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Spatial Boundaries and Moral Order in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the representation and preservation of home in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) through three interrelated spatial levels: the estate of Mansfield Park, the countryside, and Britain, all of which are represented in a state of moral crisis. Arguing that spatial boundaries signify moral and ideological boundaries, this analysis explores how the novel constructs and maintains distinctions between domestic and public spheres, rural and urban values, and Britain and its colony Antigua. The disappearance of the clearly demarcated boundaries between what lies within and outside of home leads to the disruption of the status quo with potentially destructive results. The transgression of these boundaries, through theatrical chaos within the estate, the allure and corruption associated with London, and the economic reliance on slavery in Antigua, reveals the fragility of the moral structures that define the sanctity of Mansfield Park as home. By presenting the consequences of spatial transgression and the silence surrounding colonial exploitation, the novel underscores that home is not merely inherited but must be continuously protected.

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Introduction

Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), while primarily taking place in the estate the novel is named after, is profoundly shaped by dichotomous relationships based on literal and symbolic significations of spatial boundaries. The estate is expected to embody the characteristics of domestic order and authority as the home of the Bertrams. Thus, it is no coincidence that, in the novel, when Mary and Henry Crawford arrive at the estate from London, their aunt Mrs. Grant tells them, "Mansfield shall cure you both – and without any taking in. Stay with us and we will cure you" (Austen, 1998, p. 45). This very brief statement by a relatively minor character in the novel, however, has the potential to prompt several questions about the status of Mansfield Park in the eyes of the characters as well as in the overall narrative: What is it to be cured with the Crawfords as newcomers from the city and how will Mansfield Park cure them? In what ways? And more importantly, what are the qualities of the estate that enable the curing of others? In this paper, I argue that rather than having the inherent ability "to cure" newcomers from London, Mansfield Park and its residents are going through a moral crisis as represented by transgression of the spatial boundaries that demarcate what lies inside and outside of "home." In *Mansfield Park*, spatial boundaries signify moral, social and cultural boundaries as well, which should be maintained to preserve the sanctity of the home. In this study, I discuss the representation of home through three inter-related levels, namely the estate itself, the countryside, and Britain. Thus, I contend that the narrative prioritizes the preservation of different spheres as illustrated through domestic (private) vs. public, the countryside vs. the city,

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and Britain vs. Antigua to ensure the sanctity of home (as described through the juxtaposition on these levels) and thwart any possible undermining elements.

Mansfield Park presents the moral and social development of Fanny Price, who, at the age of ten, is sent by her impoverished parents to live with her wealthy aunt and uncle, Lady and Sir Thomas Bertram. While the novel follows Fanny's years into early adulthood, it also conveys the life at the estate of Mansfield Park through a wide range of characters, starting with the Bertram children – Tom, Edmund, Maria and Julia – and including others, such as Mrs. Norris, Mr. Rushworth, the Grants and the Crawfords, as they become part of the daily life. The novel, at large, maintains its focus on the young members of the estate and their interactions as well as the romantic entanglements with inevitable consequences at the end. Except for Fanny's brief stay at Portsmouth, her parental home, the narrative limits itself to the estate and its immediate environs such as the excursion to the Sotherton estate owned by Maria's fiancé Mr. Rushworth. Thus, Austen, at first glance, seems to create a self-contained environment without much direct contact with the rest of the world; however, the residents of Mansfield Park, as the narrative gradually reveals, are not affected by only the world beyond the estate but also the conflicting relationship between their traditional home and its outside.

Raymond Williams asserts that a cursory look at Austen's world as "having a simple traditional setting" with all country houses and their families belonging to the tradition of cultivated landed gentry will be misleading; in that, this view overlooks "the continual making and the remaking of these houses and families" (1973, p. 113). In *Mansfield Park*, this process of making and remaking involves defining, challenging, negotiating and reestablishing the boundaries in various forms. Ruth Bernard Yeazell's claim that "no other novel of Jane Austen's calls such attention to its boundaries, emphasizes so strenuously the line between the in and the out, the acceptable and the unclean" (1984, p. 147) constitutes a starting point to consider how these boundaries are conceived and maintained, and what happens when they are challenged or blurred. While spatial boundaries are generally defined through their physical manifestations of dividing and defining different physical spaces, the very act of dividing and defining, as well as the thought-process behind it, is imbued with cultural, social and moral considerations. Hence, any attempt to alter or reject the already existing structure indicates an act of defiance against the authority that has established and maintained it. If Jane Austen, as Williams argues, "was writing from inside the houses" (1973, p. 112) of her time, the estate of Mansfield Park is one of these houses that is expected not only to possess a certain character in terms of social, cultural and moral codes but also to convey this character to its inhabitants since "an estate is only as good as those who inhabit it" (Duckworth, 1971, p. 43). Thus, the novel represents the potential effects and dangers of spatial transformation and transgression, literally and symbolically, on the estate, its character and those who will carry the legacy of the estate to the future.

Building upon John Wiltshire's assertion, "settings are never neutral backgrounds in *Mansfield Park*" (Wiltshire, 2006, p. 65), I contend that not only the settings that are elaborately described in the novel such as the estate itself, Sotherton or Portsmouth but also the settings that are deliberately left out of the narrative such as London and Antigua bear significance to establish different levels of spatial relationships. In this article I examine three levels and how spatially transgressive attempts on each level are portrayed and resolved in the narrative. Moving from micro to macro level, first I will focus on the transformation of the domestic space at the estate itself, then discuss the representation of London and urban life and conclude with an analysis of Sir Thomas's visit to Antigua and the significance of the colonies for the estate and the novel.

Domestic Space vs. Public Space

Alistair Duckworth asserts that in Jane Austen's novels "estates function not only as the settings of action but as indexes to the character and social responsibility of their owners" (1971, p. 25). In the case of Mansfield Park, it is Sir Thomas Bertram who is expected to maintain not only the material but also the spiritual and moral well-being of the estate and its residents with, as J. A. Downie points out, "a sense of responsibility, the benevolence and the integrity" (2010, p. 755).

While it remains questionable whether Sir Thomas is able to fulfill this role, his absence from the estate marks a period in which the household becomes free of the authoritarian presence of the father. Given that the estate does not only stand for "a piece of landed property but as a metonym of an entire cultural inheritance" (Duckworth, 1971, p. 26) and "metonym for private morality" (Mandal, 2007, p. 117), its residents' behaviors reveal the extent of their identification with this cultural inheritance and sense of morality. As Sir Thomas insists on certain moral values and social decorum which could not be challenged under any circumstances, his departure for Antigua, which would be analyzed in later sections, creates the possibility of deviating from these principles:

> [Miss Bertrams'] father was no object of love to them, he had never seemed the friend of their pleasures, and his absence was unhappily most welcome. They were relieved by it from all restraint; and without aiming at one gratification that would probably have been forbidden by Sir Thomas, they felt themselves immediately at their own disposal, and to have every indulgence within their reach. (Austen, 1998, p. 32)

Their father's absence is almost celebrated by Maria and Julia, who regard it as an opportunity for freedom from the imposition of his rules and expectations. This point of view of Miss Bertrams foreshadows the events that will take place during Sir Thomas's absence and when the elder son Tom, after returning from Antigua earlier than his father, assumes his position. Tom, however, does not show any interest in taking the responsibility of the patriarch and acting accordingly, instead his overall manners convey "the image of the regent as a lord of misrule" (Sales, 1994, p. 101), especially with the chaos caused by the preparations for staging a play in Mansfield Park. Tom's friend John Yates' arrival at the estate and the arousing interest in theatre among the young members unsettles the status quo. The narrative clearly states that John Yates would not be welcome in the household if Sir Thomas were present, thus demonstrating Tom's failure in maintaining his father's principles:

> The Honorable John Yates, this new friend, had not much to recommend him beyond habits of fashion and expense, and being the younger son of a lord with a tolerable independence; and Sir Thomas would probably have thought his introduction at Mansfield by no means desirable. (Austen, 1998, p. 119)

As the novel introduces him with an emphasis on his interest in fleeting worldly pleasures rather than a solid character with moral composure, he can only contribute to the already existing lack of regard for rules, thus providing good company to their pleasures. Thus, the novel signals the upcoming unrest, both physical and moral, in the private sphere of Mansfield Park with the undesirable personality of the guest who suggested the idea of staging a play, only to be followed by the ensuing preparations that affect all the residents as well as the estate. Doreen Massey states that "a 'place' is formed out of the particular set of social relations which interact at a particular location" (1994, p. 168). In this case, the novel depicts the transformation of the estate with a new set of social relations due to not only Sir Bertram's absence but also the presence of new characters outside of the family. If, under Sir Bertram's influence, the estate embodies the fundamental elements of home, the very same physical space starts to connote a different meaning, perhaps a more favorable one for the young members of the family, with Tom's carefree and welcoming spirit.

Theatricality holds a central position in the novel with respect to its impact on the domestic domain. It deeply influences the social and moral atmosphere in the household as well as disrupting the spatial organization of the house. Duckworth asserts that "the physical structure of the Mansfield house – the novel's central emblem of a social constitution – is endangered by the theatricals scheme" (1971, p. 41). The preparations, in the first place, necessitate a spatial reorganization of the house to provide empty space for the stage and backstage. Tom comes up with an idea about how to arrange the place for the play: they would remove the billiard table to make room for the play – the stage –, then move the bookcase in their father's room so that it can be turned into a green-room since billiard room and the father's study are joined (Austen, 1998,

p. 123). This alteration carries a symbolic meaning in that it turns Sir Thomas's room into a part of the theatre. The refutation of the patriarch's sense of decorum finds a counterpart in the spatial arrangements with this attempt. Tony Tanner defines the theatricals in Mansfield Park as "the culmination of the irresponsible license indulged in during Sir Thomas's absence" (1968, p. 152). Though characters sense that this performance would not be approved by Sir Thomas they continue with all their enthusiasm. By rearranging the father's room for the play, they not only attempt to overrule Sir Thomas's sense of propriety but also replace it with their own. In its new look, the room could no longer signify the father's authority, hence creating a sense of freedom from the established values of the house. Sir Thomas's room is not the only place that is affected by the play, as the characters use different rooms for rehearsing their parts, the domestic order is entirely interrupted.

While the play creates changes in the physical structure of the house, it leads to more serious consequences in terms of the preservation of the domestic and private domain and propriety. Edmund, from the very beginning, approaches the issue quite cautiously and considers the prospective harm it may cause to Maria, who is engaged to Mr. Rushworth. Once they choose the piece to be acted, "Lovers' Vows," Edmund's disapproval reaches a peak due to its inappropriate theme. He refrains from taking part in the production of the play until the possibility of including a gentleman from the neighborhood emerges. Up to that point, the play includes Mansfield Park residents, including the Crawfords who are guests at the parish house (extension of the estate), Mr. Rushworth and John Yates. While this group can, seemingly, gather to act without destroying the privacy of the domestic domain, the inclusion of Charles Madox, Tom's choice for the vacant role in the play, means turning the play into a public performance rather than private entertainment. Tom's statement "the Mansfield Theatricals would enliven the whole neighborhood exceedingly" (Austen, 1998, p. 105) points to the degree where this private performance may reach. This new, and unexpected, situation compels Edmund to take action to prevent any harm to the household's privacy and reputation. Here, one should note that Edmund's concern is not directed towards a specific person but the general idea of having a stranger in the household and enabling him to enjoy the status of almost a family member. To preserve the sanctity of the private domain and the reputation of the family he gives up his own principles and decides to act with the group, thus preventing the presence of a stranger in Mansfield Park. This can be regarded as his last effort to maintain the distinction between the privacy of the domestic household and the outside world. While the production process creates such turmoil, the performance of the play meets an unexpected end with the arrival of Sir Thomas.

The novel conveys the initial reaction to the news, "'My father has come. He is in the hall at this moment'" (Austen, 1998, p. 120), as "a moment of absolute horror" along with the thoughts of "What will become of us? What is to be done now?" (Austen, 1998, p. 121), hence disclosing the awareness about Sir Thomas's impending disapproval of the play. Indeed, Sir Thomas orders not only the rooms to be arranged back to their original versions but also the destruction of every copy of the play as a firm statement of his preference for "a quiet family-party to the bustle of and confusion of acting" (Austen, 1998, pp. 131-132). Sir Thomas's intervention can be read as one of the instances of "exercise of authority," which occurs in *Mansfield Park* "domestically, familially, and masculinely" (Thompson, 2015, p. 21). With his return, the patriarchal authority is re-established; spatially and morally things go back to their old self, namely the production of the play comes to an end and the less than desirable guests are sent to their way, through which Sir Thomas fulfills the expectations of his role as a responsible patriarch, father and estate owner. His intervention, accordingly, achieves to maintain the boundary between the domestic space and what lies outside of it, which can preserve the sanctity of Mansfield Park as home.

The Countryside vs. the City

Mansfield Park as an estate cannot be considered as separate from the values and social structures of the countryside, which the novel favors over urban life. Indeed, the world of Austen novels center on various estates and houses in the countryside, and as David Monaghan notes,

"her major characters may move away from the village or its neighboring great house from time to time, but it is within these settings that their values are shaped and their future lies" (Monaghan, 1980, p. 5). *Mansfield Park* is no exception, and although the novel is published in 1814, Ian Watt's eighteenth-century view of the countryside and the city becomes instrumental in comprehending the narrative's juxtaposition of the estate and the city well beyond its horizon.

> Instead of the countryman's unchanging landscape, dominated by the regular alternation of the seasons, and the established hierarchy of social and moral order symbolized by the manor-house, the parish church and the village green, the citizen of eighteenth-century London had a horizon that was in many ways like that of modern man with an infinite variety of ways of life that anyone could observe. (Watt, 2001, p. 179)

The rural represents an already established way of life with its shared values and resembles a closed system in its sense of completeness. Urban life is more fragmented with its openness to change and ability to offer different possibilities. In *Mansfield Park*, the city is mostly revealed through its effects upon characters. What truly brings urban life to the estate for the first time is the arrival of the Crawfords, Mrs. Grant's half-siblings who will stay at the parish house on the estate. Mary and Henry Crawford emerge as the epitome of "witty, sophisticated urbanites" (Graham, 2010, p. 871) with their overall demeanor and ignorance of the life in countryside. From early on, the novel presents the dichotomous relationship between Mansfield Park and the city, namely London, in terms of the values they represent. Tanner states that "If Mansfield Park, at its best, is the place to perfect people, London is the place to pervert them" (1968, p. 141). Long before the reader becomes acquainted with the personalities of the Crawfords in detail, the novel draws attention to the difference between the values of two lifestyles. Peter W. Graham, referring to Austen novels in general, remarks that "London connections seldom promise good things unless the Londoners are originally from the country and still attached to it" (2010, p. 872). In this case, Mary Crawford's relatively free manners of speaking about serious subjects and her interest in material wealth rather than the spiritual and Henry Crawford's licentious flirting with the already-engaged Maria set counterexamples to the values that Mansfield Park strives to establish. Their stay, indeed, has an improving impact on them, especially when it is compared to their behaviors in London in the later parts of the novel. However, the Crawfords, to a certain extent, manage to spoil the young residents of the estate. That their stay at the parish house and close interaction with the Bertram family coincides with Sir Thomas's absence is also significant. The impact of urban manners becomes much more influential with the absence of the patriarchal figure, who is responsible for the preservation of traditional rural values. With Sir Thomas's return and the re-establishment of the domestic order, the influence of the Crawfords on the Bertram family comes to an end, at least within the confines of the estate.

While the estate of Mansfield Park experiences the effects of urbanization through other characters and keeps the propriety, to a certain degree, intact in its own borders, the Bertram sisters' and Tom's stay in London paves the way for more serious consequences. London symbolizes their freedom from the imposition of Sir Thomas's values and the opportunity to act for themselves. They spend time at parties, take liberties and do not seem to show any longing for Mansfield Park. London, with all its potential for change and entertainment, replaces Mansfield Park, which is marked with stability and strict decorum under Sir Thomas's authority. As Tanner summarizes,

> London, the world of liberty, amusement and fashion, has no redeeming virtues. It is there that Maria falls into the ways which will lead to her adulterous corruption and ultimate disgrace and banishment. It is there that Julia involves herself with the worthless Mr. Yates. It is there that Tom wastes his substance and, as a result, nearly loses his life. (Tanner, 1968, p. 141)

Here, it is significant that the Bertram sisters form romantic attachments to the men that they have originally met at the estate; yet it is only in London that these turn into relationships. Without any patriarchal figure to intervene, London can cater to their pleasures. By pointing out

the city as the underlying reason for the misfortunes of the Bertram siblings, the novel clearly discloses its stance towards the possible perils of urban life. Indeed, an earlier conversation between Edmund and Mary Crawford at the estate points out not only the characters' but also the narrative's perspective and perception of London in terms of moral standing:

> 'You are speaking of London, I am speaking of the nation at large.'
> 'The metropolis, I imagine, is a pretty fair sample of the rest.'
> 'Not, I should hope, of the proportion of virtue to vice throughout the kingdom. We do not look in our great cities for best morality.' (Austen, 1998, p. 66)

It is the countryside and its values that provide the true source of morality rather than London. Given the Bertram siblings', with the exception of Edmund, general disdain of the life on the estate along with its rules and admiration for urban life, they inevitably succumb to a lifestyle that prioritizes self-indulgence and enjoyment over moral conduct and propriety.

As the novel places such an emphasis on life in London, the paragon of urban life, for the ruin of these three characters, it is striking that the text refrains from giving a detailed account of their experiences in the city. The reader does not learn about the amusements and liberties they enjoy in London through an extensive account. While the alluring aspects of city life are omitted from the narrative, the consequences of this lifestyle, Tom's gambling habit and rapidly deteriorating health and then the scandals concerning Maria's affair with Henry Crawford and Julia's elopement with John Yates, are presented to the extent that the reader can witness the role of the city in the incidents. The novel discloses this information in a fragmentary manner as the characters try to learn what has really happened in London. That Maria's running away with Henry appears in the society column of a newspaper, "the beautiful Mrs. R. […] who had promised to become so brilliant a leader in the fashionable world, having quitted her husband's roof in company with the well-known and captivating Mr. C. the intimate friend and associate of Mr. R." (Austen, 1998, p. 298) presents another facet of urban life, namely even the most private and embarrassing matters can become public. At this point, one should note that the novel provides a portrayal of another setting, Portsmouth, Fanny's hometown. She is sent there by Sir Bertram with the explicit intention of seeing his brother off to the navy and the implicit intention of making her appreciate her life on the estate and the prospective life with Henry Crawford, who has shown an interest in her (Austen, 1998, pp. 250-251). Descriptions of Portsmouth rely on comparisons with Mansfield Park and its "spiritual emptiness, lack of authority and loss of community" (Monaghan, 1980, p. 14) for Fanny who has embraced the values of Mansfield Park and Sir Thomas. In this regard, Portsmouth never emerges as a center of attraction or familial affection as Fanny ultimately states: "Portsmouth was Portsmouth. Mansfield was home" (Austen, 1998, p. 292), highlighting her strong connection to the estate.

The overall narrative strives to draw more attention to the threatening aspect of urban life rather than its colorful face. It allows the reader to become witness to its dangers and the ensuing destructive consequences rather than its promises, hence propagating a move from the city as a potentially corrupting environment and highlighting the values of the countryside despite its potential shortcomings. With Tom healing and assuming a more serious personality, Julia asking for forgiveness with her husband John Yates, Mansfield Park welcomes them, unlike Maria who is banished from the estate. Thus, the novel reminds not only of the physical distance but also the moral gap between the countryside and the city, disclosing the fact that for those who are willing to internalize the values of the countryside, it will always remain as the true home.

Britain vs. Antigua

In *Mansfield Park*, after a vague and brief reference to Sir Thomas's "West Indian property" early on (Austen, 1998, p. 6), the first explicit reference to Antigua, and its significance, occurs during a conversation about the family's financial state between Mrs. Norris and Lady Bertram: "'[Y]ou know, Sir Thomas's means will be rather straitened, if the Antigua estate is to make such poor returns.' 'Oh! *that* soon will be settled. Sir Thomas has been writing about it, I know'" (Austen,

1998, p. 23, emphasis in original). Thus, the narrative promptly establishes the main source of income for the family; as Raymond Williams reminds us, Sir Thomas is not only "an example of the old settled landed gentry" but also "a great West Indian: a colonial proprietor in Antigua" (1973, p. 114). In this section, I will discuss the representation of Sir Thomas's Antigua plantation, or lack thereof, in the novel to scrutinize how the meticulously constructed separation between the center of colonial economy and Mansfield Park's domestic space functions.

In order to comprehend the Bertram family's connection to and dependence on colonial economy, one needs to contextualize the novel's historicity with respect to slave trade and the Abolition Act of 1807, which outlawed the slave trade in the Empire, thus preventing the transportation of slaves but not ending the slavery in colonies. While Lord Mansfield's ruling in the Somerset case in 1772 declared slavery illegal on British soil, there had been no attempts to expand it to the rest of the Empire (Craig, 2015, p. 94). The Act of 1807 did not promise the emancipation of slaves in the Empire either; however, as Clara Tuite argues, it demanded action by the slave holders: "Slavers were faced with having to encourage reproduction of slave labor through the available pool of labor, which meant that the condition of the slaves had to be improved" (2000, p. 100). In other words, the inability to move slaves across colonies required the slave owners to ensure the continuity of slave population in a given place through birth rate, which brought forth new arrangements and more direct involvement by the slave owners in the colonies. Several scholars (Knox-Shaw, 2004, pp. 180-181; Neill, 1999, p. 88; Tuite, 2000, p. 100) claim that the novel's lack of a direct reference to the Act of 1807 does not mean Austen overlooks the issue; on the contrary, the narrative reveals "the post-abolitionist perspective [...] no matter whether Sir Thomas's visit to Antigua post- or pre-dates the passage of the law" (Knox-Shaw, 2004, p. 180). It is through oblique references that the novel points to the issues engendered by the transition period, as can be observed in the first reference to Antigua in the novel above.

Sir Thomas's visit to Antigua, then, needs to be taken into consideration within this framework: "Sir Thomas found it expedient to go to Antigua, for the better arrangement of his affairs, and he took his eldest son with him in the hope of detaching him from some bad connections at home. They left England with the probability of being nearly a twelve-month absent" (Austen, 1998, p. 25). Interestingly enough, this brief and vague quotation encapsulates Sir Thomas's positions of authority from different angles. As a plantation owner, he is responsible for taking measures to increase the profit from the plantation as well as maintaining control over the slaves. As a father, he desires to disassociate his son from the lifestyle that will almost cause his demise later in the novel. Despite the obscurity of the language here, it is clear that the present circumstances necessitate an intervention through Sir Thomas's authority. Thompson, however, remarks that the exercise of authority as a plantation owner and as a father are inherently different:

> Sir Thomas is forced to assume a different kind of authority in Antigua than at the Park, presumably less benign and more self-interested—he travels to the islands not to represent moral weight, but to extract more money from the slaves that work the sugarcane. Again, while much of this is only implicit, nonetheless, the patrician landowner embodies a different kind of authority than does the slave plantation owner. (Thompson, 2015, p. 24)

In other words, if Sir Thomas's visit to Antigua is purely motivated by financial gain, his decision to take Tom with him is prompted by an attempt to improve the failings of Tom as the future Sir Bertram. Given that Tom's gambling habit has already caused financial problems for the family and the estate itself, as in the renting of the parish house to the Grants instead of saving it for the to-be-ordained Edmund, the urgency of Sir Thomas's presence in Antigua becomes more pronounced. When he must postpone his return and send Tom back to take over his responsibilities at the estate, one can assume that his presence and direct involvement are required to ensure that Antigua continues to provide for Mansfield Park. Craig reminds us that while Sir Thomas "is distracted in the colony, the situation rapidly deteriorates at home" (Craig,

2015, p. 95) with Tom unable and unwilling to act as the authority figure, culminating in the production of the play only to be halted with the return of Sir Thomas from Antigua.

Neill argues that "Antigua for Mansfield Park (and in *Mansfield Park*) is in fact so marginal as to be optionally invisible/visible as the reader chooses, or so it appears" (1999, p. 89). Upon Sir Thomas's return, the narrative reticently states, "His business in Antigua had latterly been prosperously rapid" (Austen, 1998, p. 123) without any elaboration on the reasons why he had to extend his stay there or the condition of the plantation itself. It is left to the imagination of the characters gathered to celebrate Sir Thomas's safe return as well as the readers. The hierarchical relationship born out of colonial discourse designates colonies and peripheries as secondary spaces, where the concept of border and boundary is "key for separating out the spatial entities and identities of the metropolitan states and colonies from each other" (Banerjee and Majumder, 2025, p. 142). In a certain manner, the boundary is created, or attempted to be done so, through the lack of direct references to Antigua. Douglas Murray, commenting on the opacity of the language used in reference to Antigua, notes, "such deliberate occlusion is radically intentional and transcribes the dominant verbal – and moral – evasiveness at Mansfield Park. Life in the English country house can only be possible if inhabitants do not see slaves laboring in the fields or hear their sad complaints" (1997, p. 11). As Antigua's presence is underlined through its absence in the narrative, the scholarly attention has focused on the oft-quoted passage in which Fanny tells Edmund of her question about slave trade to Sir Thomas:

> 'Did not you hear me ask him about the slave-trade last night?' '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.' 'And I longed to do it—but there was such a dead silence! And while my cousins were sitting by without speaking a word, or seeming at all interested in the subject, I did not like—I thought it would appear as if I wanted to set myself off at their expense, by shewing a curiosity and pleasure in his information which he must wish his own daughters to feel.' (Austen, 1998, p. 136)

Edward Said's reading of this passage, and especially the silence, has been seminal: "one world could not be connected with the other since there simply is no common language for both" (1993, p. 96). Discourse of colonial economy is not compatible with the discourse of domestic space, hence the distinct separation of the spheres accordingly. While Said has interpreted the ensuing silence about the slave trade as emblematic of the omission of colonies from the life at Mansfield Park, Tuite, in an attempt to complicate this reading, points out, "this moment is not a 'silence' in or on the part of the text but a pointed representation of silence – Sir Thomas's silence on the subject of slavery. The point is that Fanny problematizes Sir Thomas's silence" (2000, p. 104). In a way, it is possible to regard this silence as the decision of Sir Thomas to firmly distinguish the boundary between home and the otherized space of plantation, not the silence of the narrative itself. Although his silence can also be interpreted as an indication of his assumed moral propriety resulting from the distinction between two worlds, namely that of Antigua and of Britain, his children's silence has been described as possibly stemming from "boredom, or embarrassment or for some other reason" (Coleman, 2009, p. 303). Regardless of the possible reasons for the silence, it ultimately leads to the omission of Antigua from the life at the estate.

In *Mansfield Park*, Antigua remains off-stage, literally and metaphorically. In a novel that even refrains from a detailed description of London due to its possible corrupting appeal, one cannot expect to see the workings of colonial economy in place. In a sense, Antigua almost exists on its own, outside the borders of not only the estate but also Britain. Massey, in her discussion of the identity of a place, asserts that "the identity of a place does not derive from some internalized history. It derives, in large part, precisely from the specificity of its interactions with 'the outside'" (1994, p. 169). In this regard, Mansfield Park's identity lies in its almost complete rejection of any possible association with Antigua. Despite the country's dependence on colonial economy, the colonies are to be excluded from daily life in the heart of the Empire. Sir Thomas, as the head of the estate, exercises his authority both to re-establish the profitable conditions in

the plantations and to keep the two worlds separate, as evinced by the silence to Fanny's questions. Thus, from his perspective, Antigua appears as the ultimate foreign, almost unspeakable, not to be allowed at home and in Britain so as not to violate the moral character and status of home at large.

Conclusion

Can Mansfield Park cure people as suggested by Mrs. Grant? The estate does have a certain level of rehabilitating effect on the Crawfords during their stay at Mansfield Park as they familiarize themselves with the world of countryside and its moral standing; however, it is the Bertram children who are grappling with the repercussions of the blurring of the boundaries. The complex spatial dynamics represented in *Mansfield Park* reveal that the preservation, transformation, and transgression of boundaries shape not only the narrative trajectory of its characters but also the moral foundations of Austen's fictional world. The estate constitutes the center where the notion of home is negotiated on these three inter-related levels. Theatricality presents the earliest and most direct intrusion to the domestic space of Mansfield Park. With the absence of Sir Thomas, the estate transforms into a theatre in which compliance with the father's authority is no longer present. The rearrangement of the rooms, especially those of Sir Thomas, undermines his authority and, for a brief period of time, replaces it with a certain disregard for the inviolability of home. Accompanied by the inappropriateness of the play's themes and the possibility of their private entertainment turning into a public performance, the domestic sphere becomes vulnerable to impropriety. It is also possible to consider this intrusion associated with the tension between the countryside and the city in the novel given that John Yates is described through his close connection to urban life. As London's presence is mostly felt through its effect on the characters, not only John Yates but also, and more importantly, the Crawford siblings bring the worldview of London to Mansfield Park. Though the estate initially attempts to assimilate the Crawfords and their urban manners, their presence ultimately foreshadows the very outcomes that London later enables: scandal, elopement, and social disintegration. In comparison to the estate as the home of moral diligence, London stands for all the opportunities, for better or worse, that can be explored without Sir Thomas's patriarchal intervention. As the novel refrains from depicting the allure of urban life, it underlines its destructive seduction of those who are almost too desperate to escape the countryside and its values. If the novel hesitates to portray London in its glamor for possible temptation, it purposefully excludes Antigua to underline the very source that enables life as it is in Mansfield Park. Here, absence operates as presence; the omission of Antigua allows Mansfield Park to retain its moral authority precisely because the narrative refuses to dwell on what sustains it economically. The silence is telling, for it reveals the necessity of not seeing in order for the estate to continue functioning as the center of order and stability. Ultimately, the narrative resolves these layered tensions by reaffirming the sanctity of home through restoration and exclusion. Tom's recovery, Julia's return, and Fanny's recognition that Mansfield is home all signal the triumph of the estate's value system for those who are willing to internalize it. The estate, countryside, and nation remain interconnected spheres in which propriety and order must be continually guarded. Through these triangulated boundaries, namely domestic vs. public, rural vs. urban, Britain vs. Antigua, Austen's *Mansfield Park* illustrates that home is maintained through vigilance, exclusion, and the attempts for careful preservation of spatial, moral, and ideological lines.

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Declaration of AI Use

Any AI-assisted tools, if used, were limited to language editing. No AI tools were used for data collection, analysis, or interpretation of findings. The author(s) assume sole responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and final content of the manuscript.

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