

In Praise of Hurry: *Mansfield Park* ❖

Yih-Dau Wu*

ABSTRACT

Jane Austen's novel *Mansfield Park* (1814) has long been read as her most vocal endorsement of Edmund Burke's ideal of slow and progressive improvement. While the failed theatrical performances, the hero's disapproval of fashionable landscape gardening and the final reward of the heroine's patient endurance all seem to justify this assumption, I argue that there is a pervasive sense of urgency and restlessness in the novel, one that Austen celebrates rather than condemns. In this article, I first examine how Austen draws upon the problem of abrupt closure to create her sentences, plots and characters. In so doing, she challenges the Burkean association of precipitate resolutions with disorder and destruction. Austen's disagreement with Burke in fact goes further. If Burke maintains that rash decisions produce chaos and that slow development promises real benefit, Austen demonstrates an alternative appreciation of speed in her novel, where the demand for immediate action ushers in positive alteration and lazy acceptance of the status quo descends into irresponsible procrastination. *Mansfield Park* takes shape as Austen explores the virtue of hurry.

KEYWORDS: Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, Edmund Burke, hurry, procrastination, closure

❖ This essay is an abridged version of a chapter in the author's doctoral thesis.

* Received: February 23, 2015; Accepted: September 3, 2015

Yih-Dau Wu, Assistant Professor, Department of English, National Chengchi University, Taiwan
E-mail: ydw20@nccu.edu.tw

頌讚匆促：《曼斯菲爾莊園》

吳易道*

摘 要

珍·奧斯汀的小說《曼斯菲爾莊園》常被認為是奧氏作品中思想最保守的一本書，因為書中對於激進革命(revolution)的批判與對漸進改變 (progressive improvement)的嚮往和十八世紀末英國保守派思想家愛德蒙·柏克對法國大革命的抨擊不謀而合。本文從匆促(hurry)此一觀點出發，嘗試在《曼斯菲爾莊園》一書中找出奧斯汀和柏克意見相左之處。柏克反對法國大革命的重要原因之一是他認為該革命來的太快太突然，柏克認為法國人民過於倉促的決定註定該國的政局改革以悲劇收場。然而奧斯汀巧妙地將柏克害怕的匆促編織到她的小說中，匆促此一概念不僅塑造了書中人物，掌控了情節安排，更滲透到句法結構當中。換言之，如果柏克認為匆促會帶來毀滅與混亂，奧斯汀釋放了匆促的創造潛力。此外，奧斯汀亦不同意柏克對於緩慢改變的理想與憧憬。《曼斯菲爾莊園》中對拖延(procrastination) 的負面呈現顯示了柏克所謂漸進的改變易淪為懶散的安於現狀。相反的，小說中對於當機立斷的果決行為往往有正面的評價。奧斯汀認為匆促還是有其必要與獨特的價值。《曼斯菲爾莊園》並非奧斯汀思想上最保守的一本小說，因為它對於匆促的頌讚是和保守柏克的想法背道而馳的。

關鍵字：珍·奧斯汀、《曼斯菲爾莊園》、愛德蒙·柏克、
匆促、拖延、結束

* 吳易道，國立政治大學英國語文學系助理教授。
E-mail: ydw20@nccu.edu.tw

In his famous review of Jane Austen's novels Walter Scott praises her truthful representation of everyday details and contrasts it favorably with the sensationalism of terror fiction in the 1790s. The latter style of novel is sensational because, Scott suggests, "violent changes of time, of place, and of circumstances, hurry [the hero] forward from one scene to another, and his adventures will usually be found only connected with each other because they have happened to the same individual." The former strain of fiction is refreshing and reassuring because it depicts life not as a rapid torrent but as "a placid or stagnant lake," from whose apparent tranquility important lessons can be drawn (qtd. in Southam 1: 61-63). Narrative rhythm plays a key role in Scott's attempt to differentiate popular Gothic novelists like Matthew Lewis and Ann Radcliffe from Austen. While Lewis and Radcliffe seldom allow their protagonists to rest in peace, quickly involving them in one extraordinary circumstance after another, Austen privileges quiet and long introspection. Impulsive activities are rarely accorded authorial approval in her published novels. Instead, those moments of restlessness are frequently subordinated to the overarching concern with social order, peace and harmony. And nowhere is this point more clearly illustrated than in *Mansfield Park*, where Mrs. Norris's failure to engage in quiet thoughtfulness and to accept delayed gratification frequently meets ridicule, contempt and defeat.

Austen's apparent distaste for impetuous action and immediate effect assumes a significant political resonance in *Mansfield Park*, arguably her most "conservative" novel thanks to its obvious Burkean allusions. In his influential *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) Edmund Burke expressly condemns excessive haste with which a political reform is carried out. Throughout this work Burke identifies the intolerance of a due process and "precipitate resolutions" as the source of all evil in revolutionary France (35). Burke's skepticism of drastic revolution that overthrows the established order overnight and his preference for a slow and progressive development surface in *Mansfield Park* through Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram's joint disapproval of Mr. Rushworth's plan to "improve" his Sotherton estate. Rushworth has been too hasty in forming a scheme of significant alteration. He is infected with the contemporary enthusiasm for landscape gardening and wants to cut down the entire avenue immediately after he witnesses how a designer transforms his friend's estate. Upon hearing this scheme, Fanny laments the unfortunate downfall of old trees and Edmund remarks: "I should

not put myself into the hands of an improver. I would rather have an inferior degree of beauty, of my own choice, and acquired progressively” (*Mansfield Park* [MP] 66-67). Their shared regret in general, and Edmund’s use of the word “progressively” in particular, provides strong evidence supporting the dominant critical consensus that Austen embraces the Burkean ideal of slow and progressive improvement.³ Hurry, it seems, has no place of honor in *Mansfield Park*.

Indeed, in a novel concerned with repudiating indecent haste and rash decisions, the ability to endure a tedious process and to wait patiently is a prominent virtue. Many critics praise the heroine Fanny Price precisely for this reason. Intrigued by “the story of a girl who triumphs by doing nothing,” Tony Tanner argues that we should pay attention to the consequence of Fanny’s submission to passivity. “She sits, she waits, she endures; and, when she is finally promoted, through marriage, into an unexpectedly high social position, it seems to be a reward not so much for her vitality as for her extraordinary immobility.” Fanny’s final triumph suggests that, for Austen, patience and temperance hold the key to “the proper preservation of society” (143-46). Ruth Bernard Yeazell is another critic who reads *Mansfield Park* in terms of virtue rewarded. This text, she argues, is “not so much a story of growing up as a myth of recognition, a fantasy of being at last acknowledged for the princess one truly is.” It is Fanny’s history of “waiting to be discovered” and at the end of her waiting there stands her prince and a comfortable home (164-65).

If Fanny’s willingness to wait pleases some readers, it annoys others, most famously Lionel Trilling. Irritated by Fanny’s obsessive allegiance to inaction, Trilling identifies it with restraints and boredom that sap life of its pleasure. It is this unlovable heroine that makes the novel unappetizing for readers enamored of the liveliness that *Pride and Prejudice* embodies. These are his influential remarks: “Perhaps no other work of genius has ever spoken, or seemed to speak, so insistently for cautiousness and constraint, even for dullness. No other great novel has so anxiously asserted the need to find security, to establish, in fixity and enclosure, a refuge from the dangers of openness and chance. . . . Most troubling of all is its preference for rest over motion” (184-85). That Fanny’s patience can be equally commendable and

³ For critics who play an important role in inaugurating and consolidating this consensus, see Duckworth 35-80; Tuite 98-155 and Karounos 715-36.

disturbing is highly suggestive. It encourages us to consider an interesting possibility that impatience deserves our praise as much as our censure. This article seeks to turn this possibility into certainty and argues that, in *Mansfield Park*, Austen does not, like Burke, regard “precipitate resolutions” as a destructive power to be avoided positively. On the contrary, she relies heavily on them to construct her characters, plot and even the texture of her narrative prose. Scrutinizing the pervasive sense of urgency and restlessness in this novel would vindicate the merit of hurry.

I. Abrupt Closure

Many early readers of *Mansfield Park* have found its conclusion peculiar. Canvassing the reception of this novel by her friends and neighbors, Austen records that a certain friend called Edward criticizes the ending as “unnatural.” He does not believe that Henry Crawford could elope with Maria Bertram “when so much in love with Fanny.” Austen’s niece Fanny Knight and a Miss Clewes are similarly “not satisfied with the end” and “want more Love between [Fanny] & Edmund” (qtd. in Southam 1: 48-49). These instances of readerly dissatisfaction indicate that Austen does not provide sufficient detail to make her conclusion convincing. For those unsatisfied readers, she should have explained more why Henry’s professed constancy for Fanny falters in the face of the woman he does not love or dramatized more the transfer of Edmund’s affection from Mary Crawford to Fanny. Why didn’t Austen do so?

Claudia Johnson’s comment on Edmund’s final marriage offers a clue. She writes: “When Edmund finally gets around to asking Fanny to marry him, the narrator intrudes with an unwontedly Sternean garrulity that obliges us to consider their alliance as a perfunctorily opted anticlimax the narrator washes her hands of, rather than a properly wished-for and well-deserved union towards which the parties have been moving all along” (114). At the heart of this observation lies a criticism of undue haste. Austen does not show us a slow but steady progress towards marital happiness but replaces it with an abrupt anti-climax. Johnson’s allusion to hand-washing suggests the author is impatient with the mess she has created and is eager to get rid of it as soon as possible. The narrator’s famous declaration confirms this point: “Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subject as soon as I can, impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable

comfort, and to have done with all the rest” (*MP* 533). This is a call for hurrying towards a decisive conclusion, one that can wind up all the on-going storylines and quickly put an end to morally dubious scenarios. The remaining ten pages of the novel appropriately respond to this call. Thus the development of Edmund’s attraction to Fanny is briskly summarized: “Having once set out, and felt that he had done so, on this road to happiness, there was nothing on the side of prudence to stop him or make his progress slow” (*MP* 544). Thus the illicit relationship between Maria and Henry is concluded with one sentence: “She hoped to marry him, and they continued together till she was obliged to be convinced that such hope was vain, and till the disappointment and wretchedness arising from the conviction, rendered her temper so bad, and her feelings for him so like hatred, as to make them for a while each other’s punishment, and then induce a voluntary separation” (*MP* 536). The repetition of the conjunction “and” postpones the arrival of a full stop, implying the narrator’s eagerness to report all we need to know about the sinful pair with as few sentences as possible. The narrator’s impatience, probably fueled by moral indignation, determines how a sentence is constructed and how much information it carries.

The effect of this impatience is certainly not confined to sentence formation but is felt in the overall quality of Austen’s prose. The last chapter of *Mansfield Park* where narrative impatience dominates differs from the preceding pages inasmuch as it transgresses the bounds of narrative. Most narratologists consider actions and events to be constituent elements of a narrative. Eventlessness generally belongs to the realm of lyric poetry.⁴ The narrator of *Mansfield Park* gives the last chapter a lyric touch because, in a hurry to conclude the novel, she halts all actions and minimizes all events. We are denied any conversation or interaction between characters. Instead, via free indirect speech, the narrator introduces us to the inner world of most major characters. As Clara Tuite has argued, “free indirect discourse is *the* strategy by which Austen lyricizes the novel” because, by externalizing the internal development of the human mind, it “displays the full lyric potential of

⁴ Austen’s literary contemporaries subscribe to this connection between eventlessness and poeticness. Coleridge expresses his concern that Robert Southey’s interest in narrative may compromise his poetic creativity: “I am fearful that he will begin to rely too much on *story* and *event* in his poems, to the neglect of those *lofty imaginings*, that are peculiar to, and definitive of, the poet.” Wordsworth similarly prioritizes “lofty imaginings” over mundane activities. In “Michael,” he aspires to “a story” “ungarnish’d with events” (qtd. in Clayton 12).

prose” (72-74). Gabrielle Starr further amplifies Tuite’s point. She writes: “Free indirect discourse in the novel and the romantic lyric has something important in common: both connected consciousness to the facts of literary form, blending consciousness into words, phrases, and the controlling factors of representation, moving both genres toward techniques that emphasize what is half-created and what perceived” (200). Dominated by free indirect discourse, the last chapter of *Mansfield Park* shows a conspicuous lyric turn. The cause of employing this narrative technique is equally important as its effect. The narrator infiltrates the consciousness of the characters, usurping their right to speak for themselves, because she desires quickly to put an end to the novel. The demand for hurry, in other words, creates an unconventional prose with poetic grace.

In this respect, the precipitate conclusion of *Mansfield Park* confirms the common critical assumption of this novel’s pervasive lyricism, in the sense that it frequently alludes to Wordsworth’s poetic experiences. Fanny’s rhapsody about the influence of time on the human mind (“How wonderful, how very wonderful the operations of time, and the changes of the human mind!”) is evidently Wordsworthian (*MP* 243). The famous East room, where we observe a transparency of Tintern Abbey, recalls Wordsworth’s poem of the same name. Fanny’s reflection in that chamber, which allows her to “redeem experiences of suffering and loss by recognizing them as part of the texture of self and history,” distinguishes Wordsworthian memory from that celebrated by eighteenth-century moral philosophers (Deresiewicz 58). To uncover Wordsworth’s presence in this novel is to argue that Austen’s narrative prose can beautifully accommodate lyric moments. This argument is particularly useful for critics attempting to defend Austen against Charlotte Brontë’s famous critique: “Can there be a great artist without poetry?”⁵ But the Wordsworthian allusions in *Mansfield Park* are not unequivocal. Austen incorporates them into her text, only to brush them aside with abrupt impatience.

Consider the famous star-gazing scene. Fanny and Edmund stand by the window and look at the starry sky. Fanny exclaims: “Here’s harmony! . . . Here’s repose! . . . Here’s what may tranquillize every care, and lift the heart

⁵ On 18 January 1848, Charlotte Brontë wrote a letter to G.H. Lewes, in which she questioned Lewes’s claim that Austen could be a great writer without demonstrating “the ravishing enthusiasm of poetry” in her works (qtd. in Southam 1:127).

to rapture! When I look out on such a night as this, I feel as if there could be neither wickedness nor sorrow in the world; and there certainly would be less of both if the sublimity of Nature were more attended to, and people were carried more out of themselves by contemplating such a scene” (*MP* 132). Fanny’s praise of “the sublimity of Nature” and its redemptive power obviously echoes Wordsworth’s lyric rapture. When she “look[s] out on such a night” through a window, Fanny sees not only the Cassiopeia constellation but also the images of herself and Edmund mirrored on the glass. This is a quintessentially Wordsworthian moment of self-reflection. However, no sooner has this affective effusion started to impregnate Austen’s narrative prose with a poetic touch, than it is suspended. Mary Crawford’s glee begins and Edmund delays his plan to leave the house and view the stars with Fanny: “We will stay till this is finished” (*MP* 132). This interruption is highly suggestive. It is as if Austen herself grew suspicious of the lyric turn of her prose. Putting her words into Edmund’s mouth, she postpones it indefinitely. Yielding to Mary’s temptation, Edmund forgets the star-gazing plan altogether.

Austen’s abrupt termination of the Wordsworthian moment not only implies her qualified appreciation of Romantic lyricism. It also supports Richard Simpson’s important, but much-ignored, claim that Austen “seems to have an ethical dread of the poetic rapture.”⁶ Simpson’s comment suggests that Austen’s objection to Wordsworth has ethical significance. Wordsworth’s “poetic rapture,” as Fanny’s enthusiastic outburst suggests, is an aesthetic and amoral experience unconcerned with a definitive conclusion. Short-circuiting Fanny’s eulogy of nature complicates the purely lyric experience, not least because it introduces the problem of abrupt closure and its moral implications. Edmund’s sudden backtracking not merely exposes Fanny to Mrs. Norris’s bullying attack, but also prefigures his temporary lapse of moral judgement under the influence of seductive Mary. Abruptness endows closure with a moral import.

It is in such an attempt to moralize a precipitate end that we can see Austen’s critical rewriting of the Wordsworthian transcendental moment. The

⁶ Simpson’s review of Austen’s novels appeared in the *Memoir, North British Review* in 1870. In this article he compares Austen to Shakespeare but acknowledges her lack of poetic genius: “Within her range her characterization is truly Shakespearean; but she has scarcely a spark of poetry. . . . [I]n fact, she was just so far a poet as a critic might be expected to be. She even seems to have had an ethical dread of the poetic rapture” (qtd. in Southam 1: 243-44).

visionary experience in Wordsworth's poems possesses disruptive force and frequently cuts short the forgoing narrative. In the sixth book of *The Prelude* (1805) Wordsworth describes his crossing the Simplon Pass in August 1790. He and his fellow travelers lose their way and are obliged to turn back. Their enquiry of direction and the local peasant's surprising reply mark the climax of this incident: "Hard of belief, we questioned him again, / And all the answers which the man returned / To our inquiries, in their sense and substance / Translated by the feelings which we had, / Ended in this — that we had crossed the Alps" (520-24). Immediately after this discovery, the poet's story is interrupted by his own imagination:

Imagination! — lifting up itself
 Before the eye and progress of my song
 Like an unfathered vapour, here that power,
 In all the might of its endowments, came
 Athwart me. I was lost as in a cloud,
 Halted without a struggle to break through
 And now, recovering, to my soul I say
 'I recognise thy glory'. In such strength
 Of usurpation, in such visitings
 Of awful promise, when the light of sense
 Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us
 The invisible world, . . . (525-36)

We never know what Wordsworth sees in the "invisible world." As is usually the case in Wordsworth's poems, this poetic rapture foregrounds the power of his imagination and pays little attention to the (narrative) rupture it produces. The consequent disruption is largely detached from ethical concerns.

Although Austen could not have read *The Prelude*, which was published posthumously in 1850, this sudden disruption of narrative in favor of imagination is reconfigured in *Mansfield Park* with an unmistakable moral message. After his return from Antigua, Sir Thomas desires to know the history of the family theatricals. He questions Mrs. Norris as to why she allows her nieces and nephews to stage a scandalous play during his absence. Uncomfortable under this interrogation, Mrs. Norris finds that "her only resource was to get out of the subject as fast as possible and turn the current of Sir Thomas's ideas into a happier channel" (*MP* 220). Therefore, without

waiting for Sir Thomas to finish his question, she boasts of her determined visit to Sotherton, which allegedly facilitates Maria's engagement with Rushworth.

“I know how great, how justly great your influence is with Lady Bertram and his children, and am the more concerned that it should not have been”—

“My dear Sir Thomas, if you had seen the state of *that* day! I thought we should never got through them . . . and poor old coachman would attend us, out of his great love and kindness, though . . . I could not help going to him up in his room before we set off to advise him not to venture . . . when we got into the rough lanes about Stoke, where what with frost and snow upon beds of stones, it was worse than any thing you can imagine”
(*MP* 221-22)

Sir Thomas's search for stories is effectively frustrated by Mrs. Norris's impatient exploitation of imagination. For one thing, she is perhaps fabricating events that never happened, since this anecdote is never alluded to by any other characters. For another, by asking Sir Thomas to envision the difficulties she encounters in bringing about the advantageous marriage, she evades Sir Thomas's accusation that she is responsible for the chaos in his family. If Wordsworth's disruptive imagination carries us to an ethereal realm that transcends everyday occurrences, Mrs. Norris's reminds us of sordid human transactions and of convenient but loveless unions. If Wordsworth bypasses the issue of morality by internalizing disruption as an intellectual experience, Austen presents precipitate closure as a matter of interruption informed by power struggle and moral concerns.

Interruption, the failure to wait until others have finished their speech, is a character flaw that many conduct books in Austen's period specifically denounce. For these conduct manual writers interruption inevitably spoils a conversation, suggesting both disrespect for the person whose speech is cut short and the rudeness of the interrupter. Hannah More in *Strictures on Female Education* (1799), for example, cautions her female readers to avoid “the charge of *inverting* the Apostle's precept, and being *swift* to *speak*, *slow* to *hear*” (2: 66). If More seeks to nip this bad habit in the bud, Austen repeatedly draws upon it to create her characters and stories. This charge of

being swift to speak and slow to hear appropriately captures Mrs. Norris's mannerism. While More's message attempts to persuade intelligent women not to show off their knowledge prematurely in men's presence, Mrs. Norris's frequent interruption of others' speech has little to do with her intellectual capacity. When her fidgeting about the room in search of a button "disturb[s] every body . . . in the midst of her nephew's [William Price's] account of a shipwreck or an engagement" (*MP* 275), she is trying to put an abrupt end to the story in which she finds no interest. Her attempt reflects her characteristic restlessness, her inability to endure a due process and her insistence on immediate satisfaction of her desire.

Mrs. Norris's restive personality easily translates into a vocal demand for hurry that reminds us of her desire for social prestige. A case in point occurs at the end of the Parsonage dinner party. Sir Thomas has a good time there and deliberately "prolong[s] the conversation on dancing" to delay their departure (*MP* 292). His conversation is cut short by Mrs. Norris's noisy bustle:

"Come, Fanny, Fanny, what are you about? We are going. Do not you see your aunt is going? Quick, quick. I cannot bear to keep good old Wilcox waiting. You should always remember the coachman and horses. My dear Sir Thomas, we have settled it that the carriage should come back for you, and Edmund, and William."

Sir Thomas could not dissent, as it had been his own arrangement, previously communicated to his wife and sister; but *that* seemed forgotten by Mrs. Norris, who must fancy that she settled it all by herself. (*MP* 292)

Sir Thomas's patriarchal authority manifests itself most clearly in his ability to control the pace of action and time management of others. It is Sir Thomas alone who can decide when to take his son to Antigua and when to release him. Even his absence from home has the power to delay Maria's marriage, Edmund's ordination and his determination to purchase a new horse for Fanny. It is this authority that Mrs. Norris attempts to usurp here by her demand for hurry. Waiting for the return of his carriage is Sir Thomas's original plan. Taking the words right out of Sir Thomas's mouth, Mrs. Norris betrays her ambition to be the head of Mansfield Park.

The social implications of hurry in this scene can be amplified further. On the face of it, Mrs. Norris appears to be a benevolent mistress who cares about her servants. Her unwillingness to stay longer seems justified by her thoughtfulness for her social inferiors. But Mrs. Norris remembers her waiting servants only when she requires some means of self-defense. Earlier in the novel when Edmund accuses her of exploiting Fanny's labor, she immediately replies: "I am sure I do not know how it was to have been done better, . . . unless I had gone myself . . . but I . . . had promised John Groom to write to Mrs. Jefferies about his son, and the poor fellow was waiting for me half an hour" (*MP* 85). Moreover, the rapid action that Mrs. Norris demands sacrifices Fanny's comfort, suggesting that Fanny's claim to her regard is even less than a coachman's. By hurrying Fanny for the sake of not keeping a servant waiting, Mrs. Norris cruelly exposes her niece's social inferiority to the public. Mrs. Norris's impatience not only puts an abrupt end to an important event in the novel. It makes this end a dramatic moment charged with moral significance.

Through Mrs. Norris's demand for hurry, Austen apparently connects undue haste with dubious social power, as Burke does in his *Reflections*. But in fact *Mansfield Park's* treatment of the quest for immediate resolution differs remarkably from Burke's. Commenting on the political instability in revolutionary France, Burke writes: "Rage and phrenzy will pull down more in half an hour, than prudence, deliberation, and foresight can build up in an hundred year. . . . What your politicians think the marks of a bold, hardy genius, are only proofs of a deplorable want of ability. By their violent haste, and their defiance of the process of nature, they are delivered over blindly to every projector and adventurer, to every alchymist and empiric" (168-70). The revolutionaries' intolerance of the oppressive ancient regime prompts them to overthrow it and allows them to obtain unprecedented power within a short period of time. Ironically, Burke argues, the same impatient desire for rapid resolutions of political difficulties will disorient their political agenda and undermine their newly-acquired power, subordinating their judgement to "every projector and adventurer." Here Burke stresses the destructive nature of haste, accusing it of destabilizing the existing power structure. In sharp contrast, *Mansfield Park* shows that it is impatience for an immediate conclusion, rather than "prudence, deliberation, and foresight," that confirms the distinction between the powerful and the powerless. The rose-cutting

episode illustrates this point clearly. Mrs. Norris asks Fanny to cut roses in hot weather and to carry them to her house without delay. Lady Bertram succinctly reports this event to Edmund: “When the roses were gathered, your aunt wished to have them, and then you know they must be taken home” (85). Lady Bertram’s words confirm who is in charge of Mansfield Park during Sir Thomas’s absence. The quick succession of verbs in her remark imitates the dispatch with which Mrs. Norris demands Fanny’s service. Her use of “must” further accords her sister’s demand for hurry with the reputation of authority, which is exactly what she desires.

Parallel to Burke’s disapprobation of undue haste is his advocacy of the virtue of slow development. Reproving members of the National Assembly in France who find “glories in performing in a few months the work of ages,” Burke argues that a positive political reform must proceed progressively. He writes:

It is one of the excellencies of a method in which time is amongst the assistants, that its operation is slow, and in some cases almost imperceptible. . . . Time is required to produce that union of minds which alone can produce all the good we aim at. Our patience will achieve more than our force. . . . By a slow and well-sustained progress, the effect of each step is watched; the good or ill success of the first, gives light to us in the second; and so, from light to light, we are conducted with safety through the whole series. (169-70)

Mansfield Park apparently absorbs this Burkean ideal that “a slow and well-sustained progress” is crucial to the correction and conservation of the established order. Fanny’s gradual assimilation into Mansfield and her staunch resistance to Henry, for example, represents the novel’s defense of the English evolutionary stability against the French revolutionary restlessness that the Crawfords embody. But just as Austen does not fully embrace the Wordsworthian vision, she has some reservations about the Burkean virtue of slow development. Burke does not specify how much time is necessary to effect constructive political improvement, acknowledging that “such a mode of reforming, possibly might take up many years” (169). While Burke believes that accepting and enduring an indefinite process helps England to avert a catastrophic revolution, in *Mansfield Park* Austen shows that such a

process is symptomatic of revolutionary chaos and restlessness that Burke seeks to forestall.

II. The Evil of Procrastination

Consider Sir Thomas's rebuke to Fanny when she rejects Henry Crawford's proposal. Sir Thomas angrily says: "I had thought you peculiarly free from wilfulness of temper, self-conceit, and every tendency to that independence of spirit, which prevails so much in modern days, . . . But you have now shewn me that you can be wilful and perverse" (367). The determiner "that" before "independence of spirit" suggests Sir Thomas's "recourse to the rhetoric of conservative or anti-Jacobin educational theorists" like Thomas Gisborne and Hannah More (Wiltshire, *MP* 367n3). Both Gisborne and More were influenced by Burke and thus "attributed the increased independence or 'insubordination' of children within the family to revolutionary French ideas" (Wiltshire, *MP* 367n3). The problem is, what exactly alerts Sir Thomas to the presence of "revolutionary French ideas" in Fanny? To answer this question we need to scrutinize Sir Thomas's reprimand in greater length:

You think only of yourself; and because you do not feel for Mr. Crawford exactly what a young, heated fancy imagines to be necessary for happiness, you resolve to refuse him at once, without wishing even for a little time to consider of it . . . and are, in a wild fit of folly, throwing away from you such opportunity of being settled in life . . . as will, probably, never occur to you again. . . . [L]et me tell you, Fanny, that you may live eighteen years longer in the world, without being addressed by a man of half Mr. Crawford's estate, or a tenth part of his merits. (*MP* 367-68)

Sir Thomas's sharp criticism of Fanny's rash decision quickly merges into his apprehension about her uncertain marital prospects, suggesting that the latter is his primary concern. He is afraid that Fanny may never have another chance to marry after turning down this eligible proposal. Because Fanny's determination to delay her marriage frustrates masculine desires and adds financial burdens to Sir Thomas's family, it constitutes a serious

defiance of the patriarchal establishment. This association of deferral with defiance becomes clearer later, when Fanny refuses to meet her suitor despite Sir Thomas's remonstrance: "Mr. Crawford has been kept waiting too long already" (*MP* 369). Instead of securing social stability, embracing slow and indefinite development threatens to subvert conventional virtues of obedience and courtesy.

A failed demand for hurry, as Sir Thomas's anger suggests, is indicative of rebellion. This futile request for immediate action recurs in the Portsmouth episode, in which Austen demonstrates that the demand for hurry cannot survive an anarchic environment and that it is the victim, rather than the cause, of chaos and disorder. In so doing, Austen qualifies Burke's claim that the pursuit of speedy resolution constitutes the origin of social turmoil. The chaos in Fanny's Portsmouth home is reflected in the pervasive noise there. "Here, every body was noisy, every voice was loud" (*MP* 454). A successful demand for hurry necessitates a hierarchy of voices. In order to shorten a protracted process, the disgruntled speaker must be able to gain ascendancy over those who keep him waiting and compel their obedience. The Price household precisely lacks this hierarchy of voices. As a result, when William complains that some essential alteration of his uniform waistcoat has not been done and clamors for immediate help, his request is drowned by much louder noise: "Mrs. Price, Rebecca, and Betsey, all went up to defend themselves, all talking together, but Rebecca loudest, and the job was to be done . . . in a great hurry" (*MP* 441). Mrs. Price, Rebecca and Betsey talk at the same time. None of them can get their message across or subdue the others' argument. This confusion is indicated by the fact that we do not know whether it is Mrs. Price or her servant who entertains the thought that "this job was to be done . . . in a great hurry." Both of them are more eager to defend their procrastination than to redress it. It is Mrs. Price's characteristic indifference to efficiency that negates the desirability of speed and perpetuates the mess in her house.

To do justice to Mrs. Price, it must be noticed that she is not disinclined to remedy her domestic grievances. Unfortunately, this desire for improvement is counteracted by her indolent wish to preserve the status quo. This internal conflict between change and preservation determines Mrs. Price's management of her servant Rebecca. Mrs. Price repeatedly complains about Rebecca's procrastination: "Tell [Rebecca] to bring in the tea-things as

soon as she can. . . . I cannot think what Rebecca has been about. I am sure I told her to bring some coals half an hour ago” (*MP* 438). Finding a slatternly servant annoying is the first step towards change. But when Fanny hints at hiring a new servant, her mother hesitates: “If I was to part with Rebecca, I should only get something worse” (*MP* 445). The balance between the principle of changing the unsatisfactory reality and that of preserving the existing order lies at the heart of Burke’s philosophy of political reform.⁷ Mrs. Price’s indecisiveness, however, presents an alternative account of Burke’s ideal. It shows that the conflict between these two principles produces irresponsible delay as much as it engenders political stability.

Mansfield Park consistently casts delay in a negative light, which is another sign suggesting Austen’s suspicion of the Burkean virtue of slow progress. This suspicion finds expression in Henry’s postponement of his marriage. When Mrs. Grant urges him to find a wife and to settle down as soon as possible, Henry playfully replies: “You will allow for the doubts of youth and inexperience. I am of a cautious temper, and unwilling to risk my happiness in a hurry. Nobody can think more highly of matrimonial state than myself ” (*MP* 49). Henry is transparently disingenuous here, as his delay in marriage has nothing to do with his “cautious temper” or his “unwillingness to risk [his] happiness in a hurry.” Henry simply wants to continue his flirtation with as many women as he likes. Marriage threatens to deny him such a privileged liberty. As D. A. Miller aptly maintains, “marriage is indeed the last best gift in Jane Austen’s novels, but Henry Crawford’s narratability comes from his systematic deferral of a gift whose finality he prefers to stress over its superiority” (21). In the same way that Burke reveres a time-honored tradition and refuses to overthrow it precipitately, Henry seemingly celebrates marriage and is unwilling to desecrate a traditional social institution with a hasty move. However, through Henry’s verbal manipulation and the disastrous consequence of his delay in marriage, Austen shows that unwillingness to be “in a hurry” easily slips into unethical procrastination.

After Henry discovers Fanny’s attraction, however, he becomes eager to throw off his flirtatious habit and to marry her. The reformation of Henry’s manners can be best observed in his farewell speech to Fanny before he leaves Portsmouth. Noticing that the unhygienic environment of Fanny’s home is

⁷ One of the most celebrated quotations from *Reflections* is “even when I changed, it should be to preserve” (248).

harmful to her health, Henry tells her: “If . . . you find yourself growing unwell, and any difficulties arise about your returning to Mansfield—without waiting for the two months to be ended—*that* must not be regarded as of any consequence, if you feel yourself at all less strong, or comfortable than usual, and will only let my sister know it, . . . she and I will immediately come down, and take you back to Mansfield” (*MP* 476). Henry is here urging Fanny not to continue waiting for Sir Thomas’s summon and to return to Mansfield without delay. This recommendation of immediate action recalls the earlier iron-gate episode, in which Henry suggests that Maria should cross the locked gate with him unaccompanied by her fiancé. A comparison of these two scenes is revealing. Both events feature Henry encouraging a young woman to stop waiting. Maria’s case is characterized by selfish demand for instant gratification regardless of others, which sows the seeds for future contention. In Fanny’s case, by contrast, we see Henry’s genuine concern for his lover and his proposed remedy promises a positive change. Fanny’s health will certainly improve after she returns to Mansfield. Through this contrast Austen invites us to consider different forms of restlessness and argues that some deserve approval. It is Henry’s impatience to see the end of Fanny’s distress that confirms his moral improvement and the sincerity of his attachment. Impatience can also be a form of moral virtue.

III. The Virtue of Impatience

Burke has the English Glorious Revolution in mind when he criticizes the National Assembly in France. He repeatedly pits the English model of peaceful political reform against the French revolutionary turmoil. In one of such comparisons, Burke resorts to a metaphor of illness to illustrate his point. He writes:

We have consecrated the state, that no man should approach to look into its defects or corruptions but with due caution; that he should never dream of beginning its reformation by its subversion; that he should approach to the faults of the state as to the wounds of a father, with pious awe and trembling solicitude. By this wise prejudice we are taught to look with horror on those children of their country who are prompt rashly to hack that aged parent in pieces, and put him into the kettle of magicians, in

hopes that . . . they may regenerate the paternal constitution, and renovate their father's life. (96)

This passage juxtaposes two different ways of redressing political defects. One prioritizes cautious preservation. Progress is necessarily slow when tempered by “pious awe and trembling solicitude.” The other embraces haste. The prospect of an immediate resolution justifies “hack[ing]” the established order “in pieces.” For Burke, speed plays a central role in determining the outcome of a revolution. Because the English accepted gradual and progressive change, the Glorious Revolution improved the hereditary rule of succession without subverting its substance. Because the French opted for rash and radical innovation, their revolution produced irrevocable alternation. As many critics have pointed out, *Mansfield Park* reveals a Burkean strain most clearly in its attempt to differentiate judicious improvement from excessive innovation.⁸ But, significantly, in this novel Austen severs the Burkean connection between slow development and improvement, not least by showing that it is the demand for hurry that effects positive alteration.

The change in the assistance Mrs. Price receives from her rich relatives is a case in point. At the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Price's apologetic letter to her sister restores peace and procures her the much-needed attention. The mode of assistance the Mansfield party adopts to alleviate her distress is encapsulated in one sentence: “Sir Thomas sent friendly advice and professions, Lady Bertram dispatched money and baby-linen, and Mrs. Norris wrote the letter” (*MP* 5). Because the privations of poverty lie at the heart of Mrs. Price's problem, only Lady Bertram's “money and baby-linen” are able to produce immediate relief for the sufferer. In contrast, Sir Thomas's “advice and professions” and Mrs. Norris's letter-writing do not benefit Mrs. Price substantially. The fact that Lady Bertram's useful act of kindness is syntactically framed by her husband and her sister's lip service suggests that the effectiveness of the former is counteracted, if not swamped, by the latter. The structure of this sentence implies that the existing project of benevolence helps Mrs. Price little, yet, unfortunately, it continues for a “twelvemonth” (*MP* 5). It is not until Mrs. Norris urgently suggests that Sir Thomas should raise Fanny in Mansfield Park that a fresh improvement is introduced. Upon hearing this proposal, Sir Thomas “could not give so instantaneous and

⁸ See Duckworth 35-80 and Karounos 717-18.

unqualified a consent” and the prospect of indefinite delay looms large (*MP* 6). The possibility of further delay is eliminated when Mrs. Norris hurries Sir Thomas into making a decision: “No sooner had he deliberately begun to state his objections, than [she] interrupted him with a reply to them all whether stated or not” (*MP* 6). Successfully putting the adoption idea into practice, Mrs. Norris’s impatient interruption helps to change the existing scheme of benevolence for the better and sets the novel’s main story in motion. Rather than producing revolutionary disorder, impatience is capable of ushering in constructive improvement.

It is this virtue of impatience that distinguishes Susan Price from her mother. Fanny’s judgement provides the only means by which we can evaluate these two minor characters. Significantly, her judgement relies heavily on the speed that characterizes Mrs. Price’s and Susan’s activity respectively. According to Fanny’s careful observation, her mother’s “days were spent in a kind of slow bustle; all was busy without getting on, always behindhand and lamenting it, without altering her ways” (*MP* 451). This passage explicitly associates slowness with procrastination, justifying Fanny’s conclusion that her mother is “a dawdle, a slattern” (*MP* 451). On the contrary, Susan is quick to point out the prevalent disorder and occasional injustice in her home, so much so that Fanny uses the term “rash squabbles” to describe Susan’s attempt to discipline her unruly brothers (*MP* 453). Fanny has good reasons to appreciate her sister’s desire to redress domestic problems immediately, because her intolerance of procrastination promises genuine improvement. For instance, it is Susan who brings Fanny tea and refreshments that she has been expecting with increasing despair: “‘She had been into the kitchen,’ [Susan] said, ‘to hurry Sally and help make the toast, and spread the bread and butter—or she did not know when they should have got tea’” (*MP* 443). This passage recalls Mrs. Price’s earlier futile attempt to speed up the tea-serving process and invites a comparison of mother and daughter in terms of hurry. Mrs. Price’s inability to command her servant’s obedience confirms her status as a powerless and indolent mistress. On the contrary, Susan’s successful demand for hurry wins Fanny’s grateful approval, implies her moral superiority and prefigures her final transcendence above her chaotic home. Although very briefly, Susan’s decision to act promptly reinstates order in the Price household. Hurry deserves to be accorded a moral character.

Such is the connection between hurry and morality in *Mansfield Park* that failure to recognize the value of speed is tantamount to moral inadequacy. The iron-gate episode apparently condemns Maria and Henry's unwillingness to wait for Rushworth. But at the center of this event lies a subtle recommendation of hurry. It is important to notice that Rushworth undertakes to fetch the key to unlock the gate with alacrity. Austen takes care to emphasize how fast he runs, not least by making Julia report that "he was posting away, as if upon life and death" (*MP* 117). Why is this emphasis on speed necessary? It is because Rushworth's readiness to oblige his fiancée and his eagerness to complete his mission make her obligation to wait for him more binding and the breach of it more outrageous. Just as hurry serves to distinguish Susan and her mother, here it helps to indicate the difference between Fanny and Maria. Although Maria witnesses how fast Rushworth runs away, she chooses to emphasize his slowness ("Mr. Rushworth is so long fetching this key") so as to legitimize her refusal to wait for him (*MP* 116). Fanny is the only person who appreciates the value of Rushworth's immediate action. "Nothing could be more obliging than your manner," she kindly assures unhappy Rushworth (*MP* 119). In this respect, hurry goes beyond a petulant demand for speed and becomes an effective moral indicator.

The last sentence of *Mansfield Park* is calculated to excite readers' impatience. "On that event [Dr. Grant's death] they [Edmund and Fanny] removed to Mansfield, and the parsonage there, which under each of its two former owners, Fanny had never been able to approach but with some painful sensation of restraint or alarm, soon grew as dear to her heart, and as thoroughly perfect in her eyes, as every thing else, within the view and patronage of Mansfield Park, had long been" (*MP* 547-48). We may expect a full stop immediately after the first "Mansfield." Instead, we have a comma, which allows another complex sentence to ensue. The subject of this sentence, "the parsonage," is separated from its predicate, "soon grew," by a long relative clause. The emergence of the predicate does not guarantee the completion of the sentence's meaning. It is followed by an elaborate network of prepositional phrases (as . . . as . . . as . . .), whose main purpose is further to delay syntactic closure. Bharat Tandon has argued that this complex sentence mimes "some painful sensation of restraint" that Fanny has been experiencing throughout the novel (196). I wish to add that, when reading this

sentence, readers are likely to feel such sensation of restraint and to be impatient for an end.

This arousal of readerly impatience is appropriate in a novel informed by a prevalent sense of urgency and restlessness. It serves as a good conclusion to a novel where hurry is celebrated as a source of creative energy. But it seems out of place in the Austen canon. Prior to *Mansfield Park*, Austen never allows a “sensation of restraint” to linger at the very end of her work. Both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* end on a happy note that highlights conjugal harmony between the hero and the heroine. *Mansfield Park* differs from these two early novels most noticeably in its treatment of hurry. As Marianne Dashwood’s and Elizabeth Bennet’s disastrous first impression suggests, the early novels condemn rash decisions and recommend patient endurance. *Mansfield Park*, by contrast, celebrates immediate action and denounces procrastination. Austen’s rethinking of the Burkean association of haste with imprudence and her consistent effort to cast hurry in a positive light mark a new phase in her literary career.

Works Cited

- Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park*. Ed. John Wiltshire. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. Print.
- Burke, Edmund. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Ed. L. G. Mitchell. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993. Print.
- Clayton, Jay. *Romantic Vision and the Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987. Print.
- Deresiewicz, William. *Jane Austen and the Romantic Poets*. New York: Columbia UP, 2004. Print.
- Duckworth, Alistair. *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1971. Print.
- Johnson, Claudia. *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988. Print.
- Karounos, Michael. "Ordination and Revolution in *Mansfield Park*." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 44.4 (2004): 715-36. Print.
- Miller, D. A. *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981. Print.
- More, Hannah. *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*. 2 vols. London: T. Cadell Jun. and W. Davies, 1799. Print.
- Southam, Brian C. ed. *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*. 2 vols. London: Routledge, 1995. Print.
- Starr, Gabrielle. *Lyric Generations: Poetry and the Novel in the Long Eighteenth Century*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2004. Print.
- Tandon, Bharat. *Jane Austen and the Morality of Conversation*. London: Anthem, 2003. Print.
- Tanner, Tony. *Jane Austen*. 1986. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.
- Trilling, Lionel. *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980. Print.
- Tuite, Clara. *Romantic Austen: Sexual Politics and the Literary Canon*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. Print.
- Wordsworth, William. *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind*. Ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill. New York: Norton, 1979. Print.
- Yeazell, Ruth Bernard. *Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel*. Chicago: U of Chicago P. Print.