both are negative in emphasising the writer’s discordant, unsympathetic vision of her peers.
been taken in the intervening years and that have seen considerable and highly effective challenges to the views of both these major critics, ⁴ and, on the other hand, of the adulation continually given to ‘gentle Jane’, that carefully—and commercially—constructed image of the quiet, self-effacing narrator of temperate love stories from the slower-paced world of Regency gentility. The vestigial ‘Harding-Mudrick’ perception is that the essential character underlying the formal elegance and politeness of Austen’s prose is one aiming primarily to dissect the follies and aspirations of her peers, exposing them as sadly wanting. And beyond this, through the regulated hatred and ironic detachment that is so forcefully purported to be Austen’s principal literary weapon, the writer is able—so it is argued—not only to distance herself from the objects of her satire, but also (by implication) to set herself above that world and apart from its weaknesses, foibles and delusion.⁵ It is a view of Austen, in other words, that presents us with the very opposite of tolerance. It leaves us with a writer whose concerns were essentially negative, whose aims were not those of comprehension and forgiveness but rather, through expressing a clear distaste for her own society, to register her disdain for it and to demarcate her difference from the failures—personal, collective and, above all, moral—of her “fellow-creatures”.⁶

However, there is an entirely different way of considering Austen’s ‘essential character’, inasmuch as we can assess this through her fiction, and from this to suggest how she makes claims for a far more comprehensive and tolerant approach to her world. Austen was writing at a time⁷ in which religious piety and devotion can arguably be viewed as markers of conformity to and support for the increasingly conservative political reaction to

⁴ In the context of this current discussion, of particular importance is work that has focussed on Austen’s sense of the religious. As regards notions of comprehension and tolerance, I would especially highlight Irene Collins’ Jane Austen and the Clergy (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 1994) and Michael Giffin’s Jane Austen and Religion: Salvation and Society in Georgian England (New York: Palgrave, 2002). Both critics draw attention to Austen’s emphasis on forgiveness and compassion; Giffin affirms that “Austen’s religious position prevents her from being harsher on her more foolish or wicked characters, because the tenor of Georgian Anglicanism was one of tolerance rather than retribution” (25).

⁵ Harding’s and Mudrick’s arguments are, in fact, far more complex and attenuated than this highly general account sets out. My concern here is not, however, to summarise their ideas, but rather to suggest the manner in which their essential core has filtered through to a common perception of Jane Austen’s intolerance.

⁶ Dabundo (250) discusses Austen’s use of the terms “fellow” and “creature”, and observes that “the addition of the qualifier “fellow” consciously adds to this usage a sense of joint plight or circumstance. That is to say, those who acknowledge “fellow creaturehood” are recognising two truths of common identity, Anglican common prayer and a human, communal identity”.

⁷ The major novels of Austen (1775-1817) were composed between the late 1790s and 1816 (with the drafting of Persuasion). At the time of her death, she was working on the fragment Sanditon.
the French Revolution and the effects this had brought to bear on contemporary English society (reflected in general terms in the discrepant positions—with respect to that revolution—of Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine). That is to say, there was a markedly ‘national’ character to contemporary religion,\(^8\) providing a context in which a writer of fiction might easily create and then demonise characters of a morally reprehensible or merely negligent nature as unwelcome Jacobins.\(^9\) Put another way, in fictional terms, the option was open for Austen to expel the *Damned* and to celebrate the *Saved* of her social panorama. But, as I will discuss here using *Mansfield Park* as illustration, she very decidedly does not choose that path in her mature novels. Her writing, instead, and in keeping with her Anglican upbringing, mediates between those who in moral terms can be seen as undesirable and those whose natures and actions clearly mark them out as being the social and moral models of preference. This mediation—whilst never shying from identifying the flaws of the morally lax—aims nevertheless at leaving open the ‘grace’ of forgiveness and comprehension to them, thereby reflecting what Kelly (151) has called the use of religion in Austen’s times “to promote post-revolutionary social mediation, harmony and national unity”.\(^10\) She is, therefore, a peacemaker, concerned with healing divides—as her prayer suggests—and not adding to them. And it is through the operation of her religious tolerance that we come to understand both how and why this peacemaking is, in general terms, fundamental to a significant part of Austen’s fiction.

It is, of course, somewhat unreasonable to insist on Austen’s sense of ‘religiousness’ as being in any degree remarkable. Religion was perhaps as central and natural a part of her world as, say, electronic technology is to ours: some of us are better aware of its intricacies and implications; others of us are less than enthusiastic about its bearing on our daily lives.

---

\(^8\) See Collins, 191: “The idea that religion and society stood or fell together had been forcefully argued by Edmund Burke in relation to the French Revolution. In 1795 Bishop Richard Watson had written: ‘When religion shall have lost its hold on men’s consciences, government will lose its authority over their persons, and a state of barbarous anarchy will ensue’”.

\(^9\) A political reading of Austen’s early epistolary novella, *Lady Susan* (c. 1794; left unfinished until c.1805-1809), in fact gives credence to this very possibility: seen from the perspective of the Burke-Paine debate, this novella can be understood as identifying that which is socially and morally acceptable with the conservative Catherine Vernon, revealing Lady Susan Vernon to be representative of Jacobin unwholesomeness—a threat to social and moral stability that must be rejected and expelled.

So, too, with religion in Austen’s environment. Consequently, it is misleading for us in our highly secularised context (in modern-day western Europe at least) to overstate the importance of Austen’s faith within a world that, despite much debate as to its form and practice, largely took personal faith as a given. But recognising this should not blind us to the fact that Austen’s faith nevertheless had a particular quality, and furthermore that this quality—in keeping, in fact, with broader socio-moral changes in early C19 England—underwent a growth in intensity throughout her life.

The two principal currents in Austen’s religious outlook were traditional Anglicanism and far-from-traditional Evangelicalism. Austen in many ways lies between these two ways of understanding Protestantism: on the one hand, she was shaped and influenced from her early childhood by the tenets of the Church of England, and held steadfast to these views throughout her life. But, on the other hand, she was to become ever closer to the characteristic Evangelical call for active participation in solving life’s troubles as the primary means of attaining grace and salvation. I will argue here that Austen adapts the dynamism of the Evangelists as a way of invigorating the sometimes overly passive Anglican approach to moral duty, yet attenuated the more extreme forms of Evangelical ‘religiosity’ with the balanced moderation of established Anglican teaching. Expressing this very contrast, Wheeler (406) remarks that:

The moderate eighteenth-century Anglicanism that Jane Austen imbibed at Steventon [her birthplace] from her father, the Revd George Austen, emphasised divine wisdom and atonement in theology, order and patriotism in politics and common sense and morality in private life. Most Church of England clergy steered a safe middle course between Enlightenment rationalism, with its attendant dangers of agnosticism and secularisation, and Evangelical ‘enthusiasm’, characterised by intense personal piety. The Established Church was thus in danger of becoming simply a quiet moral presence, rather than a dynamic body which lived out a radical gospel message. (On Easter Day 1800, there were only six communicants at [London’s ] St Paul’s Cathedral).

Clearly, as we can interpret from the narrative voice of all her major fiction, Austen strongly supports greater and more unambiguous moral certainty and standards. And it is not difficult, given the risks of Anglicanism evaporating into a mere ‘quiet moral presence’,
to accept that such views were also articulated in a politically conservative political key\textsuperscript{11} as a manner by which (most especially in the late 1790s and early 1800s) to vigorously defend the nation’s moral core from the perceived corrosiveness of what conservative voices took—albeit in an evidently simplified manner—to be the self-absorbed Jacobinism undermining communal values of family and class, values which Austen so transparently upholds. In that sense, the intensity of the Evangelicals would appear to have held an obvious appeal to her. Yet this does not completely ring true with what we actually know of Austen’s personal views. For whilst she would remark to Fanny, her niece, in 1814 that “[she was] by no means convinced that we ought not all be Evangelicals, [and was] at least persuaded that they who are so from Reason and Feeling, must be happiest and safest”,\textsuperscript{12} we also know from personal sources that she disliked the self-righteous declarations of faith that Evangelists were more than capable of expressing in a very public manner. Collins (187) highlights Austen’s response to Edward Cooper, the novelist’s cousin and a serious-minded Evangelist with published books of sermons to his name: on receiving from him the news—expressed joyfully—of his son’s birth, Austen tells her sister: “[h]e dares not write otherwise to \textit{me}… [or else] he might be obliged to purge himself from the guilt of writing Nonsense by filling his shoes with whole pease \textit{sic} for a week afterwards”,\textsuperscript{13} ironically musing on the Evangelical tendency to dismiss personal happiness as an unwanted distraction from the Spartan mental discipline of focussing constantly on spiritual affairs. In her artistic writings, too, Austen not infrequently draws attention to the undesirability of openly voiced piety, appearing to distrust this as shallow and self-serving, and contrasting it with true faith, personal humility and—in no small measure—with a robust sense of humour. Her deflating portraits of, for example, Maria Bennet and the Reverend Collins in

\textsuperscript{11} Substantial critical work has argued, in opposition to more the more traditional view on Austen’s political beliefs, that the novelist was, in fact, essentially aligned to pro-Jacobin views and sympathies (see, especially, Claudia L. Johnson, \textit{Women, Politics and the Novel}. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990, and—more recently—Peter Knox-Shaw, \textit{Jane Austen and the Enlightenment}. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2004). However, my own view is broadly in accordance with that of Marilyn Butler (\textit{Jane Austen and the War of Ideas}. [1987 edition with a revised introduction]. Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 1987), who argues—I think far more convincingly, given Austen’s own personal circumstances and the manner in which these were affected by the historical context—for Austen’s conservatism. In all events, perhaps the fairest assessment of this controversial aspect is provided by Jane Spencer (\textit{The Rise of the Woman Novelist. From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen}. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1986), who sees Austen as “the progressive element within the tradition of conformity” (169), a view that is in keeping with the argument I present in this article.


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, Letters, no. 32, pp. 74-77, emphasis in the original.
Pride and Prejudice (both of whom frequently spout humourless, tiresome zealousness) are eloquent and artistically highly successful expressions of Austen’s unease with such religious seriousness, though it is only fair to observe that her second triad of novels—understood in order of composition, not publication—considerably attenuates this vein of criticism. And Austen the reader, as Wheeler (412) reminds us, “eschews the kind of fervent religiosity that characterised much of the religious fiction of her day, particularly Evangelical fiction”. In other words—and we can trace this from Northanger Abbey through to Persuasion—Austen does argue in support of moral certainty and for the need to actively construct goodness within our communities (the Evangelicals’ ‘good deeds’); and she does undermine those who act in self-serving, morally damaging ways. Yet, precisely in dealing with these characters, the antagonists of her fiction, her Anglican tolerance comes to the fore: of the many and highly varied members of Austen’s considerable rogues’ gallery—we think of John and Isabella Thorpe (Northanger Abbey); Willoughby or Lucy Steele (Sense and Sensibility); Wickham and Lady de Bourgh (Pride and Prejudice); the Crawford and Mrs Norris (Mansfield Park); Mr and Mrs Elton (Emma); and Sir Walter or William Elliot (Persuasion), amongst others—not one of them is made to meet a physically gruesome or tragic ending by which an easy moral might be drawn regarding their actions and beliefs. Such turns of events are not within the parameters of Austen’s mature fiction, it is true, but more importantly, this would not have been coherent with the underlying message that her writing projects. For, although these characters do indeed reap what they sow, they are—on the whole, though with some notable exception—left regretting their misdeeds. That is, we frequently see them reflecting on what might have been had another form of behaviour been determined upon. We see, in other words, that the doorway to future personal improvement and therefore happiness is not wholly barred to them. As Wheeler (413) observes:

As in other aspects of her religious life and understanding… Austen is moderate in her representation of her characters’ fallen state and future hopes: most are ‘not greatly in fault’ and deserve ‘tolerable comfort’ (MP, 3:17). In the [Anglican] service of Holy Communion, the priest says to the congregation: ‘Ye that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbours… Draw near with faith and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort’.

14 See also Giffin’s comments (note 4, above)
In short, then, Austen does not seek to confront Good and Evil in direct adversarial terms, with the failure and condemnation of Evil triumphantly paraded. Having revealed the morally correct path to be taken, those who fall by the way are not terminally excluded from that path (a message of obvious post-revolutionary and national political import, as Kelly has noted). She leaves open the possibility for her wayward characters, by their mulling over the consequences of their own shortcomings, to form part of a better scheme of things. Not by imposition, not by miraculous conversion, but through comprehension on their part, and through tolerance on the part of the ‘higher community’

Ironically, I would say that the clearest example in Austen’s major fiction of the points raised in this discussion comes from *Mansfield Park* (1811-1813; first published 1814). And I say ‘ironically’ as this is a work often seen by modern readers—most particularly those detached from an understanding of the historical context in which the novel was written—to be the least attractive of Austen’s works in that it appears to forward a narrowly pious view of life. To such readers the earnest protagonist, Fanny Price, falls disappointingly short of the ready, dynamic appeal of her ‘competitor’, the dazzling Mary Crawford, appearing to be insufferably sanctimonious, and indeed much of the work’s general tenor might be seen as something of an apology for Evangelical sermonising. Even critics of the very highest calibre have found the novel seriously wanting. The renowned putdown by Kingsley Amis (142) was that “Edmund and Fanny are both morally detestable and the endorsement of their feelings and behaviour by the author…makes *Mansfield Park* an immoral book”. The novel has also had to contend with considerable and largely hostile attention from certain cultural and political ambits that have read it as tacitly complicit with slavery (posited—it has to be said—on the slightest of textual evidence). The most influential and controversial of these views is that provided by Edward Said,

---

15 “Austen sought to repair the dangerous divisions opened by differences of religion and politics in the classes her novels address. She sought to repair those differences…” (167).
16 “‘Conversion’ was another Evangelical requirement which Jane Austen could not regard as necessary. [She…] could not possibly have approved of a doctrine which divided people into sheep and goats, the saved and the damned, since she was constantly showing in her novels that there is both good and bad in everybody” (Collins 188).
though the validity of his interpretation has very much been brought into question. In other words, the choice of *Mansfield Park* to highlight Austen’s sense of religious tolerance might at first sight appear a little odd, perhaps even perverse. Yet if we are to attempt a fuller understanding of this work, and thereby to make a reasonable stab at ascertaining Austen’s ideas in this text, we necessarily have to read it in light of its own times and not through a modern partiality for certain types of action, protagonists or outcomes over others, nor yet through positing Austen’s connivance with forms of inhuman brutality that—as this very novel shows us—could only ever have been anathema to her.

More sensitive to Austen’s society and its preoccupations, and reaffirming the ways in which Austen’s fiction reflects and comments on contemporary ‘national’ concerns, Kelly (156) effectively counters Amis by reminding us that [modern] readers’ preference for Mary over Fanny exemplifies a secularization of literary culture since Austen’s day that has made it difficult to understand how Anglicans such as Austen would have considered it vital in the Revolutionary aftermath to fill country vicarages with Edmunds and Fannys rather than Henrys and Marys.

Seen in this manner, and recalling the essential idea that runs through this current discussion, I would suggest that there are a number of clear ways in which *Mansfield Park*, far from advancing a constricted and rather dismal Evangelical ‘agenda’, in fact systematically puts forward a blueprint for tolerant, principled behaviour aimed at avoiding confrontation, at providing an example to the morally confused and at fostering forgiveness (and perhaps even hope) for the fallen.

To begin, in Fanny Price we obviously have something rather more than a prim and prissy counterpart to Mary Crawford (although, as a counterpart, her balance, good sense and moral certainty would have been in itself greatly valued by Austen’s earliest readers, as

---


19 That said, however, Austen’s mother found Fanny Price to be “insipid” (see Park Honan. *Jane Austen: Her Life*. London: Phoenix, 1997. [347]).
Kelly suggests). Beyond this, though, and viewing her in her own right and not merely in comparison, she provides a model for long-sufferance—year upon year of being marginalised and undervalued. But, when through her unbending values and courage, she finally sees the Bertrams escape from the problems of their troubled world and wins Edmund’s heart, her response is one of gratitude and humility; it is expressed modestly, and in terms of joy: in it, we find not one trace of triumph. And it is perceived wholly through the prism of love, the great healer. Knowing, as Austen surely did, that the broader significance of this relationship and the very particular difficulties that it has had to overcome would be clear to a perceptive and receptive contemporary readership, no further connections or explanations need to be made:

Timid, anxious, doubting as she was, it was still impossible that such tenderness as hers should not, at times, hold out the strongest hope of success, though it remained for a later period to tell him the whole delightful and astonishing truth. [Edmund’s] happiness in knowing himself to have been so long the beloved of such a heart, must have been great enough to warrant any strength of language in which he could clothe it to her or to himself; it must have been a delightful happiness. But there was happiness elsewhere which no description can reach. (MP, 48)²⁰

Another way in which this novel acts as a reflection of Austen’s broader ideas of tolerance inspired through religious grounding is the general effort that is made, most notably by Fanny, to be aware of the suffering of others and, through that awareness, to contribute—however slightly or indirectly—to its alleviation. Once again, the modern reader connects far more readily with the often languid and frankly humorous expressions of self-interest that Mary Crawford is apt to deliver, and, in comparison with this, Fanny’s observations can well appear to mark her out as an irritating Goody Two-Shoes. But this is to miss the point by some distance. Through Fanny, Austen is setting out a quietly articulated challenge to an excessive concern for the pursuit of personal satisfaction (by definition, an obviously anti-social force and one that was readily identified with Jacobin ideals²¹) and establishes in its stead an active concern for the welfare of others. To be sure,

²¹ “As Marilyn Butler has pointed out, the theme of individual rights was central to English Jacobin novels of the 1790s. Reacting against this ideology, conservative, anti-Jacobin writers [amongst whom I suggest we must certainly include Austen] argued for the necessity of a social code that would limit those rights, seeing the individual in relationship to the community” (Warren Roberts. Jane Austen and the French Revolution. London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1979. [36-37]).
the notion of ‘tolerance’ here is not that of accepting ideas that contradict and undermine one’s own, but points in its place to an acceptance (that is, a toleration) of the need to subordinate self motivation to the general wants of a broader—and in this case, less fortunate—community: “To be the friend of the poor and oppressed!” muses Fanny “Nothing could be more grateful” (MP, 41). But, to return briefly to perhaps the most controversial aspect of Mansfield Park, I would argue that the mention of slavery most clearly highlights Fanny’s sympathy for the plight of others. Let us review the terms of the debate. The brief, very brief, passage in question—in which Edmund appeals to Fanny to engage his father (and her uncle) more fully in conversation as a means of securing greater mutual intimacy and sympathy—is the following conversation:

[Fanny] “But I do talk to him more than I used. I am sure I do. Did not you hear me ask him about the slave-trade last night?”

[Edmund] “I did—and was in hopes the question would be followed up by others. It would have pleased your uncle to be inquired of farther.”

[Fanny] “And I longed to do it—but there was such a dead silence!” (MP, 21).

Edward Said (112), I think implicitly recognising that this is rather too slight a context to base much of a thesis upon, nevertheless points out the culpability of this reference by suggesting that it somehow sets in motion a whole chain of replicas: “If we think ahead to [Great Expectations, Nostromo, Heart of Darkness, Wide Sargasso Sea], Sir Thomas’s Antigua readily acquires a slightly greater density than the discrete, reticent appearances it makes in the pages of Mansfield Park”. Said is suggesting here that Fanny’s attempt at conversation with her uncle—and I presume that she is supposed to metonymically represent Imperial British culture—in effect normalises and trivialises the horrendous human suffering that this barbarity entailed, converting it into a mere coffee-table subject, along with the weather, today’s dinner and tomorrow’s outing. There is, however, nothing else within the novel that would give the slightest support to such an interpretation. And suggesting, as Said does, that the fragmentary nature of the remark is, in fact, precisely an indication of the degree to which complicity with slavery has become an accepted part of life is a rather dangerous argument, incidentally, since if we applied its reductio ad absurdum, presumably we would be compelled to admit that no reference at all to slavery
would be evidence of even greater complicity with it! To my mind, a far more convincing understanding of this passage is that made by Brian Southam, in which Sir Thomas’s “dead silence” is seen as sad testimony to the fact that he is unable to give Fanny a fitting answer, and effectively highlights his own sense of guilt. Indeed, it is the fact of raising this subject in the first place that points us in the direction of Fanny’s (and Austen’s) sympathies with the Evangelist William Wilberforce, and acts as an expression of her disapproval of slavery. It shows, in Southam’s words, that Fanny was “a friend of the abolition”, quietly courageous enough to put forward her concern with such injustice where stronger voices around her had refused even to breach the issue.

There are further ways in which Austen’s novel points to a sense of religious tolerance. Paradoxically, one of these ways effectively results in the exposure as hollow and unacceptable (at a moral level) of Mary Crawford’s attitudes; yet it does so in a way that never restricts her arguments, nor ever imposes an alternative view in a forceful manner. Instead, rather than censoring or silencing Mary, Austen gives great freedom to her voice—and by this very means allows her to be the instrument of her own downfall. The broader political message here, I suggest—and one that Austen places as mediating discourse within the issue of post-revolutionary social unity—is that it shows the forceful suppression of discrepant ideas to be unnecessary (since they are inherently flawed and therefore will not ultimately succeed); it therefore appeals for a more reasonable, comprehensive response by providing clear alternatives to ‘undesirable’ attitudes, so laying the foundations, on the one hand, for forgiveness, and on the other, for repentance, neither of which can flourish in a context of oppression. An instance of this occurs quite early in the novel: Mr Rushworth (showing his guests around his family estate) takes them to the chapel—a fine building, but now almost wholly unused.

---

23 1759-1833, English politician and philanthropist, highly influential in the campaign to abolish slavery (achieved in the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act).
24 An obvious symbol for the institution of the Anglican Church at this time.
“It is a handsome chapel, and was formerly in constant use both morning and evening. Prayers were always read in it by the domestic chaplain, within the memory of many; but the late Mr. Rushworth left it off.”

“Every generation has its improvements,” said Miss Crawford, with a smile, to Edmund (…)

“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!” (MP, 8)

“Very fine indeed,” said Miss Crawford, laughing. “It must do the heads of the family a great deal of good to force all the poor housemaids and footmen to leave business and pleasure, and say their prayers here twice a day, while they are inventing excuses themselves for staying away.” (MP, 9)

Mary’s systematic identification with the search for pleasure at the expense both of acceptance and respect for responsibility, frequently ridiculing the very concerns that so appeal to Fanny’s sense of what is right stands in sharp opposition to the code of moral conduct that Mansfield Park appears to support. But the telling point is that it is allowed to stand so vociferously, so unchallenged (until the close of the novel) and so long. In short, Mary’s perspective is, we would say, tolerated, though this is not at all tantamount to its being assumed or approved. Precisely by not silencing Mary, precisely by allowing her such full and free expression—and of course, through careful juxtaposing with Fanny’s own reflections—her irreverent, subversive opinions largely establish their own unacceptability, and, obviating any need for direct conflict, are see to fail.25

Finally, and also paradoxically, I suggest—as I put forward earlier in this discussion—that even the downfall of the wayward characters shows us how the novel mediates for tolerance from a determined Anglican-Evangelical perspective. Their downfall is no small affair, and a novel with Mansfield Park’s sense of moral purpose clearly does not treat such things lightly. But, by focussing on at least some of these characters as they

25 Still more telling examples of such ‘exposure’ are her conversation with Edmund, also at Rushworth’s estate (MP, 9), in which she not only disapproves of his clerical calling but also succeeds in suggesting the anachronism of religion within the modern world and the basic uselessness of the clergy, and, of course, the dénouement of her attachment to Edmund (MP, 47), in which she sees the moral destructiveness of her brother’s affair with Maria Rushworth, née Bertram, as little other than a social error in need of a quick fix.
review and regret their failings, the door is implicitly left open for their repentance and regeneration. “Je ne regrette rien” is a good soundbite, but it’s a poor recipe for a happy life, since it militates against the ability to learn from past mistakes and thereby to recalibrate values for a better future. Of Henry Crawford we are told:

“…he went off … at last, because he could not help it, regretting Fanny even at the moment, but regretting her infinitely more when all the bustle of [his affair with Maria] was over, and a very few months had taught him, by the force of contrast, to place a yet higher value on the sweetness of her temper, the purity of her mind, and the excellence of her principles.

That punishment, the public punishment of disgrace, should in a just measure attend his share of the offence is, we know, not one of the barriers which society gives to virtue. In this world the penalty is less equal than could be wished; but without presuming to look forward to a juster appointment hereafter, we may fairly consider a man of sense, like Henry Crawford, to be providing for himself no small portion of vexation and regret: vexation that must rise sometimes to self-reproach, and regret to wretchedness, in having so requited hospitality, so injured family peace, so forfeited his best, most estimable, and endeared acquaintance, and so lost the woman whom he had rationally as well as passionately loved. (MP, 48)

We might easily mistake this for the triumphant revelling in the antagonist’s fall; but to do so would be to have missed the deeper message that has been relayed throughout the novel and that, as we have seen, has both religious and political intentions. For, with the expression “a man of sense”, Austen is not suggesting that Crawford’s intelligence serves only to heighten the intensity of his loss through a fuller comprehension of his misdeeds, Rather, she draws attention to his capacity for moral reflection—the necessary basis of regeneration, personal and collective, spiritual and national—from which in due course reconciliation and acceptance will derive. And this, to a greater or lesser extent, is also the fate that befalls the novel’s other misdoers. Certainly, it is a fate that sees their unequivocal downfall and is one that involves, for the Bertram sisters at least, an almost irreparable rupture from their family. And in this respect, it is not difficult to see how these ‘disorderly elements’—disturbing and undermining the established, consensual patriarchy of their community—stand for the greater, far more bitter divisions that were tearing at English

---

26 This final reflection on a moral untrustworthy gallant strikingly recalls the closing remarks made about the equally unreliable John Willoughby in Sense and Sensibility.
society in the late 1790s and early 1800s. Yet exactly for this reason, having outlined their moral shortcomings and failure, having redressed the balance (albeit in fiction) in favour of communal stability and moral order, the writer’s deep sense of the Christian need for a restoration of harmony through forgiveness brings closure to this period of disruption. And in its place, Austen makes a call for peace.