Janna HalfDesiQueen

Dr. Advisor Lady

ENGL Class On Jane Austen

14 March 2014

"Fanny Was Quite Oppressed": Patriarchal Violence In the Name of Empire

The novels of Jane Austen self-consciously exist in a context governed by the power of empire, and by the abuse of that power by its agents. The common thread throughout the majority of Austen scholarship ignores that abuse of power as it relates domestic patriarchy to imperial domination, in favor of a reading that scorns sexual promiscuity and celebrates the virtue of domestic protection of women from amoral and usually socially impotent young men. In his book *What Matters in Jane Austen?*, John Mullan tells us that "in Austen, as in the eighteenth-century novels from which she learned, pre-marital sex happens because a young woman gets into the hands of a rakish man, not because two people simply cannot resist each other" (173). Readings such as this favor the idea that Austen only presents ignoble young men as purveyors of sexual violence, which not only does a disservice to the individual female characters being studied, but also devalues the connections that Austen ties between empire and rape culture. Across her novels, some of the most vicious purveyors of sexual violence come from the institutions that were, to her contemporaries, considered the most noble of professions, given their honorable status in furtherance of British interests in the colonies. Austen uses these moments of violence to make a point about the holy trinity of colonial power – the British military, the Anglican church, and the private citizens who owned slaves – allowed men to subjugate women at home, because furtherance of subjugation abroad cannot be accomplished without first normalizing it at home.

Jane Austen wrote in a constant state of quietly subversive feminism, and would often demonstrate the pervasive and willingly unseen effects of male violence upon female bodies by very subtly putting female characters in positions of victimization. Male ownership of women is dealt with explicitly in *Mansfield Park* as an allegory for slavery, and *Northanger Abbey* as an alternative to traditional literary tropes of Gothic horror, and *Emma* with its overt analogy for rape. In the first of these listed novels, Fanny Price is the answer to people of color in terms of free labor in the form of slavery and a store of economic value; her acquaintance Mary Crawford is an answer to the concept of slavery in terms of the idea that men have total mastery of the fate of the women nominally in their care, and despite how abhorrent a woman's relationship with her guardian was, she was ruined if he did not do what he ought by her. *Emma* tells us about how a society built by men, for men, privileges men with a horrifying scope of male access to female bodies, and how this needed to be not only overlooked but permitted. General Tilney's abuse of his daughter Eleanor in *Northanger Abbey* answers the idea of horror involving ghosts and monsters and vampires and murder with the idea that the truly horrific is much more universal, and much more hidden, than any such monstrous ideas.

Fanny Price, Emma Woodhouse, and Eleanor Tilney together represent the trinity of consequences associated with male domination of women, and the scars that those women bear of that domination for the rest of their lives. Austen's larger point of the extended narrative presented throughout all three of the novels in question is that the forces that enable British imperialism abroad are also necessary for the patriarchy to maintain its power at home: those who are not wealthy white men need to be oppressed, and this oppression is accomplished on multiple different levels, and to different short-term ends. The long-term goal of both missions, the domestic and the imperial, is the same: those who are wealthy white men are entitled to assert

their dominance over all who are *not* wealthy white men by any means necessary, and such dominance is encouraged in all three major arms of imperial patriarchy, i.e., the church, the military, and the plantation-based economy.

Mansfield Park is the first of the novels discussed to be published, and so has the most overt components of the extended analogy between domestic patriarchy and imperial violence. Fanny becomes the physical property of her uncle Sir Thomas Bertram as a child, and he invests in her in the form of housing, food, and a small amount of education in the hope that he will one day be able to sell her in the marriage market. Austen makes this most clear to us by using similar language to refer to Fanny and landed property, specifically the word "improvement." Upon Fanny's uncle's return from his slave-operated sugar plantation in Antigua, he specifically makes note of the returns that his investment in Fanny is already yielding:

> [Fanny] was quite oppressed. […] [Sir Thomas] led her nearer the light and looked at her again—inquired particularly after her health, and then, correcting himself, observed that he need not inquire, for her appearance spoke sufficiently on that point. A fine blush having succeeded the previous paleness of her face, he was justified in his belief of her equal improvement in health and beauty. (Austen, *MP* 208)

Sir Thomas's status as a slave owner, of course, clarifies the nature of his commodification of Fanny in that he is used to buying and selling human bodies, especially the bodies of those not permitted to speak for themselves, as he does not allow Fanny to speak here. Indeed, Austen tells us that Fanny is "oppressed" by her uncle's attentions. The fact that Sir Thomas is leading Fanny nearer to the light is also indicative of the colonial power in slave-holding: a common trope in imperial thought was that slavery was good for the slaves by way of enlightening them as to the

true ways of the world. It would be all too easy to ignore the elements of sex slavery present in this situation, as Stefanie Markovitz does in her article "Jane Austen and the Happy Fall," because a surface reading is fully satisfied by dehumanizing Fanny and turning her into only a commodity, as her uncle apparently does. But it is not enough to do so. The attitude that combines women with land is highlighted by Maria Bertram's fiancé Mr. Rushworth, who spends much of chapter six discussing his planned future renovations – "improvements" – to his estate at Sotherton, the most notable of which involve somehow modernizing a course of woodlands complete with a stream (Austen, *MP* 66). Again, the implication is that the preexisting independent situation is disgusting in that it is not inherently bound to imperial patriarchy, and that must be changed. As in the body of Fanny, so in the land at Sotherton, and so in the colonies in the Caribbean.

Sir Thomas's investment in Fanny very nearly yields a return in the form of her sale in the marriage market to Henry Crawford, the son of another wealthy landed family. Such a connection for Sir Thomas, of course, is reliant on the idea that Fanny is not a human being, in the same way that he and his peers among the slave-owning community did not feel it necessary to see slaves as people. Fanny is scolded endlessly for being ungrateful enough to refuse Henry Crawford's proposal in a series of scenes evocative of the colonial idea that the British and other imperial powers were actually saving the poor brown people from their uncivilized selves by systematically oppressing them. Through Fanny, Austen is proving that men have within the Regency patriarchy the right to buy and sell female sexuality. Women, then, like slaves, are to be traded for the profit of their owners. This attitude was not only complicit with that of empire but also necessary to it – normalizing the idea of commodification of human bodies on the grounds that they are less human than others at home allowed for it to continue abroad.

If Fanny is Austen's exploration of how male heads of household can trade the women supposedly in their care for profit as part of a slave trade reflective of the trade that keeps Caribbean sugar plantations running, then Eleanor Tilney is Austen's manifesto on the near-limitless powers of men to use and abuse the women in their households without any sort of check. Eleanor comes to us in *Northanger Abbey*, Austen's parody of the Gothic horror novel, and she first appears as the gentle sister of the novel's romantic hero, Henry Tilney. She is the dutiful daughter of her father the general, and she is the polite and proper nominal female head of his household following the death of his wife. Most Austen scholarship holds her to be the most level-headed character in the book, as Susan Zlotnik exemplifies in her study of the economic elements of the marriage market in the novel: "Eleanor possesses a clear-sighted understanding of woman's status as a commodity in the marriage market, although this insight into women's commodification does not set her free but merely depresses and immobilizes her" (279-80). Eleanor is everything that is goodness and propriety, and at the end of the book she, like so many Austen characters in her same role, is married to a nearly-anonymous wealthy gentleman. The narrative does beg the question, though, of who exactly Eleanor's new husband is, where he comes from, and why exactly a sensible young woman such as Eleanor would be so willing to enter into a hasty marriage. Simply, Austen tells us that Eleanor's reason is to get out of her father's house, where she is a victim of an ongoing pattern of sexual assault at his hands. The readings that critics such as Zlotnik give to Eleanor, casting her as a passive character who is only pragmatic when her agency is absolutely necessary, do the character a disservice. Eleanor's ongoing victimization makes her two acts of defiance (her removal of Catherine from Northanger Abbey and her marriage at the end of the novel) so much braver, because it is not in the habit of abuse victims to actively work against their abusers. In fact, the idea that most

readings of Eleanor do ignore the implied ongoing pattern of abuse is in line with the same patriarchal blindness that Austen is criticizing – it is much easier and less controversial, after all, to write an article studying economics in the marriage market than it is to discuss what exactly the existence of incestuous abuse does to the woman as a victim. Ignoring Eleanor's victimization makes it easier for the general to be viewed as a one-dimensional figure: as a stern patriarch in academia, and as a brave enforcer of British power abroad within the novel. In both cases, ignoring his abuse of Eleanor serves the purpose of focusing only on his simpler, more easily understood role in promoting empire.

Austen does not make this shadow narrative as explicit as the shadow narrative in *Mansfield Park*, and there is only one moment in which, in a moment of great distress at the fact that she has to turn Catherine out of Northanger Abbey, Eleanor almost slips up and reveals the abuse to her friend: "'You are mistaken, indeed,' returned Eleanor, looking at her most compassionately – 'It is no one from Woodston. It is my father himself.' Her voice faltered, and her eyes were turned to the ground as she mentioned his name" (Austen, *NA* 231). Eleanor can look at Catherine with compassion when Catherine is worried that Eleanor is distressed about the potential of bad news form Eleanor's brother Henry, but as soon as Eleanor mentions her father, the fortitude of character that so defines her is gone. Eyes in this novel are used primarily as a medium of exchanging information: Catherine's fascinated eyes dart around Bath when she first arrives, Mrs. Allen's eyes judge Mrs. Thorpe's gown, the eyes of men move constantly over Isabella Thorpe, and Henry Tilney's eyes are what first assure Catherine of his good character. In casting down her eyes, Eleanor is withholding information and safeguarding a source of shame. And she does this in the context of getting Catherine out of her father's house and away to safety as quickly as possible, because without Henry in the house, not only is Eleanor's nominal

protection gone, but Eleanor is also well aware that Catherine herself could be a potential victim. As readers, our only confirmation that the general wants Catherine out of the house is Eleanor's word, and there is nothing to confirm that Eleanor is telling the truth. It is not until three chapters later that Catherine and the reader are told that the General was offended by Catherine's lack of wealth, which is plenty of time for Eleanor and Henry to agree upon that as their cover story. Catherine and the reader both happily swallow that as a perfectly reasonable explanation.

Henry's role in his sister's abuse is never made quite clear, although Paul Morrison notes that Henry is still a figure of authority in his younger sister's life, and we are not told whether he uses that authority for good or for ill. Morrison does, however, connect male dominance to the force of empire, and acknowledges that the subversion of one could contribute to the subversion of the other: "Yet if the instability of the opposition [of colonized people to the Europeans] subverts Henry's ethnocentrisms, it nevertheless remains the basis of the sexual politics of […] the power Henry wields over Catherine and Eleanor" (3). Morrison, though reading Eleanor as a survivor of physical abuse rather than sexual, does explore what Austen is saying about the "lesser of two evils" idea – to marry into a possibility of an unknown danger, or to keep enduring the familiar danger. Morrison makes no extrapolations as to whether Henry uses his powers to benefit Eleanor or to further harm her; Morrison makes no speculations as to whether or not Henry is aware of the ongoing pattern of abuse, but does acknowledge that if he is aware and chooses to do nothing, he is one of the most morally reprehensible characters Austen ever created, and therefore possibly the worst match of any Austen heroine.

The joke, of course, is that there is literally nothing of the fantastical nature of horror that Catherine hopes to find going on in Northanger Abbey; the horror is much more accessible and present in the violence that the general visits upon his daughter. And nobody cares about that

violence, because sexual abuse is quiet, and domestic sexual abuse in the households of men who are due an enormous amount of respect from the rest of the patriarchy they're serving, is practically invisible. The inclination of society at large, in the Regency as in right now, is to disbelieve any accusations of its existence, especially when the abuser is a great man. Eleanor Tilney is completely dependent on her father, financially and socially; the success of the empire is also completely dependent on high-ranking military members who are willing to do violence. Eleanor has no money or friends of her own, and so she has no choice but to allow her father to abuse his absolute authority. Furthermore, if she publicly acknowledges the sexual abuse, then she completely destroys any chance she ever has of marriage and so freedom from her abuser. What Austen proves through Tilney's abuse of Eleanor is that men, on the individual level, can and do take advantage of the prevailing distrust and infantilization of women on the social level to abuse the women around them without fear of any sort of repercussion. General Tilney's military position invokes the idea that men who are horrifically violent in their own households maintain the empire, but it is this violence that makes the such effective stewards of empire. One would have to be horrifically violent, after all, to be the military arm of a program that encourages rape and murder in the furtherance of economic interests.

Austen was aware, of course, that the economic interests in and of themselves were not enough justification for colonialism, and that empire necessitated a better excuse for constant foreign invasion. She followed this with the logical conclusion that the agents of that "better excuse" would of course be due the same terrible rights and privileges of the other two arms of colonialism. If the military and the slave-owning class are two parts of the trinity of the British empire, then the Anglican church would be the third. Members of the clergy in England were in the unique position of having absolute spiritual power over their congregation but also having the

opportunity to marry and therefore become the patriarchal head of a family unit; such dual privilege could imbue clergymen with the idea that they were entitled to universal access to women's bodies. This is exemplified by the scene in *Emma* in which the vicar Mr. Elton proposes marriage to the titular character in a moving carriage, without Emma's having any protection or representation from his advances:

> Scarcely had they passed the sweep-gate and joined the other carriage, than she found her subject cut up—her hand seized—her attention demanded, and Mr. Elton actually making violent love to her: availing himself of the precious opportunity, declaring sentiments which must be already well known, hoping—fearing—adoring—ready to die if she refused him; but flattering himself that his ardent attachment and unequalled love and unexampled passion could not fail of having some effect, and in short, very much resolved on being seriously accepted as soon as possible. (Austen, *Emma* 140)

The "violent love" being made here is explicitly with Elton's words, but the physical proximity that Elton assumes to Emma's body, his grabbing of her hand, and his assumption of her consent and disregard for the fact that it is denied, all bear the hallmark of a rape scene. Austen, as the daughter and sister of two clergymen, was well aware of the power that was simultaneously modest in scale but unlimited in scope, and that the modesty was complicit in the universality in that it helped the power appear limited on the surface, which allowed the potential damage of that power to go unnoticed. The patriarchal might of religious men could easily be invisible, given that it is supposed to be rooted in an inherently good concept – that of God's love. Austen, through Mr. Elton, is proving the insidiousness of a belief in that benevolent power. A large part of the British colonial mission, as with almost all colonial missions, was interested in bringing

heathen souls to Christ. Essential to this idea is the foundational belief that because people native to the lands that were so violently colonized were inherently incapable of self-governance, and so it was the responsibility of members of the clergy to save them from themselves. This responsibility, conveniently enough, required that clergymen be given unlimited right to interfere with any and all aspects of the lives of individuals who were subjected to European occupation. Elton's attitude towards Emma, and later towards Augusta Elton, is directly reflective of how Austen (less so in *Emma* than in *Mansfield Park*) frames the attitudes of colonizers in relation to the colonized; that is to say, Austen presents Elton's thoughts about women as revolving around the idea that women are incapable of knowing their own minds, and are to be put on pedestals and objectified and coddled and enlightened beyond what they have the scope to do for themselves, but never trusted with any sort of agency.

Austen was well aware of what happened to women when they were left alone with morally bankrupt and self-justifying men, and she was well aware how the domination of white men in one realm led to increased acceptance of the domination of white men in all realms. Furthermore, the free pass that colonialism gave to men to touch women's bodies was a source of deep concern for her, and she was well aware of its various forms and therefore increased danger. There is a reason that Austen constantly put female characters in danger from representatives of the men who did supposedly good work in the name of King and Country, and it is that she saw the patriarchy for what it was: a pervasive and multifaceted structure that simultaneously needed and enabled white men exhibiting violent power over everyone else in order to maintain the ability to exercise that power.

Works Cited

Austen, Jane. *Emma*. Ed. Richard Cronin and Dorothy McMillan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1815. Print.

Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park*. Ed. John Wiltshire. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1814. Print.

Austen, Jane. *Northanger Abbey*. Ed. Barbara M. Benedict. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1817. Print.

Markovitz, Stefanie. "Jane Austen and the Happy Fall." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 47.4 (2007): 779-97.*JSTOR*. Web. 1 Mar. 2014.

Morrison, Paul. "Enclosed in Openness: Northanger Abbey and the Domestic Carceral." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 33.1 (1991): 1-23. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 Mar. 2014.

Mullan, John. “Is There Any Sex in Jane Austen?” *What Matters in Jane Austen?: Twenty Crucial Puzzles Solved*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012. 162-78. Print.

Mullan, John. “What Makes Characters Blush?” *What Matters in Jane Austen?: Twenty Crucial Puzzles Solved*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012. 162-78. Print.

Zlotnik, Susan. "From Involuntary Object to Voluntary Spy: Female Agency, Novels, and the Marketplace in "Northanger Abbey."." *Studies in the Novel* 41.3 (2009): 277-92. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 10 Mar. 2014.