

Spring 2012

Portraits of Progress: The Rise of Realism in Jane Austen's Clergy

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PORTRAITS OF PROGRESS: THE RISE OF REALISM IN JANE AUSTEN'S
CLERGY

by

RACHEL ELIZABETH CASON

(Under the Direction of Tom Lloyd)

ABSTRACT

This work examines the development of Austen's characterization of the clergy. It uses examples of three prominent clerical types: Henry Tilney, too good to be true; William Collins, too ridiculous to be believable; and Edmund Bertram, realistic because he is both flawed and virtuous. Utilizing critical sources from the last sixty years, this thesis demonstrates that previous scholars have overlooked the idea that the development of Austen's clerical characters can be used to chart Austen's progress as a writer. As such, this thesis fills in where other scholars have left off.

INDEX WORDS: Austen, Bertram, Clergy, Collins, Development, Flaw, *Mansfield Park*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Pride and Prejudice*, Realism, Tilney, Vice, Virtue

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B.A., Georgia Southern University, 2010

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

2012

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Electronic Version Approved:
May 2012

DEDICATION

In memory of Frank Gleason Ward, Jr.

This thesis is dedicated, with love, to my mom, Dot.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to the following people for helping me complete this endeavor: Dr. Tom Lloyd, for unflagging attention to detail and for sharing his vast knowledge; to Dr. Joe Pellegrino, for being the finest teacher, friend, and mentor a person could wish for; and to Dr. Dustin Anderson, for exceptional encouragement over the last two years. All of your comments and suggestions helped strengthen this thesis more than I can express.

This work would not have been possible without the support of my stalwart family and friends. For not giving up on me when I bailed on you many weekends and holidays in favor of doing more research and revision, I thank you.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

By blood, marriages, and correspondence, Jane Austen was strongly connected with the profession of the clergy. Her father served as rector at the parish at Steventon. Her brothers James and Henry followed in his footsteps. Her relations in the clergy put her in the society of other clerics, and Austen developed friendships and corresponded with a number of clergymen. Irene Collins, in "Displeasing Pictures of Clergymen," states that Austen's "correspondence includes reference to at least [ninety] clergymen of her acquaintance" (110). While studies have been performed on Austen's oeuvre of characters, including the clerical figures, critics do not look at how her approach to characterizing the profession changes through the progression of her novels. Collins offers an informative study on the state of the Church of England as it existed in Austen's lifetime. The text is useful for grounding an understanding of the profession that so greatly affected Austen's writing and several of her characters. However, Collins's historical and biographical approach limits study of characters' merit as they represent Austen's development as an author.

Because each of Jane Austen's six novels features at least one member of the Anglican clergy, readers can use the constant presence of clerics as one way to see her development as a writer, and to trace an arc from her first text to her last. While the clergymen in her novels provide examples of her views of the Anglican Church, it is nearly impossible to state what her personal beliefs were. Readers will never know what she privately believed because most of her personal effects were burned posthumously. Instead, readers are able to make generalizations based on extant letters and documents, such as "[Austen] was a loyal member of the Church of

England" ("Displeasing Pictures of Clergymen" 109). However, her private beliefs are an issue completely separate from the characterizations of the clerics in her texts. The clerics may not always be major characters, but they show the most change from one incarnation to the next.

The one article that does feature discussion of Austen's clerics is Raymond A. Cook's "As Jane Austen Saw the Clergy." The piece is essentialized, outdated, and is not developed in a scholarly fashion. In a very brief piece, Cook attempts to survey the clergy from every Austen novel, which does not allow for full development of any tangible theme. Other than Cook's article, critical discourse of Austen's novels has tended to disregard the minor clerics,¹ though readers seeing each cleric as part of a larger arc can appreciate that each new incarnation shows change and increase in the Austen's writerly development. My thesis focuses on her earliest novel, *Northanger Abbey*; one from the middle of her career, *Pride and Prejudice*; and one of her last novels, *Mansfield Park*.

Collins is one of the foremost scholars studying Austen's connection to the Church of England and the clerical profession, three of her works that are particularly relevant to this topic. In *Jane Austen and the Clergy*, Collins surveys Austen's biographical connections in the Anglican Church, and explains the process of joining the clergy, the rights and regulations under which they lived, their typical incomes, and how they fit into the social hierarchy of eighteenth and nineteenth century England. Further, Collins looks at a number of the clerics that Austen wrote about in her novels as examples of the historical and social influences that affected the writing. In "Displeasing Pictures of Clergymen," Collins offers a defense of Mr. Collins and Mr. Elton who, though unrespectable and clownish, are deliberately drawn in such a manner. Collins cites Austen's desire for publication and popularity and suggests that writing funny characters was one way to ensure both. Finally, "The Rev. Henry Tilney, Rector of Woodston" is a detailed

character study of Henry Tilney and the sources that Austen may have drawn from when creating the character and writing *Northanger Abbey*. While each of these texts serves a purpose in helping to establish what has already been done on the topic of Austen's clerics, Collins does not offer a character study that shows the arc of Austen's development as seen through the characterizations of her clerics. I will contend that progression in Austen's clerics, and will rely minimally on biographical details; Collins and her cohort have previously focused nearly exclusively on biography, none connect the clerics in order to chart her development.

Northanger Abbey is Austen's first mature novel, though published posthumously, and marks the transition from her juvenilia. In it, Austen created the cleric Henry Tilney, who is so likeable and exalted that he is presented as too exemplary to be believable. *Northanger Abbey* is variously classified by scholars, like John K. Mathison and Mark Loveridge (respectively), as a parody of the Gothic form and as a novel of education. The focus is on Catherine's education, as she grows from a young woman who sees life in terms of Gothic tropes into a woman who sees the world as a realist. This transformation is completed in the last few chapters of the story. While her point-of-view is the filter through which readers see the story and that gives it an overwrought, overblown nature, she is not the only character worth studying. In a novel of fanciful characters, Tilney is not just a clergyman, he is the most illustrious version of a clergyman. Catherine sees him as the perfect man, and Austen, with her usual ironic distance, paints him as the perfect cleric. Tilney is able to converse easily with women and men, in matters of domesticity as well as government. He is the second son of the extremely wealthy General Tilney. Though he would never need to work for money, he goes into to the clerical profession because he has a desire to help people. While he does not live at his parish, he visits frequently enough that during Catherine's stay of a few weeks at Northanger, he makes two separate trips

that each encompass several days. Tilney is also a reader, able to discuss novels as well as serious histories. He values precise language and tries to instill this value in those around him, as part of his teaching-preacher approach to life.

Composed shortly after *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility* was the first novel published during Austen's life. The cleric of the novel, Edward Ferrars, is remarkably like Tilney in that he is overly romanticized. His one great sin in the novel is that he fell in love and got engaged very young, both before he could afford to marry and before he had seen enough of the world to know that there were better women than his betrothed. When he later falls in love with Elinor Dashwood, he holds himself distant because of his secret engagement. Ferrars is gentle among women, and is of above average intelligence, though he is described as too shy for his own good.

Tilney is a better character than Ferrars for study in this case rather because Tilney is employed as a cleric for the entirety of *Northanger Abbey*, though he does not spend all his time in his parish. Ferrars, though, is only offered a living late in *Sense and Sensibility*, and readers never actually see him function in or talk about the role of a cleric. Austen presents Tilney as more entrenched in the clerical life, while Ferrars is shown mostly as a gentleman of leisure who intends at some point to join the clergy. Ferrars is, admittedly, the more complicated of the two men, but since those complications do not result from his occupation, this discourse will be limited to Tilney.

Austen's second type of clergyman is presented as ridiculous, perhaps in order to correct for the unconvincingly generous portrayal of Tilney. William Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* appears to readers as a mere dolt, not a real character. He is a parody of the ideals of masculinity in Austen's time. He has no monetary power of his own, having been granted his living by his

patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh.² He has no social graces, making a joke of himself at both the local dance and in his marriage proposal to Elizabeth. He is neither a great reader (only claiming to spend time reading published sermons) nor a great conversationalist (Mr. Bennet only speaks to Mr. Collins for as long as is absolutely necessary, and during those times he repeatedly mocks him). His choice to enter the church is based on the necessity of an income, since he is destined to inherit Mr. Bennet's land and estate. He speaks about proper behavior for a cleric as something that is studied rather than something he actively practices. For him, the church office is nothing more than a job. Since his salary depends entirely on Lady Catherine's good graces, that job is reduced from the shepherding of souls to Heaven to the continual outpouring of compliments to Lady Catherine.

Though written after *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* is paired with *Pride and Prejudice* because it features Philip Elton, a cleric similar in ridiculousness to William Collins. The two characters were created years apart, but their resemblances are numerous enough that they are best viewed as the same type. Mr. Elton has aspirations of improving his station by marrying Emma Woodhouse, but he fails to get her approval of such an alliance. Emma decries ever having considered him as an eligible match for a woman in her position (she neither needs a fortune nor claims to want a husband). In fact, she had been actively working to encourage a romantic match between Elton and Harriet Smith, a poor, untitled woman of unknown parentage. Mr. Elton, once snubbed by Emma, immediately leaves town to find a wife of fortune, if not consequence. He returns to the neighborhood with his new wife and they proceed to make themselves as odious as possible to everyone. This is the only difference in Mr. Elton and Mr. Collins: Collins, after marrying on the rebound, settles away from the neighborhood where he had originally been snubbed.

The character of Mr. Collins offers more direct commentary on the position of the clergy in the nineteenth-century Church of England than Mr. Elton. He converses about his duties as a rector, and he offers insight into the system of entailment and of assigning livings by landowners. Collins is more an exemplar of the cleric than Elton is. Collins's focus is on his profession in the church. Elton's focus is on gaining social station and moving into the upper echelon of society. Elton never seems to worry over his parishioners, glebe, or tithe-rights, and he never seems to have any duties in leading worship services. For these reasons, this thesis relies on Collins for the example of the middle clerics.

Where Mr. Tilney is unbelievable because he is overly virtuous, Mr. Collins is unbelievable because he is too silly to be real. The progression of her style is marked by Austen's movement from a model clergyman to one no reader can take seriously because he comes across as a joke. *Mansfield Park* was published between *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, but it presents a distinctly different type of cleric. In *Mansfield Park*, Austen reaches the compromise between Tilney and Collins in the character of Edmund Bertram. Bertram is caring, compassionate, and earnest with his cousin, Fanny Price. He helps her adjust when she first moves to Mansfield, and he looks out for her during her stay, making sure she is as comfortable and happy as possible. He wants to be a cleric because, as he tells Mary Crawford, he sees value in a profession that helps people become better. Like Tilney, Bertram is not the eldest son in his family, so he will not inherit his father's property, nor does he stand to inherit enough money to maintain him for the rest of his life. His argument is easy to understand: becoming a cleric is a future to which he is disposed, and there is a living that will be available to him near home. Why, then, would he not go into the church?

Readers are also able to see Bertram's failings and character flaws. When he meets Mary Crawford he is taken by her beauty, and he begins to court her in spite of the fact that she is not a morally upstanding woman. She is crude, demeans the clerical profession, causes Bertram to neglect Fanny, and shows herself to be more interested in gaining wealth than in reciprocating his love. Yet, Bertram makes excuses for her right up until the last few chapters of the novel.

The characterization of Bertram is one of the ways that readers are able to see Austen's development as a writer. Unlike prior clerics, he is one of the main characters in the novel. Further, he is the most realistic cleric that Austen ever wrote because he is a dynamic, round character who changes on a fundamental level. He has both serious positive and negative aspects; he is believable because he is neither too good nor too foolish. In *Edmund Bertram*, Austen adjusts her pitch so that her cleric is representative of a real person. He empathizes with Fanny when she is depressed, he feels the burden of filial responsibility when his father and brother are away from home, and he is able to excuse Mary Crawford's indiscretions because he knows how easy it would be for him to be in her place. As one of the last clergyman that Austen created, he represents her most developed incarnation of the cleric.

Austen's sixth novel, *Persuasion*, has been omitted from this study because, as Cook has stated, "The only other clergymen in Jane Austen's novels are Charles Hayter and Dr. Shirley in *Persuasion*, who are such minor characters that they warrant hardly more than a passing comment" (48). The profession that Austen focuses on in *Persuasion* is the English Navy, to which she was connected through her brothers Francis and Charles. The novel does have clerics; however they are negligible to the story.

In order to properly understand Austen's clergymen, it is necessary to know some of the history of the Church of England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In Austen's lifetime,

entering a profession in the church was significantly different than in current practice. Hugh D. McKellar's "The Profession of a Clergyman" gives a brief synopsis of the history of the practices of the Church of England in the late 1700s and early 1800s. The article is a brief, straightforward overview of church history. McKellar also points out some of the places where Austen makes reference to significant changes in the running of the Anglican Church; however, these are only tangential points.

McKellar's article contains particularly useful information concerning the history of the Church of England, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is a brief piece, and highlights some of the most dramatic changes that the Church went through at the turn of the century. McKellar also points out how historical circumstances affected Austen's writing. Again, though, his focus is more broadly on the Church and Austen's oeuvre; the scope of this thesis is limited to specific novels and the clerics therein, and uses church history as background information (as opposed to foregrounded study).

According to McKellar, a clergyman's "job" encompassed leading worship services, naturally, but also, "he was a one-man department of health, education, and welfare, as well as record-keeper for the community, since he might be the only literate one for miles around" (28). A clergyman's pay was based on two factors: first was the patron, the person who actually awarded a living to a clergyman (28). Second was tithing, based on "a percentage of all crops and livestock raised within the parish" (29). In order to boost their incomes, clergymen could buy the tithe-rights to parishes other than the one in which they served (30).

By the time Austen was writing, a career in the church had "[become] attractive not just to bright lads who viewed it . . . as a first step out of the working class, but to the younger sons of landowners" (McKellar 30). Readers see this literally with Edmund Bertram, who understands

that a profession in the church is a beneficial pursuit. Tilney and Collins are different cases. As McKellar points out, "Henry Tilney . . . and Mr. Elton do in fact possess the skills needed for the work expected of them; what we chiefly miss in them is a sense of vocation. Unlike Edmund Bertram, they give no outward sign of responding to an urge too strong to be resisted" (33). Because he was written much earlier in Austen's life, Tilney's concern is how he can best help the members of the parish to which he has attached himself, as opposed to how the Church can best improve his station in life. He visits his parish frequently, though he does not live in the same area. General Tilney has money enough that none of his three children need to work. Readers know from this that Tilney has chosen the cleric's life not for pecuniary benefit, but from his sincere desire to do good. Mr. Collins, on the other hand, is a farceur but he will inherit Mr. Bennet's estate thanks to the patriarchal system of entail. He joins the Church to bolster his future income.

In the mid 1500s, Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries in England, Wales, and Ireland. He then "doled out [their accumulated lands] as he pleased to favoured loyal subjects, who proceeded to bequeath and traffic in them as they saw fit" and "presentation rights . . . came to be treated as marketable commodities" (McKellar 30). The church had become a profession for those able to send a son to Oxford to study, and to buy the rights to a parish at which he could serve. A clergyman was not required to complete a formal education to join the church order, provided he could fulfill the requirements for ordination in the Prayer Book. McKellar posits that Oxford educations were primarily valuable because they gave the men attending a chance to form social connections that would help them later in life when they were looking for livings and at how to manage their estates (33). However, in the three novels of focus in this thesis, Austen's clerics have avoided the monetary concern altogether by being born to wealth (Tilney), being

avored by a wealthy patroness (Collins), or by having a local living set to become vacant in a short time (Bertram). Therefore, the clerics who wanted to marry might very easily have enough money to support a wife and family in Austen's day. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, clergymen could buy the tithe-rights to nearby parishes to help support their families. In some cases, there would be "a sizeable group of people living comfortably on the tithes of parishes which they never saw" (McKellar 30). However, this is not the case that Austen presents with any of her novels' clerics; perhaps it was not her own experience, or maybe she did not want to glorify the practice. Because she chose to leave it out of her works, it is precluded from this discussion.

The office of the clergyman had also, as Collins tells Elizabeth, garnered respect which allows him to speak to Darcy "as equal in point of dignity with the highest rank in the kingdom" (*Pride and Prejudice* 69). In spite of the fact that this information is gleaned from the mouth of a dupe, readers can appreciate that this was not an uncommon train of thought, since Austen does not contradict Collins's supposition. The cleric's social status, while it did not put him on exactly equal footing with the gentry, did allow him to move in social circles above his own station. After England's break with Rome led to the creation of the Church of England, clergymen were allowed to marry. Readers see the pursuit of a wife as paramount importance for Collins, and of only moderate concern for Tilney and Bertram.

McKellar concludes his article by asserting that Evangelical writer Hannah More may have had some influence on Austen's own views of what a proper cleric should be (34). According to McKellar, More's ideas that can be seen in Austen's novels are: that the cleric live within the bounds of the parish which he pastored, that he be friendly with the locals and "demonstrat[e] concern for their individual well-being," and that he work hard (34). These are all

qualities possessed by Bertram, Austen's well-rounded, realistic clergyman. He is the most human because in him Austen has struck the balance between too-good-to-be-true and an unprofessional imbecile. By writing *Mansfield Park*, she had worked out how to creatively present a character that was just human enough.

CHAPTER 2

HENRY TILNEY: THE CONSCIENTIOUS CLERIC

They made their appearance in the Lower Rooms; and here fortune was more favourable to our heroine. The master of the ceremonies introduced to her a very gentlemanlike young man as a partner;—his name was Tilney.
—*Northanger Abbey*

The trends in the criticism of *Northanger Abbey* deal with some measure of detective work on the part of modern critics to decide whether to interpret the novel as parody or as honest commentary on the state of the clergy in the Anglican Church in the late eighteenth century. Even more so, however, there is a question of whether the work is up to the quality readers expect from an Austen novel. Numerous critics are quick to belittle *Northanger Abbey*: George Levine calls it "trivially entertaining" (335), and Lloyd W. Brown states that the ending of the novel is marked by "the obvious artifices of Jane Austen's denouement" (1583). John K. Mathison gives a nod to his predecessors who treat *Northanger Abbey* as pure parody, but then places it within the larger tradition of heroines maturing, a pattern he demonstrates in each of Austen's six novels. Mark Loveridge also defends the novel as a more intelligent and subtle Gothic novel than many critics give it credit for by suggesting that some of the elements usually considered flaws were used purposefully and well, provided the reader knows where to look. Narelle Shaw attempts to discern how much of the novel can be credited to a young Austen, and how much is revision performed by a more mature Austen, particularly how much of her trademark free indirect style was added later. Cecil S. Emden posits that some of the specific references to *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and the Gothic-parody elements were added years after the original composition.

Northanger Abbey was Austen's first composed, but last published novel. It was originally written between 1798 and 1803, when it was purchased for publication by Richard Crosby of London. However, he never published the novel. Using a pen name to correspond with him, Austen bought back the manuscript in 1815. Two years later, after apparently editing the original text in preparation to resubmit it for publication, Austen set the manuscript aside when her Addison's disease³ inhibited her ability to work (Fraiman xii). *Northanger Abbey* was published in 1817 in a volume that also contained *Persuasion*. Addressing how much revision was made on the manuscript, Susan Fraiman, in her introduction to the Norton Critical edition of *Northanger Abbey*, states, "[t]hough we know, at a minimum, that revisions were made in 1803, 1809, and 1816, critics disagree on their extent, with the majority arguing for only superficial corrections at the later dates" (xiii). Regardless of minor changes, *Northanger Abbey* is Austen's first-written novel and is exemplary of her earliest writing style and technique; therefore, it is the starting point for discussion of the development of Austen's clerics.

Irene Collins has suggested that the cleric of *Northanger Abbey*, Henry Tilney, received many of his traits from Austen's father George (*Jane Austen and the Clergy* 46). Specifically, she posits that George Austen's "interest in current topics of debate . . . and a delight in plays and novels," (46) as well as a love of the Gothic novel (113) were superimposed onto Tilney's character. Tilney freely owns that he has "read all [of] Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and most of them with great pleasure" (*Northanger Abbey* 72). If Tilney is based on a beloved relative of Austen's, it is not surprising that his characterization is somewhat idealized. Austen would want to give a flattering portrait of Tilney if he were meant to represent a close family member, so that the family member would be mollified rather than mortified as being the inspiration for the character. Further, basing Tilney on the men in her family who were members of the clergy

would make her want to represent well the vocation in which they were employed. In addition to the fact that Austen created a genial clergyman in *Northanger Abbey*, Tilney's goodness is further elevated by Catherine's tendency to idealize him even beyond his innate goodness.

Collins suggests that Tilney, in addition to the traits he shares with George Austen, may represent an assimilation of characteristics from contemporary cleric and writer, Sydney Smith ("The Rev. Henry Tilney, Rector of Woodston" 162-164). Chris Viveash asserts that Austen had occasion to meet Smith and alludes to the fact that Tilney and Smith share similar characteristics (255). Additionally, Lord David Cecil proposes Smith as the model for Tilney's witty repartee (*Jane Austen and the Clergy* 2). However, there is much more scholarship, and a much greater likelihood that Tilney was based more on Austen's clerical family members. The possibility of his being based on Smith is tenuous at best, and no definitive evidence has been found to support this position. If indeed Tilney were based on one of Austen's contemporaries rather than family, the fact remains that he is a totally quintessential version of all that a cleric can and should be.

Collins offers an excellent overview of Austen's kith and kin who were clergymen who may have inspired not only her characters, but also her choice to create a recurring role in her novels for a member of the clerical body of the Church of England. George Austen had been the rector of Steventon parish for more than a decade before Austen was born (*Jane Austen and the Clergy* 2), and he and his family remained at Steventon for twenty-five years after Austen's birth (3). Later he retired to Bath (3). Austen's mother, Cassandra Leigh Austen, came from clergyman stock; both her father and an uncle were clerics. Among Austen's six brothers, two joined the clergy, two took on naval careers, one was adopted by a wealthy cousin and became a gentleman, and the youngest was probably mentally handicapped and lived away from the parsonage (3). In addition to these members of the clergy from her immediate family, there is

evidence of Austen's having numerous clerical friends. Letters that she wrote home to Cassandra while on visits to other parsonages with her parents speak to this. In these letters, Collins says that the "clergy appear only in a social capacity" (8). She continues, "The clear impression is that Jane took clergymen for granted and judged them as she found them, expecting them to be neither better nor worse than other men. They formed an integral part of the social scene [in and around Steventon]" (8). Thus, readers expect that the clerical characters presented in Austen's novels can and will act as ordinary people, replete with both vice and virtue. However, that is not the case in *Northanger Abbey*: Tilney has no vices, and is virtuous and kind to everyone with whom he comes into contact.

Northanger Abbey is told from the perspective of Catherine Morland, a seventeen-year-old girl who is interested primarily in reading books, "provided that nothing like useful knowledge could be gained from them, [and] provided they were all story and no reflection" (*Northanger Abbey* 7). Traditionally, *Northanger Abbey* is seen as Austen's attempt to take traditional tropes from the Gothic novel and transform them. Waldo S. Glock posits that Austen "has integrated into the body of Catherine Moreland's ordinary adventures a substantial element of Gothic burlesque" (33). When Catherine goes to visit the Tilneys at Northanger, it is a reversal of the kidnapping that might be featured in a Gothic novel. Instead of the heroine being taken away from her family against her will and their knowledge, only to be mistreated by a villain, Catherine, with permission from the Allens (acting *in loco parentis* during Catherine's time in Bath), goes to visit the Tilneys where she is treated like an honored guest and is given the best treatment possible for most of her stay. Another instance of the trope-reversal happens during the trip to Northanger Abbey. Tilney recites a speech that seems to have been pulled together from any number of the Gothic novels that he and Catherine have read: he includes "sliding

panels and tapestries;" "room[s] without windows, doors, or furniture;" and "Dorothy the ancient housekeeper [who will conduct Catherine] up a different staircase, and along many gloomy passages, into an apartment never used since some cousin or kin died in it about twenty years before" (107-108). He builds Catherine's expectations of finding Northanger to be a horrible Gothic abbey until he can no longer stand her growing excitement and then lets himself go in a fit of laughter, obviously not the typical Gothic ending to such a story (109). Later, Catherine, with his story in mind, imagines her own room to be haunted and filled with secrets to be discovered, so she opens every drawer and chest in the room until she finds rolls of paper, on which she is sure she will find something horrible (116). When she reads them by the light of the next day, however, she finds that instead of containing the last testament of a houseguest who perished in the room where she sleeps, they contain only itemized laundry and blacksmith bills. Here again Austen offers a Gothic trope, but turns it on its head.

Juliet McMaster, in addition to drawing comparisons between *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility*, discusses Catherine's tendency to see the Gothic where it does not exist: "when [Catherine's] own life brings the genuine experience of reality – more intense though lower-keyed than the events of the Gothic novels – she gets the two confused" (725). McMaster calls "[t]hat confusion of literary with real experience . . . the most obvious theme in the book" (725). While this is a popular and valid reading of the novel, the goal of this thesis is not to show that Catherine's education is the central theme of *Northanger Abbey*, but that her tendency to confuse Gothic convention and real life is only part of the reason why she sees Tilney as inculpable. Catherine is not an irrational creature incapable of learning. She is able to see where she has overestimated the people around her, and she never concludes that she was wrong in her estimation of Tilney's polite and generous disposition. Therefore, the fact that her esteem for him

never diminishes, even after her so-called "education" is complete, means that Tilney really is as respectable as he appears.

Catherine has a tendency to put the people around her on pedestals, as when Tilney asks her to dance at the Pump Room, a Bath social fixture (50). This is neither the first time the two have danced, nor is it a completely unexpected gesture. However, she romanticizes the event in her mind as Tilney rescuing her from the clutches of the boorish John Thorpe⁴. Thorpe had been watching her with the apparent intention of asking her to dance, a request that she neither wants to accept nor could politely turn down. Thus she "gave herself up for lost" (50) to Thorpe's monopolizing her evening at the Pump Room. Catherine had, in fact, begun to repent:

her folly, in supposing that among such a crowd they should even meet with the Tilneys in any reasonable time . . . when she suddenly found herself addressed and again solicited to dance, by Mr. Tilney himself. With what sparkling eyes and ready motion she granted his request, and with how pleasing a flutter of her heart she went with him to the set, may be easily imagined. To escape, and, as she believed, so narrowly escape John Thorpe, and to be asked, so immediately on his joining her, asked by Mr. Tilney, as if he had sought her on purpose!—it did not appear that life could supply any greater felicity. (50)

The mere event of being asked to dance by Henry Tilney is enough to send Catherine into raptures. This episode is representative of the way Catherine interprets events in her life throughout the majority of *Northanger Abbey*. That is, she views her life through a lens tinted by the style of the Gothic novels which she spent her early teens reading. The dramatic emotions that Catherine exhibits are typical of the tropes used in contemporary Gothic novels.

Although the entire story of *Northanger Abbey* is told from Catherine's overdrawn perspective, Tilney's character is presented as particularly consummate by Austen (beyond Catherine's interpreting him to be so). In a story of Gothic romantic notions, Tilney is meritorious to the point of being unbelievable. Among other positive qualities that Catherine notices about Tilney, she finds that he is able to put her at ease in awkward social situations (*NA* 14), knows a great deal about fabrics (16), believes in marital fidelity (51-52), likes plays (62), appreciates Catherine's awkward flirtations for the earnest feelings they convey (63), reads novels (73), and displays a great ability to converse well throughout the novel. These are all qualities that serve to make Catherine love him, but they also set Tilney apart from the usual clergymen that Austen would have been exposed to during her youth. Collins suggests that "[t]he clergy could not all be expected to be good conversationalists. There can have been few as accomplished as Henry Tilney, whose skills were clearly something quite new to Catherine Morland, brought up though she had been in a country parsonage" (*Jane Austen and the Clergy* 113). These traits are not typical for clerics from Austen's youth, and they are used in *Northanger Abbey* to set Tilney even further above any other character.

Tilney spends approximately half of his time at his parish in Woodston (107). Such commitment was not necessarily required of members of the clergy during Austen's lifetime.

According to Collins,

The formal duties of a parish priest in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were indeed very much lighter than those expected of a modern clergyman; so light that they allowed for a practice known as 'nominal residence', whereby a clergyman who had no other parish to his name could nevertheless spend most of his time elsewhere. (*Jane Austen and the Clergy* 94)

Essentially, all that was required of the clerics by the end of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries in England was to deliver one or two sermons on Sunday. Early in the eighteenth century, clerics were expected to read prayers twice a day on Sundays, preach one or two sermons, visit new mothers to confer sacraments that they had missed, and catechize local children (*Jane Austen and the Clergy* 94). There was also the potential for a midweek service to be held (95). However, as the century progressed, these duties became less demanding. Most churches stopped having a second Sunday service later in the century (94), and communion would be given monthly, rather than weekly (95).

In "The Rev. Henry Tilney, Rector of Woodson," Collins discusses Tilney's Woodston-visiting habits. She explains that:

When [*Northanger Abbey*] was written, in 1798, there was no law obliging clergy to live in their parishes; and even when one was passed, in 1808, it was difficult to enforce. Some three thousand of England's 7,500 parishes had no parsonage fit for a clergyman to live in; and in any case a third of the clergy of the Church of England held more than one parish and could not live in them all. Some clergy never saw their parishes from one year's end to another. (160)

Collins explains that there was no law that required Tilney to maintain his presence at Woodston. That he is in his parish approximately as often as he is away shows that his morals will not allow him to show disregard for his profession.

For Tilney to spend so much of his time at his parish in Woodston shows that he has elevated sensibilities about what a rector's duties and time commitment ought to be. Additionally, Tilney has apparently taken it on himself to hire a curate to maintain the Woodston parish during his absences (*NA* 152). This practice was not required by church law, but it allows

for the Woodston parish to have a representative cleric to stand in when Tilney is not available. In order to maintain the curate's employment at Woodston, Tilney would have to pay out of pocket because, as Collins explains, there were no provisions from the church government to be used to maintain local curates whose primary cleric did not keep a constant residence within the parish. Curates were not uncommon in the Anglican Church in the early nineteenth century; however, having both a rector and a curate whenever the rector was unavailable was certainly a rarity. Austen is subtle in relaying that Tilney provides for a curate at Woodston, only referring to the curate's existence in passing in chapter twenty-eight. The text simply states that, "Henry was not able to obey his father's injunction of remaining wholly at Northanger in attendance on the ladies, during his absence in London; the engagements of his curate at Woodston obliging him to leave them on Saturday for a couple of nights" (NA 152) as if the Woodston curate a matter of course. Keeping a curate at Woodston is meant to show that Tilney is better than the average rector. He is more concerned about the spiritual well-being of his parishioners than any other clerical figure that Austen presents, because he is the only one who goes so above and beyond the call of duty in this way.

Austen presents Tilney as a kind, generous, and intelligent beyond the norm. Catherine Morland's perception of the character shows him to be the most estimable and most goodly, Godly rector of Austen's entire oeuvre. While the entire story has a romantic glow about it due to the nature of Catherine's preoccupation with the Gothic, Tilney is idealized even beyond the other elements of *Northanger Abbey* to produce a character who is nearly flawless. Even Tilney's faults only serve to make the characters around him better people. That is, Tilney's least altruistic moments show him to be a better man and member of society than the people around him. For example, Tilney can occasionally be pedantic, as when he encourages Catherine to be more

exacting when choosing the words she uses (NA 73-74). However, this instance of pedantry is not done out of heartlessness nor is it taken badly by Catherine.

Catherine calls a novel she had just read "nice" and Tilney, though he may appear somewhat curmudgeonly for it, attempts to show her that the term has become so overused that it has lost its original meaning and, in fact, any meaning at all. Thus, when she states that a book is "nice," she has not enlightened her listener whatsoever about any aspect of it. Catherine does not understand that Tilney is trying to get her to be more specific with the vocabulary that she uses. The two of them are out walking with Eleanor Tilney and they begin to discuss novels and novel-reading. Tilney says that he has read hundreds of novels during his time at Oxford (NA 73). Catherine, finding common ground, asks him, ". . . do not you think *Udolpho* the nicest book in the world?" Tilney responds, "The nicest;— by which I suppose you mean the neatest. That must depend upon the binding." He wants Catherine to describe *The Mysteries of Udolpho* with a more exact term than simply "nice," because that term in the late 1700s was defined as "particular" (OED). Tilney's tone is teasing, but what he wants is for Catherine to see that her terminology is non-specific, and that her description of the book would be better if she used accurate vocabulary. Eleanor explains to Catherine that the reason for being Tilney's pedantry is to encourage her into thoughtful conversation rather than to make fun of her (73).

Readers are able to appreciate that Tilney's critique is not done in anger, and that he shows a sincere desire to help Catherine improve herself, and Catherine is far from offended by his gentle rebuke. In fact, the adjectives that she uses for the rest of her discussion of books become much more specific, as with the history books she describes as "solemn" and "tiresome" (74). Austen uses this moment to show that Tilney is a well-educated man. He attended Oxford (73), but his attitude about language shows that he was there to learn and not just to make

connections (which, as will be seen with William Collins, was not necessarily true of every future rector who attended university).

Further, this episode is used as a substitution to show what Tilney would be like in his pulpit at Woodston. Readers may not see Tilney deliver a sermon, but from his interactions with Catherine where his goal is to educate her, they understand that as a rector he would work to educate his parishioners about the finer points of religious study and devotion. Tilney's ministerial prowess as an educator is best understood from this vignette of encouraging Catherine to be more precise in her language. Austen may also be suggesting that one of the duties Tilney will take on will be to educate young men bound for university, a common practice by clerics looking to bolster their incomes.

It would be common in the nineteenth century for an educated man or woman to be familiar with the theory of the Picturesque. Based on Edmund Burke's theories of the beautiful and the sublime, the Picturesque theory encouraged organization of the nature surrounding a person's home in a way that appealed to the desire for organization in landscape, while still preserving the beauty inherent to the flora. Picturesque gardening is defined as "the arrangement of a garden so as to make it resemble a picture; a romantic style of gardening, aiming at irregular and rugged beauty" (*OED*). Austen makes references in several of her novels to the practice of using the Picturesque ideology in landscape design. In *Northanger Abbey*, though, there is a more abstract discussion of the Picturesque:

But Catherine did not know her own advantages—did not know that a good-looking girl, with an affectionate heart and a very ignorant mind, cannot fail of attracting a clever young man, unless circumstances are particularly untoward. In the present instance, she confessed and lamented her want of knowledge, declared

that she would give anything in the world to be able to draw; and a lecture on the picturesque immediately followed, in which his instructions were so clear that she soon began to see beauty in everything admired by him, and her attention was so earnest that he became perfectly satisfied of her having a great deal of natural taste. He talked of foregrounds, distances, and second distances—side-screens and perspectives—lights and shades; and Catherine was so hopeful a scholar that when they gained the top of Beechen Cliff, she voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath as unworthy to make part of a landscape. Delighted with her progress, and fearful of wearying her with too much wisdom at once, Henry suffered the subject to decline . . . (NA 76-77)

Catherine relates to Tilney that she has a desire to know more about this subject, and his discussion centers on teaching her as opposed to showing off his knowledge. From a specificity of language to a better understanding of Burke's theories on the relationship of landscape and architecture, Tilney's goal is always to share his knowledge with the willing Catherine. If he is able to teach a young woman without formal education and a self-professed avoider of those books that might impart wisdom, readers infer that Tilney-as-rector is a force to be reckoned with. Tilney always says exactly what Catherine needs to hear, but he does so in a way that makes her eager to listen. His oration and teaching, if anything like his communications with Catherine, would lend themselves to building up the moral fiber and thoughtfulness of his parishioners.

There is one episode in which Tilney's extraordinary fortitude and temperament are displayed. Catherine knows that his mother died after a sudden illness, and that Eleanor was away from home during Mrs. Tilney's decline and death (NA 128). She has also come to

understand that the General feels reluctant to show her Mrs. Tilney's bedchamber (127). However, Catherine sees the world through the Gothic haze induced by her novel reading. Therefore, when she understands that the General does not want her to see the private quarters where Mrs. Tilney spent her last days, combined with what she considers the mysterious circumstances surrounding her death, the only conclusion that Catherine can draw is that General Tilney actually murdered his wife, or that he falsified her death and actually keeps her locked in one of the more isolated rooms, weakened and oppressed and tortured by the knowledge that she can never again see the children she loves (130).

Obviously, readers are meant to look with incredulity on the idea that Catherine has concocted such a history. Austen's narration takes on an ironic tone in her description of Catherine's desire to see Mrs. Tilney's room: "The General's evident desire of preventing such an examination was an additional stimulant. Something was certainly to be concealed; her fancy, though it had trespassed lately once or twice, could not mislead her here . . ." (128). Readers have seen Catherine's imagination run away with her before (as when she sees Tilney asking her to dance as his rescuing her from Thorpe's grasp), and have no reason to think that the power of her imagination has weakened yet. Readers cannot accept that she believes her wild ideas to the point that she would go to break into chambers the General has forbidden her from entering by his avoidance of showing her into it (127-128). But enter it she does, and she finds neither a trapped madwoman in the attic nor evidence of malice by the General toward his wife. Catherine's reaction to the realization of just how wrong her assumptions were is intense. Austen describes a clean but uninhabited room and then shows readers Catherine's emotional reaction:

Catherine had expected to have her feelings worked, and worked they were.

Astonishment and doubt first seized them; and a shortly succeeding ray of

common sense added some bitter emotions of shame. She could not be mistaken as to the room; but how grossly mistaken in everything else!—in Miss Tilney's meaning, in her own calculation! (133)

Catherine realizes that she had judged the General's character wrongly. She feels all the shame of having believed that he could be capable of murder, and of letting her imagination lead her to intruding on the General's desired privacy.

At this point, Catherine is well aware of her mistake, and has mentally chastised herself. Having realized how much she has let her good judgment be misled by her naïve Gothic-informed mindset, "[s]he was sick of exploring, and desired but to be safe in her own room, with her own heart only privy to its folly" (133). However, when she tries to escape to the solace of her room, she is stopped by Tilney's sudden return from his parish where he had been visiting for some days. Tilney attempts to discover the reason for her presence in such a remote part of Northanger Abbey. She explains what she had assumed to be the reason for the room being off-limits:

"Yes, [Eleanor has spoken of the room] a great deal. That is—no, not much, but what she did say was very interesting. [Mrs. Tilney's] dying so suddenly," (slowly, and with hesitation it was spoken,) "and you—none of you being at home—and your father, I thought—perhaps had not been very fond of her."

"And from these circumstances," he replied, (his quick eye fixed on her's,) "you infer perhaps the probability of some negligence—some—(involuntarily she shook her head)—or it may be—of something still less pardonable." She raised her eyes towards him more fully than she had ever done before. "My mother's illness," he continued, "the seizure which ended in her death, *was* sudden. The

malady itself, one from which she had often suffered, a bilious fever—its cause therefore constitutional. . . . During the progress of her disorder, Frederick and I (*we* were both at home) saw her repeatedly; and from our own observation can bear witness to her having received every possible attention which could spring from the affection of those about her, or which her situation in life could command. Poor Eleanor *was* absent, and at such a distance as to return only to see her mother in her coffin." (135-136)

Having heard the circumstances surrounding a perfectly usual, if somewhat sudden death, Catherine is still not satisfied that the General is innocent. While she has Tilney's attention, and while the conversation is focused on the subject anyway, Catherine broaches the General's emotions during Mrs. Tilney's illness and death:

"But your father," said Catherine, "was *he* afflicted?"

"For a time, greatly so. You have erred in supposing him not attached to her. He loved her, I am persuaded, as well as it was possible for him to . . . His value of her was sincere; and, if not permanently, he was truly afflicted by her death."⁵

"I am very glad of it," said Catherine; "it would have been very shocking!"—
(136)

Tilney's response is the strongest condemnation that Catherine can receive. After having realized what Catherine had suspected about the relationship between his father and mother, and after realizing that she had come to believe the General had acted nefariously to get Mrs. Tilney out of his life, Tilney's accusation is harsh though justified:

"If I understand you rightly, you had formed a surmise of such horror as I have hardly words to—Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the

suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you—Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?" (136)

Tilney, the moral paragon, cannot see that a Christian Englishman could ever be guilty of a crime like murder. He argues that Catherine should never have entertained such thoughts because they are English first, implying civility and refinement, and Christian second, suggesting that their morals are unquestionable. In putting Englishness first, and in referring to the spies, he suggests that loyalty to the English crown offers an even better recommendation of character than does one's religious devotion. According to Susan Fraiman, in her footnote in the Norton Critical edition of *Northanger Abbey*, this particular speech should be read somewhat ironically. The action of the novel is set during the Napoleonic wars, and Tilney's reference to a "neighbourhood of voluntary spies" refers to the anti-Jacobin forces working to quell revolutionaries in England who supported France. Fraiman suggests that this idea evokes "Gothic tones [of] surveillance" (NA 136, note 4). However, his statement likely deals more with making the reader aware that Tilney is politically knowledgeable, rather than suggesting that he is a spy himself, or that he encourages espionage. Tilney's casual manner of referring to the anti-Jacobin forces indicates that he thinks everyone (or at least anyone as simple and uneducated as Catherine) would know

enough about the subject that he need only make the reference to be perfectly understood. Furthermore, this position that this family lives in a "neighbourhood of voluntary spies" ought to preclude Catherine from thinking it possible that the general could get away with murder.

Tilney is unable to accept that Catherine could believe that a member of the Church of England is capable of plotting to harm his wife. Collins suggests that Tilney's special gift is finding out the secret sins of others ("The Rev. Henry Tilney, Rector of Woodston" 154-155). In this particular episode, he infers that Catherine suspected General Tilney of either murder or keeping his wife hostage in their home. However, as Collins points out, Tilney's ability to find out Catherine's secret sin is meted by his ability and willingness to instantly forgive and forget what he has discovered (156). Tilney, readers are told, is as polite and attentive to Catherine as ever during the evening meal, a mere few hours after having discovered her looking for evidence of his father's murderous wrongdoing:

Henry soon followed her into the room, and the only difference in his behaviour to her, was that he paid her rather more attention than usual. Catherine had never wanted comfort more, and he looked as if he was aware of it.

The evening wore away with no abatement of this soothing politeness; and her spirits were gradually raised to a modest tranquillity. She did not learn either to forget or defend the past; but she learned to hope that it would never transpire farther, and that it might not cost her Henry's entire regard. (*NA* 137)

Tilney holds no grudge, where perhaps the natural reaction would be to do so. Instead, this almost perfect rector displays an impeccable exercise of the morals that he preaches; he forgives Catherine and does not attempt to make her feel bad for having had any suspicions about his father. With this perfect forgiveness readers see that Tilney, far from being portrayed ironically

as an upright man by Austen, is presented by her as genuinely good. His ability to forgive and forget is equaled only by his devotion to filial duty and honor. Both are used in conjunction to show that this is a character not only seen as very good by Catherine, but that Austen created a genuinely noble person in Tilney.

Chapter twenty-eight of the novel features Catherine being cast out from Northanger at General Tilney's direction. The general discovers that Catherine is not as rich as Thorpe had previously intimated her to be (another example of Thorpe's pattern of over-exaggeration), and, feeling betrayed, he sends her home instantly. The general, when he thought Catherine came from a wealthy family, had planned that she would make an eligible match for Henry. Once he discovers that she is from a middle-class family, he wants her as far from his home as possible in order to put a stop to what he sees as her taking advantage of his family. He sends her from Northanger without so much as a servant to attend her home, as would be polite custom to do for a young woman travelling alone. General Tilney's behavior is beyond cruel, because he does not even offer the courtesy of an explanation to Catherine. In fact, he makes Eleanor deliver the order of expulsion, choosing not to face Catherine himself.

On her trip home, Catherine considers what Tilney will think when he returns to Northanger and finds out she has left, since her exit takes place while he is visiting his parish. When she arrives home and tells the story of her sudden return, her family points out how unfair it was of the General to cast her out with no explanation. The Morlands commiserate with their daughter and suggest that "General Tilney had acted neither honourably nor feelingly – neither as a gentleman nor as a parent" (*NA* 161). However, Austen says that the Morlands are not predisposed to be cruel or catty, and they soon drop the affair and move on with their lives. Catherine is home only a few days before the arrival of Henry Tilney, who visits ostensibly to

make certain that Catherine had gotten home safely. His true motivation, though, is to assure her of his affection. Austen intrudes into the narration to say that:

I must confess that his affection originated in nothing better than gratitude, or, in other words, that a persuasion of her partiality for him had been the only cause of giving her a serious thought. It is a new circumstance in romance, I acknowledge, and dreadfully derogatory of an heroine's dignity; but if it be as new in common life, the credit of a wild imagination will at least be all my own. (168)

Her suggestion that Tilney's regard was based only on the fact that Catherine was partial to him, in no way lessens the fact that they have at this point grown to mutual affection. The beginnings of their relationship may be based on nothing more than the fact that Tilney was nice to Catherine at the Pump Room, but it has grown to the point that Tilney is offering her his hand in marriage (168). He proceeds to explain all the circumstances surrounding the general's forcing her away, and that though it was not Catherine's fault he had believed Thorpe's lies, he punished her just the same. Catherine realizes "that in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty" (170). Her error, then was not in construing the general to be a bad man. Rather, as before, she had chosen her terms improperly. The general was not the murderous tyrant that Catherine imagined, but he is a cruel and unjust man all the same. Instead of understanding his personality as harsh and mercenary, she had jumped to the improbable conclusion that he was a murderer. Her imprecise language was her undoing in her estimation of the general.

As for Tilney, "[h]e felt himself bound as much in honour as in affection to Miss Morland, and believing that heart to be his own which he had been directed to gain, no unworthy retraction of a tacit consent, nor reversing decree of unjustifiable anger, could shake his fidelity,

or influence the resolutions it prompted" (*NA* 171). As much as he wants to marry Catherine post-haste, however, he is willing to wait to gain the consent of his father. The general learns that Catherine's family is not poor, just not as wealthy as himself, so he allows Tilney to marry her and holds no grudge (173). They all, presumably, live happily ever after.

Critic Cynthia Griffin mentions Tilney in passing, but does not believe that he warrants extensive discussion. She states "I think it is fairly clear that he functions primarily to correct Catherine's distortions and offers very little himself toward a comprehensive picture of 'reality'" (39). However, he is not the throw-away character she posits when viewed as the first of a series of prototypical characters that Austen created. As her first cleric, he may not be as developed as later iterations, but that does not mean that he is not valuable in his own right.

The character Henry Tilney was composed very early in Jane Austen's career, in the first of her novels. As such, readers do not necessarily expect that her writing style would be fully refined or perfected. One notable element that shows her lack of experience in writing is the elevated nature that she gives Tilney. He is a better person than is humanly possible. He is comfortable and appropriate in situations that range from the very public to the very private. He is able to converse intelligently with the learned society of his university friends as well as with Mrs. Allen, whose interests are quite specific (fabrics and fashion). He is, moreover, able to maintain these conversations without appearing overbearing or dominating, even when his expertise in the subject outweighs that of his conversation partner. Tilney's manners are obliging and proper in every situation, even when he might be justified in acting indignant or angry. Instead, Tilney is portrayed as nearly perfect as any character could be. He loves sincerely, acts uprightly, and never holds a grudge. He tries to teach Catherine to be a mature adult and wants to

do the best he can for his own parish. Tilney is Austen's first cleric, and certainly the most paradigmatic.

Readers may not be surprised to find him so portrayed when they understand that he is at least somewhat based on the character of one of Austen's real life clerical relations, her father. Furthermore, as a first attempt at creating a character that represents the profession so much connected to Austen's life, her attitude is one of profound respect for the office of the clergy. She distills her views of the clerical office with an exemplar of highest human potential in the character of Henry Tilney. Her next iteration must necessarily be less. As shall be seen, the character of William Collins represents Tilney's antithesis in terms of temperament and clerical quality.

CHAPTER 3

WILLIAM COLLINS: AUSTEN'S CLOWN

"[Mr. Collins] must be an oddity, I think," said [Elizabeth Bennet]. "I cannot make him out.—There is something very pompous in his stile. . . . Could he be a sensible man, sir?"

*"No, my dear; I think not. I have great hopes of finding him quite the reverse. There is a mixture of servility and self-importance in his letter, which promises well. I am impatient to see him[," replied Mr. Bennet]
—Pride and Prejudice*

Having created a portrait of a very "good" clerical figure like Henry Tilney, who is so indefectible that he is unbelievable, Austen's next iteration of the clergyman comes in the form of William Collins. If Tilney represents the highest of Austen's clergymen, Collins represents the nadir. He is as unbelievable as Henry Tilney, but for the opposite reason: he is a clod, too ridiculous to be plausible. The characterization of Collins may be an attempt to garner readers by appealing to their sense of humor. Alternately, Collins may represent a tendency toward toadying that Austen saw in her wide clerical connections, though he was probably not a direct representation of a specific person. In fact, she did not think that she could successfully create a literary character that was modeled on a real cleric (*Jane Austen and the Clergy* 1-2). Irene Collins quotes from one of Austen's letters, where Austen claims that she did not base any of her characters on real people because she did not consider herself "equal to" writing a character who encapsulated both the humorous and the serious sides of a real person, and as such, that she had never modeled any of her characters on any specific person (2).

William Collins is unbelievable because he is a joke. As readers view him following the idealistic Henry Tilney, it seems that once again Austen has tried and failed at writing the cleric that readers wanted. However, Irene Collins suggests that the character is exactly what Austen intended ("Displeasing Pictures of Clergymen" 114). Collins continues that although Austen was

experimenting with the form of the novel, her hope was publication and she saw a comical character like Mr. Collins as a means of garnering a readership. Whether he is intentionally bad or not is a moot point. Collins's character is perfect for tracing an arc in Austen's development because he is vastly different from his predecessors and those that follow. He represents a change in the type, and it is a change for the farcical.

Mr. Collins's first introduction in *Pride and Prejudice* is via a letter he writes to Mr. Bennet announcing his intention to join the Bennets for a stay of about two weeks. His letter is filled with bloated language and digression that would make Henry Tilney cringe. His sentences are long and muddled, and his word choice reflects his inferior knowledge and skills. Collins opens:

Dear Sir,

The disagreement subsisting between yourself and my late honoured father, always gave me much uneasiness, and since I have had the misfortune to lose him, I have frequently wished to heal the breach; but for some time I was kept back by my own doubts, fearing lest it might seem disrespectful to his memory for me to be on good terms with any one, with whom it had always pleased him to be at variance. (*P&P* 42-43)

Within the first sentence Collins calls the death of his father a "misfortune" (readers expect the death of a parent to be somewhat more meaningful). He means to say that he does not know whether to try to mend the broken relationship with the Bennet family because his dad had held the grudge to his death (readers expect a clergyman to be more tactful in his broaching an apparently sore subject). However, he uses the wrong term, replacing "existing" with "subsisting." For a man who graduated from Oxford, something Tilney showed to include an

education on exacting word choice, Collins does not exhibit a masterful grasp of the English language. From here, Collins launches straight into the toadying that will prove to be his consistent and strongest character flaw: "I have been so fortunate as to be distinguished by the patronage of the Right Honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, widow of Sir Lewis de Bourgh, whose bounty and beneficence has preferred me to the valuable rectory of this parish, where it shall be my earnest endeavour to demean myself with grateful respect towards her ladyship" (43). Not bragging at gaining his position, Collins is merely exhibiting his manner of never uttering much beyond a phrase without mentioning Lady Catherine and her generosity. Again, his word choice shows how Collins's prose does not meet the standards previously set by an Oxford graduate. Here he says his goal is to "demean" himself, literally to humble himself and lower his reputation (*OED*). The idea he means to convey is that he will "conduct" himself with respect toward Lady Catherine.

The various members of the Bennet family receive his sentiments differently: Mrs. Bennet thinks it is good and right that Collins wants to make up in some way for the fact that he is going to inherit Mr. Bennet's estate; Jane wants to reserve judgment while giving him the benefit of the doubt; and Elizabeth thinks Collins must be an "oddity" who is probably not "a sensible man" (*P&P* 44). Mr. Bennet concurs that he will be just idiotic enough to make entertainment for his (Mr. Bennet's) cynical preferences. Mary's comments focus on the prose of the letter, which she says is not "defective" (44). There is no indication that Mary is anything other than genuine in her assessment. Finally, "[t]o Catherine and Lydia, neither the letter nor the writer were in any degree interesting" because they are only interested in men who wear the red of military employ.

Though his character bears out Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth's early surmises that he is not a sensible man, Collins's ability to rouse such disparate reactions suggests that the mere fact of his being a cleric does not automatically endow him with any set of virtues unique to the profession. That is, knowing that their cousin is a clergyman does not give him any credibility with the family who will lose their estate to him when Mr. Bennet dies; he is not granted to have superhuman empathy or generosity in the way that Henry Tilney does. Further, he is not presumed to be intelligent or sensible, even though he attended university and has gained a substantial living at Hunsford since his graduation.

As mentioned, Collins betrays what Mary Jean Corbett calls his obsequiousness (237), especially in his deference to Lady Catherine. Mr. Bennet says that Collins's style of writing suggests that his character includes "a mixture of servility and self-importance" (44). Before he is even formally introduced in the text, his letter establishes that his goals in joining the clerical profession are primarily "to demean [himself] with grateful respect towards her Ladyship," and secondarily to "be ever ready to perform those rites and ceremonies which are instituted by the Church of England" (43). His official position may be the rector of Hunsford, but the role he actually feels most vital is actively expressing gratitude to the woman who helped him secure his living.

During Collins's first dinner with the Bennet family, Mr. Bennet brings up the subject of Lady Catherine and allows Collins to make himself look as foolish as he will. Mr. Collins does not disappoint. Austen devotes a long paragraph of Collins's uninterrupted thoughts on his patroness: "Mr. Collins was eloquent in her praise. The subject elevated him to more than usual solemnity of manner, and with a most important aspect he protested that he had never in his life witnessed such behaviour in a person of rank—such affability and condescension, as he had

himself experienced from Lady Catherine" (45). He goes on to report her approval of his sermons, her inviting him to dine with her at Rosings, requesting his presence to play cards, allowing him to join the society of the neighborhood, advising him to marry as soon as possible, visiting him at his Parsonage, and her suggested alterations to his abode (*P&P* 45-46). He is beyond garrulous on this, his favorite subject, and "Mr. Bennet's expectations were fully answered. His cousin was as absurd as he had hoped . . ." (47).

As a pastor in the Church of England, one of the expectations of Collins is that his sermons be persuasive and articulate enough to eventually be published in a collection (thus, he refers to the ones he has written as "discourses" in chapter fourteen). It follows, then, that he should produce cogent arguments and deliver them articulately. However, as with so many other things, Collins's character turns out to be the opposite of what would be expected of such a man.

William Collins has so conditioned himself to keep his focus on his patroness, that he can barely get started proposing to Elizabeth because he is too busy talking about Lady Catherine. His focus, rather than Elizabeth Bennet, is on expounding on the beneficence shown by Lady Catherine in encouraging him to marry in the first place:

". . . it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honour of calling patroness. Twice has she condescended to give me her opinion (unasked too!) on this subject; and it was but the very Saturday night before I left Hunsford . . . that she said, 'Mr. Collins, you must marry. A clergyman like you must marry.—Chuse properly, chuse a gentlewoman for *my* sake; and for your *own*, let her be an active, useful sort of person, not brought up high, but able to make a small income go a good way. This is my

advice. Find such a woman as soon as you can, bring her to Hunsford, and I will visit her." (72)

Not surprisingly, this discussion about the woman who could become her nearest neighbor and provider of the majority of her living provisions does not rouse Elizabeth to accept Collins's proposal, though critics tend to agree that Elizabeth is taking a great risk in turning down Collins's offer. Mrs. Bennet's reaction to Elizabeth refusing Collins of having what appears to be a nervous breakdown may seem overly dramatic. However, from her perspective, Elizabeth turns down Collins and sacrifices any chance of marrying and not ending up as a poor spinster.

It is a natural position to argue that Elizabeth should have accepted Collins's offer of marriage. She has no way of knowing when or if another such opportunity will present itself, and she has to consider the impending loss of financial security when her father's estate is entailed away. James Sherry says of the proposal, "though the scene begins light-heartedly enough with the incomparable foolishness of Collins's pretended passion, it ends with the menace of poverty and loneliness for those, like Elizabeth, without money and rank. And whatever else one might wish to say about it, the threat cannot be ignored" (616). Sherry's position, that for as ridiculous as the scene may first appear to modern readers, it is grounded in a serious social issue, is absolutely correct. However, Mrs. Bennet is the only person in the text who sees this clearly and does not ignore the "threat." Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth enjoy a laugh at Mrs. Bennet's expense, because neither of them wants to think about what rejecting Mr. Collins really means for the family. They take the "out of sight, out of mind" approach to Elizabeth's encroaching spinsterhood.

In discussing this proposal scene, the majority of critics fall into two camps: those who focus on Collins's proposal and those who focus on Elizabeth's response. Of those who focus on

Collins's proposal, Sandra Macpherson says that the proposal fails because Collins considers it a "dispensation" (17) and does not fully appreciate that Elizabeth might not agree with his point of view. Judith Lowder Newton explains that she sees the thrust of Collins's proposal to be his list of "reasons" to marry, and specifically to marry a Bennet (31). E.M. Halliday only mentions the proposal in passing (65), preferring to focus on Darcy's failed proposal instead. Of those who focus on Elizabeth's response, John Pikoulis posits that Elizabeth's "mind and emotion" are in "harmony" (42) and that is why she is able to give such a straightforward answer. She has no doubt intellectually or in her heart that marrying Collins is out of the question. Daniel A. Segal and Richard Handler comment on Collins's eligibility, as contrasted against Elizabeth's unreasonableness (331).

Henrietta Ten Harmsel gives an alternative reading to the scene. She posits that "Charlotte Lucas' quick acceptance of the clergyman after Elizabeth has rejected him emphasizes the heroine's narrow escape from falling prey to the demands of her society" (106). For Ten Harmsel, Elizabeth stands up for what she believes in spite of the fact that the odds are against another man proposing to her in the future. Because readers see Charlotte accept Collins's proposal, which cannot be supposed to be any better planned or presented, Ten Harmsel says that Austen is showing how close Elizabeth was to being a victim of the patriarchy. Ten Harmsel's argument shows that this scene has been explored from many different angles, but never do critics use the proposal scene as a means for approaching Collins's pulpit style.

The proposal itself is a bad one, without doubt. Collins's focus is too much on himself and his patroness and not enough on his intended. Even more than that, it betrays a want of structure and preparation. If a marriage proposal should be a one-time event that changes two lives forever, a certain amount of planning and practice should go into making that moment as

perfect as possible. Instead, Collins's proposal is marked by phrases like "which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier" and "which, however, as I have already said" (72, 73). His thoughts are disorganized, scattered. This does not make sense, seeing that offering discourses is supposed to be Collins's forté. And, while Collins would presumably read from published collections of sermons when preaching, for a shorter speech such this, he should be able to keep his ideas in his head long enough to get them out in proper order without a memory aid.

Within days of having been rejected by Elizabeth, Collins proposes to and is accepted by Charlotte Lucas. Mrs. Bennet is scandalized at her own perceived loss, and Elizabeth is surprised by Charlotte's desire to marry such a bumbler. Austen makes Charlotte's position clear: she would prefer a loveless marriage to spinsterhood (*P&P* 83). In spite of not fully comprehending Charlotte's motivation in marrying her cousin, Elizabeth does try to understand that her reasoning is socially thrust upon her, which she views as a worse alternative than having Collins for a husband. Elizabeth agrees, at Charlotte's behest, to go visit the couple after they have settled into the Hunsford Parsonage.

At Hunsford, Collins's focus is still centered on acquiescing to Lady Catherine's authority and touting the grandness of her abode. Readers are told that Collins spends a good deal of time working in his garden (104), but the impression given is that he works in his garden to better situate himself for seeing the instant Lady Catherine or her daughter, Miss de Bourgh, should drive up the lane, which is the only separation between the Collins's rectory and Lady Catherine's estate (46). It is beside the garden gate that Miss de Bourgh invites, from the comfort of her phaeton, Mr. and Mrs. Collins and their guests to dinner at Rosings (106). Thus, the appearance is that the garden has been strategically situated to offer Collins the best view of the comings and goings at Rosings. As with the wrong focus in his proposal to Elizabeth, Collins's greatest

"triumph" is not in being able to provide his guests with warm hospitality, but rather in "displaying the grandeur of his patroness . . . and of letting them see her civility towards himself and his wife . . ." (106). When the group spends some time at Rosings whiling away the evening playing cards, "Lady Catherine was generally speaking – stating the mistakes [of the other players], or relating some anecdote of herself. Mr. Collins was employed in agreeing to everything her Ladyship said, thanking her for every fish he won, and apologising if he thought he won too many" (111). That is, Collins acts as her toady even when he is meant to be her opponent in a game of cards.

Though it is perhaps understandable that Collins wants to show his thankfulness to Lady Catherine for bestowing the living of Hunsford upon one so soon out of university, it is difficult for Elizabeth to understand why Collins acts with such a degree of sycophancy. Either he has an inborn penchant, or it is his developed bureaucratic manner. However, Austen tells readers that it was only "a fortunate chance [that] had recommended him to Lady Catherine de Bourgh when the living of Hunsford was vacant" (48). Collins did not gain the living by being the best at his profession, or by ingratiating himself to Lady Catherine's society. Only a serendipitous meeting led to his becoming the rector of Hunsford. Although Collins is obviously doing well enough with only the Hunsford parish to support him and his spouse (and, presumably, the children that will follow), he is looking to expand his empire. Holding multiple livings, or pluralism, "was the common practice of allowing Anglican clergymen to hold more than one living" at the time (White 13-14), and this is what Elizabeth suspects is at the heart of Collins's attentions to Lady Catherine: "Very few days passed in which Mr. Collins did not walk to Rosings, and not many in which his wife did not think it necessary to go likewise; and till Elizabeth recollected that there

might be other family livings to be disposed of, she could not understand the sacrifice of so many hours" (*P&P* 112).

Aside from the general disgust inspired by Collins's behavior towards Lady Catherine and Miss de Bourgh, there is also the question of what sort of image he is projecting to his congregation. His preoccupation is with uplifting and complimenting Lady Catherine, her possessions, and her mannerisms, even in company of his wife and his guests. One cannot suppose that he is able to turn this off, even for a few hours each Sunday. His congregants, though not shown in the novel, would see his fawning to his patroness and must lose some of the respect they might have for their pastor. Put simply, Collins cannot command the respect of his parishioners when he does not act respectably before them.

In addition to his flattering Lady Catherine, Collins is socially awkward. His dinner with the Bennet family has been discussed at length, but he is equally inelegant in public settings. Prior to his marriage, during Collins's sojourn with the Bennets, Mr. Bingley gives a ball at his Netherfield estate to which he invites the Bennets and Mr. Collins. Collins, who has only just begun his wooing of Elizabeth, requests her hand for the first two dances, an honor which first indicates that "*she* was selected from among her sisters as worthy of being the mistress of Hunsford Parsonage" (60). Although repulsed by Collins's buffoonery, she does the only polite thing and admits his request, presuming that the dances will be over quickly and she can move on to dance with more desirable partners. These two dances with Collins, though, "were dances of mortification. Mr. Collins, awkward and solemn, apologising instead of attending, and often moving wrong without being aware of it, gave her all the shame and misery which a disagreeable partner for a couple of dances can give. The moment of her release from him was [ecstasy]" (*P&P* 61-62). Collins had to know that he had minimal skill at dancing before he asks Elizabeth

for first two, but he asks anyway. Then he makes himself perfectly idiotic for he displays his inadequacy by bumbling around in front of all the acquaintances that Mr. Bingley has made since he moved to Netherfield.

If that is not enough, he then breaks protocol by taking the liberty of introducing himself to Mr. Darcy. Darcy's social rank is far above Collins's, and as such, a mutual acquaintance would need to make the introduction before he could approach Darcy. Collins wants to address Darcy because he feels that he should have already spoken to him and offered a report on Darcy's Aunt and Collins's patroness, Lady Catherine. Collins believes that he has been remiss in being at the ball for any length of time and not paying his respects to so near a relation of Lady Catherine. Elizabeth tries to prevent his making a fool of himself yet again, and though she reasons it out very well, she has no chance of changing his course:

Elizabeth tried hard to dissuade him from such a scheme; assuring him that Mr. Darcy would consider his addressing him without introduction as an impertinent freedom, rather than a compliment to his aunt; that it was not in the least necessary there should be any notice on either side, and that if it were, it must belong to Mr. Darcy, the superior in consequence, to begin the acquaintance.— Mr. Collins listened to her with the determined air of following his own inclination . . . (66-67)

Then, Collins carries out his plan:

And with a low bow he left her to attack Mr. Darcy, whose reception of his advances she eagerly watched, and whose astonishment at being so addressed was very evident. Her cousin prefaced his speech with a solemn bow, and though she could not hear a word of it, she felt as if hearing it all, and saw in the motion of

his lips the words "apology," "Hunsford," and "Lady Catherine de Bourgh."—It vexed her to see him expose himself to such a man, Mr. Darcy was eyeing him with unrestrained wonder, and when at last Mr. Collins allowed him time to speak, replied with an air of distant civility. Mr. Collins, however, was not discouraged from speaking again, and Mr. Darcy's contempt seemed abundantly increasing with the length of his second speech, and at the end of it he only made him a slight bow, and moved another way. (67)

William Collins is neither able to take explicit advice from Elizabeth, nor able to read subtle hints from Darcy. He cannot see when he is making himself ridiculous, and once he has set himself on a plan, he refuses to vary from it.

Collins writes a second letter to Mr. Bennet, during the scandal of Lydia and Wickham's elopement, and in it he clears any doubt readers have about his inability to address his peers and betters with propriety. In the letter, he suggests that "[t]he death of [Lydia] would have been a blessing in comparison of [her elopement]" (*P&P* 192). He continues that Lydia's rash behavior is not only the result of bad parenting, but also that "for the consolation of [Mr.] and Mrs. Bennet . . . her own disposition must be naturally bad, or she could not be guilty of such an enormity at so early an age" (192). Readers, having been introduced to a cleric too incompetent to be real, are perhaps only somewhat shocked that this is his attempt to comfort the Bennets after the biggest catastrophe they have ever faced: to blame them for having raised a bad seed of a daughter.

As a person, Collins has character deficits that make him ridiculous. As a cleric, he is even more deficient. Austen decries Collins's preference of stultifying reading material. She expected her clergymen to read varied types of literature (*Jane Austen and the Clergy* 47). As

Henry Tilney openly admitted that he liked to read novels as well as other types of prose, so were all respectable clerics in Austen's world supposed to show an interest in reading a variety of works. Collins is asked by his young cousins to read aloud, which should come naturally to a rector who would most likely read from any number of published collections many of the sermons he delivered each year. Though Collins "readily assented, and a book was produced; . . . on beholding it, (for everything announced it to be from a circulating library,) he started back, and begging pardon, protested that he never read novels.it—Kitty stared at him, and Lydia exclaimed.—Other books were produced, and after some deliberation he chose Fordyce's Sermons" (*P&P* 47). He quickly breaks off reading the sermons aloud, though, when it becomes clear that Kitty and Lydia would rather hear just about anything else. Collins has the ability to read. What Austen is suggesting here is two-fold: first, he cannot read well enough to maintain his audience's attention. Kitty and Lydia begin to chatter almost as soon as he begins reading aloud. Second, he is not a good reader. None of the others either ask him to continue reading or shush Kitty and Lydia, which would be expected if his reading ability were appropriate. Even to Mary Bennet, the bookish sister most likely to enjoy a reading of Fordyce's Sermons, Collins's "very monotonous solemnity" (*P&P* 47) does not incline her toward enjoying his presentation at all.

The other criticism that Austen proposes is that Collins does not have the attention span to focus on a book for any length of time where there are people nearby to talk to. He is only shown reading one other time in the novel, and again, it is a relief for him and those around him when he stops reading, this time (theoretically), silently to himself:

Mr. Collins had followed [Mr. Bennet into his library] after breakfast, and there he would continue, nominally engaged with one of the largest folios in the

collection, but really talking to Mr. Bennet, with little cessation, of his house and garden at Hunsford. Such doings discomposed Mr. Bennet exceedingly. [. . .] [H]is civility, therefore, was most prompt in inviting Mr. Collins to join his daughters in their walk; and Mr. Collins, being in fact much better fitted for a walker than a reader, was extremely well pleased to close his large book, and go. (*P&P* 49)

As Irene Collins points out, "it is a black mark against [Mr.] Collins that he is discovered to be unable to concentrate on the large folios in [Mr.] Bennet's library" (*Jane Austen and the Clergy* 47). Collins has taken the liberty of invading Mr. Bennet's private space, his library, where he can escape what he considers the constant chatter of his wife and younger daughters. Even more than having invaded the Bennet home, into which he invited himself though he would not have been desired, Collins has penetrated Mr. Bennet's inner sanctum. And, rather than following Mr. Bennet's lead and reading, Collins prattles on "with little cessation" about his home (*P&P* 49). Mr. Bennet is, therefore, quick to send him away with his daughters on their walk to town. Austen tells readers that he is much better suited for a walk, sure to be accompanied by opportunities to hear the Bennet daughters' gossip and more so for chances to interrupt with accounts of Lady Catherine's generosity.

Collins, beyond not being a reader, is not much of a sermon-writer. He states that he has written only two sermons since his installation at Hunsford (45). Irene Collins estimates the length of time in which he wrote those at approximately seven months, "between his ordination at Easter and his visit to Longbourn in November of the same year" (*Jane Austen and the Clergy* 96). She postulates that, although Collins carries out his duties "to the letter" (94), he is neither overworked nor particularly productive. She points out that he is able to receive his visitors

"during what must have been Lent ('Easter was approaching') yet there is no sign that he was inundated with devotional exercises at what is now the busiest season of a clergyman's year; on the contrary, he was able to spend each morning for a week driving Sir William Lucas around the country side in his gig" (93). William Collins is solemn about his position, always ready to tout the fact that he "consider[s] the clerical office as equal in point of dignity with the highest rank in the kingdom" (*P&P* 67). However, he is not as serious about his calling as he ought to be, or his priorities would be reordered to reflect the duties of a clergyman. Yet again, in comparison to Henry Tilney, Collins's shortcomings are stark: Tilney consistently comports himself with humility when he is in the company of his social superiors and inferiors. Collins acts the fool in everyone's company. Further, Tilney displays the sort of instant and complete forgiveness of Catherine that Collins is not willing or able to replicate. When Lydia elopes with Wickham, Collins's letter to the Bennets is condescending and harsh. Even after Lydia and Wickham marry, his comment is to the effect of being glad to have that business "hushed up" and to admit his shock at finding out Mr. and Mrs. Wickham had been welcomed to Longbourn after their scandal was known (*P&P* 237). Brian Wilkie goes so far to call Collins's behavior regarding Lydia "unchristian harshness" (541).

Attending a university was not required of prospective clergymen. As Hugh D. McKellar explains, in the nineteenth century Church of England, "the only four conditions laid down by the Prayer Book for ordination [were that the prospect be] 'a person of virtuous conversation, and without crime . . . learned in the Latin tongue, and sufficiently instructed in the Holy Scripture'" (33). While a university degree might aid a future cleric in his ability to converse in the required areas of knowledge, "[t]hey enrolled at Oxford or Cambridge primarily to learn from exposure and inference how a gentleman ought to behave in any situation" (33). The primary benefit, then,

of a college education was more social than intellectual. Making connections at university paved the way for future employment.

William Collins, readers are told, "was not a sensible man, and the deficiency of nature had been but little assisted by education or society; the greatest part of his life having been spent under the guidance of an illiterate and miserly father" (*P&P* 48). And, though he has the advantage of having attended university, "he had merely kept the necessary terms, without forming at it any useful acquaintance" (48). McKellar explains that these acquaintances would be made up of "potential patrons" as well as "friends who might invite him to stay at their homes, giving him a chance to observe how their fathers managed their estates, and how the local parsons ran their parishes, since both operations required similar skills" (33). Because Collins is too socially incompetent to form these sorts of connections, he does not have the benefit of being able to learn from other rectors who understand the unique position of working under a patron, nor does he have the opportunity to learn how to comport himself in polite society.

Francis R. Hart calls Collins an "invader" and posits that he is a threatening presence because he "introduc[es] a foolishly public behavior in the most intimate situations and a snob's vulgar concern with material domestic arrangements" (325). Collins's character invites such criticism because he displays a dichotomy of ridiculous behavior and mercenary motivations, neither acting appropriately in public nor being driven by upstanding intentions inspired by his profession or his humanity. However, where Hart suggests that Collins brings public behavior into the private sphere, he just as often acts out what should be private foolish behavior in the public realm, as when he introduces himself to Darcy in the middle of a crowded ball. What should have been a private humiliation between Darcy and the Bennets is there shared with all those in attendance of the Netherfield ball.

Though at the novel's debut Collins was praised as being an "excellent" character, one who is enjoyable to read (Hogan 41), throughout the recent critical discourse, only one scholar offers any type of support to suggest that Collins is more than an obsequious idiot. John Lauber, in "Jane Austen's Fools," makes the case that the characters that readers see as clowns and nincompoops are actually ordinary people that Austen only shows during their most foolish moments. He proposes:

In life, we may be foolish a great deal of the time, but no one is foolish always. In comedy the fool is always and nothing but a fool. Jane Austen's Mr. Collins is excessively foolish when proposing marriage to Elizabeth Bennet, or when toadying to Lady Catherine de Bourgh, but would he be equally foolish when working in his garden? – his most respectable pursuit, the author tells us.

Probably not, and so we never see him there. The comic fool, then, is a fool through and through, for some variety of foolishness is the essence of his being . . .
.. (511)

Lauber, then, posits that while modern readers see Collins as the epitome of foolish behavior, it is only partially because of a disposition that inclines toward stupidity. The real reason Collins appears so ridiculous, according to Lauber, is because Austen wants him to seem as foolish as possible. So, rather than showing him being industrious by working in his glebe (as Lauber suggests), or show him actually in the pulpit delivering a sermon, Austen presents him only during social situations for which readers already know he has not been prepared. The technique is effective: the overall impression that readers are left with is of Collins who is ever outlandish. Only a great deal of detective work and historical research, combined with a fair bit of benefit of

the doubt, can rehabilitate Collins into anything other than the most foolishly unbelievable of Austen's clerical characters.

The problem with Lauber's argument is that, in trying to redeem Collins, he ignores basic plot points. It is true that readers never see Collins working in his garden. In fact, what readers are told of Collins and his garden is that the primary benefit to be gained from it is seeing the moment that Lady Catherine's buggy leaves the Rosings estate (*P&P* 46). He is out to gather gossip, not to cultivate crops. Lauber's position is that Austen says working in the garden is Collins's "most respectable pleasures" (*P&P* 104). Austen's statement is probably ironic, though Lauber seeks to interpret it as earnest, and that she is making light of Collins's pretensions to being an orator. That is, she calls working in his garden Collins's most respectable pleasure because in his garden, though he can be as outlandish as he chooses, there is no one around to witness his actions (not even Austen's readers). The case is not that he is sensible there, only that no one is privy to his shame.

In Austen's attempt to correct for aiming too high with her earliest clergymen, she next presents clerics who are too low. William Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* is a university-trained and well-established idiot. Not only is he a sycophantic man, he is a deficient person, who even in his most serious moments is rendered ridiculous by his wordiness and need to constantly invoke the name of Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Collins posits that his main duty is to conduct himself properly toward his patroness, and his ancillary duty is to carry out the responsibilities of a cleric. However, where there are numerous instances of his fulfilling the former with great gusto, Austen shows Collins repeatedly incompetent at performing the latter.

CHAPTER 4

EDMUND BERTRAM: BELIEVABLY HUMAN

[T]he character of Edmund, his strong good sense and uprightness of mind, bid most fairly for utility, honour, and happiness to himself and all his connections. He was to be a clergyman.
—*Mansfield Park*

Though it has been called both Austen's "most profound" and her "most problematic" novel (Weinsheimer 185), *Mansfield Park* represents the achievement of full development in Jane Austen's writing style and abilities, and, as such, it is the most advanced novel. This development can be seen in any number of changes in style. One of these changes that is frequently overlooked is the characterization of Edmund Bertram. *Northanger Abbey* is too high, with Henry Tilney being too laudable to be realistic; *Pride and Prejudice* is too low, with William Collins too dunderheaded to be believed. Edmund Bertram is the most believable of all of Austen's clerical portraits. Unlike Mr. Collins, Edmund is not a joke. He has manners appropriate to his station, a younger son in a moderately wealthy family. He knows how to comport himself in the society of kith and kin, which readers see when he tries desperately to keep his brother and sisters from putting on a play (*MP* 88-91); it would have been scandalous for the Bertram family had word gotten out among their general acquaintance of the acting scheme set up by his brother and sisters. From a young age, Edmund both planned and was intended for a profession in the clergy. As Sir Thomas Bertram's second son he will not have a great inheritance to live on after his father dies. Instead, he must have some profession, and his character and nature suit him to a life in the church.

The critical discourse about *Mansfield Park* is varied, but comes down to a handful of issues. Namely, critics have been arguing for more than fifty years about the Evangelical nature

of the novel, the importance of ordination, and whether or not it is a novel that ought to be studied at length or at all. David Monaghan surveys the criticism where there is a debate as to whether Austen was pro- or anti-Evangelical. What he demonstrates that the vast numbers of critics come down on the pro-Evangelical reading of the novel because there is more evidence to support that (215-217). Others, such as Avrom Fleishman, take the approach that, instead of focusing on the Evangelical question, readers should pay more attention to the political undertones that he says are featured prominently in the novel (1-3). Armed with an extant letter in which Austen stated that her purpose in writing *Mansfield Park* was to study ordination, critics come to no consensus as to what she actually meant, and whether she accomplished it. Both Joseph W. Donohue, Jr. and Michael Karounos concentrate on opening new meanings of the term "ordination" in order to more fully understand Austen's stated purpose. Oliver MacDonagh addresses the question of whether or not Austen achieved her goal of an ordination discussion, and concludes that she used "ordination" to refer more broadly to a discussion of the Church of England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and that she offers a complex commentary of it in the novel. Some critics are not certain that *Mansfield Park* is worth studying. Joseph M. Duffy, Jr. calls it an "unsatisfactory novel" because of what he describes as an overly didactic inclination, an "uncertainty as of moral and ideological commitment," and a poor construction (71). On the other hand, Edward M. White, after summarizing the litany of critics who have damned the novel as valueless or nearly so, posits that Austen accomplished what she intended with the novel. He calls it "a conscious, unsentimental, and hard reaction to a version of romanticism in terms of an unsentimental and hard approbation of what was being destroyed by it" (660). Critics fail to speak to Edmund's role as a cleric specifically, and none have seen him as the endpoint in a developmental series. Where others have focused on the novel as a whole

and found fault, looking at the mechanical pieces like characters, their constitutions, and their credibility shows that, far from being either a failure or an off-putting success, *Mansfield Park* is the most human of all of Austen's novels.

One of the ways that Edmund is more developed than any prior clerical character is that he shows appropriate concern for his family. Tilney is content to have a brother who occasionally breaks up engagements, as in the case of Isabella Thorpe and James Morland. Collins considers it good form to offer condemnation in the guise of consolation to his bereaved cousins, as when Lydia Bennet elopes with Wickham and Collins blames her parents. However, Edmund, without meddling, does his best to help guide his sisters whenever his father is away from home. This includes an attempt to be sure that Maria is not engaging herself to Rushworth for the wrong reasons, which he believes to be based on monetary concerns and not a mutual desire for the marital state. Rushworth was "from the first struck with the beauty of Miss [Maria] Bertram, and being inclined to marry, soon fancied himself in love" (*MP* 29), and so his convictions about marrying Maria are not the strongest. He simply feels that it is the appropriate time to be married at the same time that he finds himself living near a pretty, eligible woman.

Further, the only thing to recommend Rushworth to Maria is "a larger income than her father's, as well as [a] house in town," while against him is the general consensus that he has "not more than common sense" (29). Clearly, Mr. Rushworth will not make a good husband for Maria emotionally or intellectually, and the only compatibility between them is that they both appreciate Mr. Rushworth's money. Edmund is the only family member able to see this lack of mutual attraction; he knows that without the money to recommend him, "[Rushworth] would be a very stupid fellow" (30). However, in the end, Edmund accepts that he cannot step in to prevent the marriage if his father has no qualms with it: "[Sir Thomas, Edmund's father] was

truly happy in the prospect of an alliance so unquestionably advantageous, and of which he heard nothing but the perfectly good and agreeable. It was a connection exactly of the right sort—in the same county, and the same interest . . ." (*MP* 30). With her father's approval, Maria marries Rushworth. Later, when Maria leaves him to pursue an affair with Henry Crawford (306), Edmund's reservations about their match prove to be warranted. Thus, Edmund is intelligent in a realistic way: he sees that Rushworth is a poor match for his sister, and he tries to suggest this to his father. However, when his father, as the authority in the household, does not prevent the marriage, Edmund takes the proper stance of submitting to his father's will.

Austen has previously demonstrated an instance of an older sibling attempting to offer guidance to a younger one, but backing down whenever the father acquiesces to the wishes of the younger sibling. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth sees that letting Lydia visit Brighton with her friend in the regiment is a bad idea, and she tries to explain this to her father. However, when he signals that his final decision is to let Lydia go, Elizabeth drops the subject. Later, Elizabeth's judgment is proven right when Lydia elopes with Wickham, which causes the crisis that consumes the Bennet family for the second half of the novel.

Eventually, Austen shows that Edmund lacks self-awareness. Not even he is above the allure of a financially independent future being a consideration for making a decision. In defense of his joining the church, he says "[m]y taking orders I assure you is quite as voluntary as Maria's marrying" (77). This, of course, is humorous, since it has already been established that Edmund thinks Maria is marrying of her own choice, but she is marrying (per Edmund's belief) for the wrong reasons. No matter how earnestly Edmund believes that he is joining the Church from morally appropriate motivation, he still incongruously chooses to compare his situation to his sister marrying for the wrong reasons.

Mary Crawford, pointing out how ironically fortunate it is that Edmund's predilection to join the clergy matches with his father's intention of installing him in the local parish, suggests that recognizing that a living was available and intended for him has prejudiced Edmund toward a clerical calling. Edmund, instead of disputing the idea, admits that:

knowing that there was such a provision for me, probably did bias me. Nor can I think it wrong that it should. There was no natural disinclination to be overcome, and I see no reason why a man should make a worse clergyman for knowing that he will have a competence early in life. I was in safe hands. I hope I should not have been influenced myself in a wrong way, and I am sure my father was too conscientious to have allowed it. I have no doubt that I was biased, but I think it was blamelessly. (*MP* 77-78)

Edmund sees a difference in allowing one's predisposition to overcome other preclusions and as it works in conjunction with an already-present desire. Edmund openly admits that knowing a living in the church was being kept for him may have biased him toward the clerical profession. However, he also has had an innate desire to become a cleric from his youth. So for Edmund, rather than creating a desire where none was present, the availability of the living has only increased a desire that already existed.

This also shows that the potential availability of money does play a part in most decisions that anyone not entitled to a large inheritance must make. Maria is a woman in the patriarchal entail system. She will not inherit much, if anything, from her father's estate. Edmund is the second son, and the entail goes to the eldest male heir. He is nearly as disadvantaged as Maria in this case. In juxtaposing their situations, Austen's commentary (delivered through Edmund) is that financial concerns might not be deciding factors for everyone, but that for non-inheriting

children, they definitely play a role. Edmund's comment that his decision to join the clergy is as freely made as Maria's engagement to Rushworth illustrates that both had to consider their futures in which they would not have their father's money. The irony, of course, is that Maria's only option is to marry into wealth if she is to have it, but Edmund can be gainfully employed. Irene Collins posits that it would in fact have been "ludicrous" for Austen to "suggest that Maria and Julia Bertram . . . should enter paid employment" (*Jane Austen and the Clergy* 187). Maria's choice is less free than Edmund suggests. Edmund's is the choice of a career or an advantageous marriage or both; Maria's "choice" is to marry well or live poor.

The fact that Edmund has real, contemporary concerns adds to the depth of his character and makes him more realistic. Tilney never seems to show any concern about his future from a pecuniary standpoint. Even though he is also a second son, he seems certain that between what his mother left him at her death and his father's vast wealth, he will never have any real need. And so he is able to marry someone as poor as Catherine Morland without any concern that they might not be able to live in the style to which he has been accustomed. Collins is only Mr. Bennet's nephew, but he is the eldest male heir and he is therefore destined to add Mr. Bennet's accumulated wealth to what his father left him and his annual stipend from Lady Catherine. Both Tilney and Collins are able to choose their spouses without regard to fortune. Edmund does not have the benefit of a dependable income from his father; however, he can choose his profession as he will. That he chooses the one to which he is most suited adds to the development of his character.

Edmund, though, is not perfect. In order to be as believable as he is, Edmund also must be shown to have faults. Margaret Kirkham has called Edmund a "mixed character," saying that his "faults as well as virtues are shown . . . and this implies the need for heroines to be capable of

independent moral judgement" (73). Fanny, as will be shown, is perfectly capable of "independent moral judgement." While Edmund may at first glance seem to be nearly as inculpable as Henry Tilney, it is his mixed character that makes him different and real. He is portrayed by Austen as having the typical faults of any other young man in his day: above all, the inability to find fault in a well-to-do, pretty young woman in whom he is interested. Edmund meets Mary Crawford early in the novel (31), when Dr. and Mrs. Grant take the living at Mansfield Park and she and her brother Henry visit them⁶. Edmund is smitten almost from the first meeting. He is, to use Fanny's words, "deceived in [Mary Crawford]; he [gives] her merits which she had not; her faults were what they had ever been, but he [sees] them no longer" (181). Edmund's fault, according to Fanny, is willfully blinding himself to Mary's lack of a moral center.

Mary's first impressions of the brothers Bertram are varied. Her impression of Tom is mercenary and suggest that her interest is strictly a matter of how marrying him would situate her well in society:

[Tom] had easy manners, excellent spirits, a large acquaintance, and a great deal to say; and the reversion of Mansfield Park, and a baronetcy, did no harm to all this. Miss Crawford soon felt, that he and his situation might do. She looked about her with due consideration, and found almost everything in his favour, a park, a real park, five miles round, a spacious modern-built house, . . . pleasant sisters, a quiet mother, and an agreeable man himself—with the advantage of being tied up from much gaming at present, by a promise to his father, and of being Sir Thomas hereafter. It might do very well; she believed she should accept him. (35)

Her interests strictly relate to how much Tom Bertram can provide for her, and she makes a point of being as attentive and attractive to him as possible (35-36). Her earliest impressions of Edmund reflect that her singular interest is in his elder brother. When Tom leaves, she looks forward to Edmund's being a dull substitute (38). However, after she actually does take the time to speak to him, she finds that "[h]e is a well-bred man; he makes the best of it" (41). Her attentions turn toward seducing Edmund, who is receptive to her advances.

Edmund is attracted to Mary Crawford very early in their acquaintance, even though he is first ignored by his new neighbor. Aside from merely being an eligible young woman and new in the neighborhood, Mary appears charming to Edmund and Fanny. She has it in her favor that she is "remarkably pretty" (31), but then she blunders and clues readers in to her true nature. Mary's first offense is that she speaks a little too openly and honestly about what she thinks is wrong with her uncle's cottage. Edmund's reaction is to be "sorry to hear Miss Crawford, whom he was much disposed to admire, speak so freely of her uncle. It did not suit his sense of propriety, and he was silenced, till induced by further smiles and liveliness, to put the matter by for the present" (42). Edmund does not approve of her rudeness, but he is able to be dissuaded from feeling upset by a few smiles from a pretty girl.

Readers have seen a similar behavior before with Henry Tilney forgiving Catherine's wild suppositions about General Tilney's past. However, Edmund's action is decidedly different. Tilney is quick to forgive a mistake for which Catherine shows remorse. Edmund excuses Mary in spite of the fact that she is neither remorseful nor shows recognition for having done anything wrong. As a rector, he should encourage Mary to reform. However, he is reacting as a young man, not a cleric, and he just wants to look the other way when Mary acts inappropriately. Tilney

acted as a cleric and showed Catherine her error and then forgave her. Edmund tries to justify Mary's wrong behavior.

When Mary makes an inappropriate remark about her own uncle, and puns about having seen numerous rears and vices (44), Edmund admits that the joke was in poor taste, but resolutely maintains that her upbringing is to blame for her not knowing that it is gauche to make such a comment in polite society (46). Further, he assures Fanny that by virtue of now living under the influence of Dr. and Mrs. Grant (that is, living with a clergyman who can exert moral influence over her) she will necessarily see the error of her ways and begin to improve (46).

Edmund speaks highly of Mary, saying that she has:

"a lively mind . . . seizing whatever may contribute to its own amusement or that of others; perfectly allowable, when untinctured by ill humour or roughness; and there is not a shadow of either in the countenance or manner of Miss Crawford, nothing sharp, or loud, or coarse. She is perfectly feminine, except in the instances we have been speaking of. *There* she cannot be justified. I am glad you saw it all as I did." (47)

Yet, even as he tells Fanny that he cannot justify Mary's behavior on the occasion of her insulting her uncle and the profession of the Navy at large, he is doing just that. Edmund, blinded by his desire for Mary Crawford, allows himself to behave similarly to Maria when she chose to attach herself to Rushworth in spite of their having very little in common; they both see only what they want. Where Maria was willing to overlook Rushworth's having only moderate sense in favor of his money, Edmund is willing to overlook a complete difference in manners and moral standards in favor of Mary's charms and beauty. Clearly, this concerns Fanny enough that she has brought it to his attention, but Edmund "was in a line of admiration of Miss Crawford,

which might lead him where Fanny could not follow. Miss Crawford's attractions did not lessen. . . . Edmund was beginning, at the end of a week of such intercourse, to be a good deal in love" (47).

Mary eventually tempts Edmund into being a part of the in-home theatre troupe, something he originally strongly condemns. When he first discovers the plot that the Crawfords, Mr. Yates, Mr. Rushworth, and his siblings have contrived to put on the play *Lovers' Vows* in home and to act the parts themselves, he is shocked and upset. He speaks to the play being "exceedingly unfit for private representation" (98) because it features, among other things, a man impregnating and abandoning a young woman after promising fidelity to her, another young woman who is portrayed as sexually attracted to her minister/tutor, and a rake⁷ who has no trepidation about wooing dozens of girls with no intention of following through on his promises to them. The scandal of putting on a play in the Bertram home is made worse by choosing a play with objectionable thematic material. Edmund tries to say as much to Maria to have her call off the play, but she says that she sees nothing wrong with the plan. Edmund "[finds] that to have endeavoured to set them right must be his only satisfaction" (100).

When the group starts assigning parts, they find that they are one male lead short. They all begin to entreat Edmund to take up the part of Anhalt, the play's young cleric who is in love with Amelia, being played by Mary Crawford. Mary tells Edmund that he is best suited to play Anhalt because of their shared profession. Edmund, however, feels that he must be the worst to play a ministerial character: "I should be sorry to make the character ridiculous by bad acting. It must be very difficult to keep Anhalt from appearing a formal, solemn lecturer; and the man who chooses the profession itself, is, perhaps, one of the last who would wish to represent it on the stage" (102). Edmund does not say that he will be a formal, solemn lecturer in his own ministry,

but that in trying to present someone else's words as his own he would be unbelievable. The inference that can be made from this is that he does not intend to be a tedious cleric who merely reads his sermons, but that he plans to interject enough of his own personality to keep his sermonizing fresh⁸.

Edmund finally assents to play the part of Anhalt when he finds that if he continues to refuse, rather than give up the play, the group will bring in another neighbor who will bear witness to their scandal (108). Furthermore, he says that he will take the part to prevent Mary Crawford from having to act the part of Amelia opposite a stranger. Though Fanny knows that it is improper, she cannot stop Edmund once his mind is made up. Only the unexpected and almost miraculous re-entrance of the ultimate authority figure, Sir Thomas, from his work in Antigua can make Edmund sensible of how much in error he is to presume to act in the piece. The entire scheme of the play shows readers how much influence Mary Crawford is able to exert over Edmund, as well as how much of a shock it takes to bring Edmund back to his senses about what is right.

Edmund allows himself to overlook and reason away Mary's every improper sentiment and action. Frequently, he appeals to Fanny to help him justify Mary's indecorum, as below after asking Mary to dance with him at the impending ball, he receives both an affirmative answer as well as the claim that it is the last time she will ever dance with him:

"I have been pained by her manner this morning, and cannot get the better of it. I know her disposition to be as sweet and faultless as your own, but the influence of her former companions makes her seem, gives to her conversation, to her professed opinions, sometimes a tinge of wrong. She does not *think* evil, but she

speaks it—speaks it in playfulness—and though I know it to be playfulness, it grieves me to the soul."

"The effect of education," said Fanny gently.

Edmund could not but agree to it. "Yes, that uncle and aunt! They have injured the finest mind! –for sometimes, Fanny, I own to you, it does appear more than manner; it appears as if the mind itself was tainted." (184)

Ironically, within this conversation he contradicts himself: first Mary "does not *think* evil," then "it appears as if the mind itself was tainted." The only reason for the contradiction that makes sense is the fact that at first he is absolving Mary, and then blaming those who have influenced her. He says that she does not think evil (therefore, that the problem is not a lack in moral fortitude), but that she is playful. The appearance of her actions comes across as joking and innocent, but the motivation of her playfulness is not innate wrongfulness of mind. However, when he talks about the reason for that playfulness, and even admits that there may be an ethical deficiency, he still does not blame Mary. He is only willing to say that she may be immoral when he prefaces it by saying that it is not her fault and that she was raised under the influence of immoral people (so there was no way she could not have been affected by such circumstance).

He goes on to speak of how proud he is that he has "never been blinded" by his feelings when a pretty woman was involved (185). Obviously, he is lying to himself as much as to Fanny, but the issue runs deeper than that. Edmund has allowed himself to become as "tainted" as he claims that Mary's mind has been. The difference is that where Mary's mind has, according to Edmund, been dirtied by outside forces, forces beyond her control, his has been corrupted by his own willful ignorance. He does not want to see Mary as anything other than an eligible mate, so he does not. And he is not shaken from this view until Mary reveals her true character in full. His

humanity is as convincing as possible because, like a real person, it takes a shock to change Edmund's perception of what he wants to see as good.

When Henry and Maria run away together, Mary and Edmund have a conversation that finally opens his eyes to how amoral she is. Edmund, distraught over the scandal, and placing a great deal of blame on Henry for worming his way back into Maria's life, is shocked when Mary's focus is on the "folly" of the situation:

"She reprobated her brother's folly as being drawn on by a woman whom he had never cared for [Maria], to do what must lose him the woman he adored [Fanny, whom he was courting up until running away with Maria]; but still more the folly of – poor Maria, in sacrificing such a situation, plunging into such difficulties, under the idea of being really loved by a man who had long ago made his indifference clear. . . . No reluctance, no horror, no feminine – shall I say? no modest loathings! . . . For where, Fanny, shall we find a woman whom nature had so richly endowed? –Spoilt, spoilt!—" (308)

Edmund's sensibilities are rocked by such a cavalier interpretation of the events that stand to ruin Maria's future as mere "folly." But it is her further attempt to blame Fanny for Henry's misbehavior that causes the irrevocable break for Edmund. Mary says that if Fanny had just accepted Henry's advances he would not have wanted to seduce Maria and there would have been no scandal. Impugning the character of one as upright as Fanny "breaks the charm" over and "opens the eyes" of Edmund, allowing him to see Mary for the female rake that she is (*MP* 309). He has several opportunities to recognize that Mary's surface does not quite match up to her true self before this point, but he always (until the last two chapters of the novel) convinces himself that he is mistaken or that she is not as bad as he suspects. Only when Mary insinuates

that Fanny is anything less than the best that a woman can be, does Edmund finally realize that was completely mistaken in his assessment of Mary Crawford's character. He has a great deal to learn to become an intuitive rector, able to properly read the people around him. However, readers see him progress, over the course of the novel, toward a greater understanding of himself and those around him.

One potential problem in *Mansfield Park* is that it is Fanny's consciousness through which the action of the story is seen. In evaluating her reliability as a narrator, readers must make allowances for the fact that Fanny cannot know everything, nor be trusted to give completely objective views of the events that go on around her. However, Fanny's character and conscientious efforts to obey the authority figures in her life mean that readers should be able to trust that she will always attempt to be an impartial judge of the goings-on at Mansfield Park. Perhaps the best evidence of Fanny's consistency in this is demonstrated in the Portsmouth episode (254-304) where Fanny's first impressions at being in her mother and father's home after years spent at Mansfield Park are of being ignored by her father (258), overwhelmed at the cacophony (259), and stricken with a headache (260). She rebukes herself for her reaction to the way she is received which proves Fanny's desire to always judge as impartially as possible, and that lets readers trust her words. She thinks, "She was home. But alas! it was not such a home, she had not such a welcome, as – *she checked herself*; she was unreasonable. What right had she to be of importance to her family?" [emphasis added] (260). Fanny is willing and desirous of checking herself; she works to ascertain whether her thoughts are being colored by selfish desire, if she is taking a one-sided view of the situation. Here she realizes that she is not being circumspect, and so she redirects her thoughts and reassesses the situation from a neutral perspective. As much as a person can be objective, Fanny Price is an objective judge of what

goes on around her. Thus, the audience is able to accept Fanny's impressions of her surrounding circumstances as those of reliable narrator.

Fanny's affection for Edmund began almost from the time of her joining the Bertram family. On first moving to Mansfield Park, Fanny's distress was plain to all of the Bertrams, but only Edmund worked to alleviate it: "[he] was at great pains to overcome her shame in being so surprised, and persuade[d] her to speak openly" (13). To this end, he "persevered" and "tried to console her" after finding that missing home and especially her brother lay at the root of Fanny's sadness. Edmund finds the solution to Fanny's homesickness, being able to write to her brother William, and he provides her the materials to write him as well as the promise that his father will frank the letter and so make it cost nothing for William to receive it (13-14).

These early attentions to Fanny's happiness and well-being, along with Edmund's overall demeanor of being "uniformly kind" (15), grow in measure as Fanny's years at Mansfield pass. When he realizes that riding a horse each day would be beneficial to Fanny's health, Edmund takes it upon himself to sell one of his own horses to buy a gentle pony, suitable for Fanny's daily use (28). Edmund's continued concern for Fanny's state, and his tendency to go out of his way to be sure that she is not lacking in anything, cause Fanny to praise his character: "She regarded her cousin as an example of everything good and great, as possessing worth, which no one but herself could ever appreciate, and as entitled to such gratitude from her, as no feelings could be strong enough to pay. Her sentiments towards him were compounded of all that was respectful, grateful, confiding, and tender" (28). As elevated as her language may seem at first blush, the truth is that Fanny's relegated place as an observer rather than an active participant in the Bertram family enables her to see Edmund at his best, most charitable moments. These observations are not made less valid by the fact that his charity is frequently directed toward

Fanny herself. If the story were told from another's perspective, readers would expect that his or her focus would tend to rely on personal anecdotes that illustrate the beneficence of Edmund's character. She takes note of Edmund's kindnesses toward her not because she is particularly selfish, but rather because he is particularly kind.

Edmund's goodness exists in his character from a young age, which indicates that the qualities of charity and goodness are natural to Edmund and not necessarily learned habits. If these were learned traits, Tom would show similar tendencies in his treatment of Fanny. If Edmund's only motivation for being generous toward Fanny were training and/or upbringing, then Tom's behavior would be identical to Edmund's, since they were raised by the same parents and nurse and tutors. Instead, Edmund's description shows that his very nature is different from that of his siblings. That is, Edmund is inherently "good," and this indicates that his decision to join the clergy is both a conscious choice as well as an innate drive.

Because the narrative of *Mansfield Park* is centered on Fanny's consciousness, and because so much of the novel deals in showing how hard she works to be above the reproach of all the authority figures in her life, the final and strongest commendation for Edmund's uprightness and suitability to the profession of the clergy is his realization at the end of the novel that "Fanny herself [was] growing as dear, as important to him in all her smiles, and all her ways, as Mary Crawford had ever been" (319). The movement of Edmund's affections toward Fanny confirms that that intrinsic goodness he showed when a child, has only increased as he matured. And here readers are meant to see that Edmund is "no longer the dupe of Miss Crawford" (313), as his attentions turn to Fanny and are fully freed from Mary. By recognizing the error of esteeming Mary over Fanny, and making the appropriate changes by turning toward Fanny,

Edmund is progressing toward being a complete person. That change, that roundness of character, is just one of the ways that readers see Austen's progress.

One of the unique elements of *Mansfield Park* is the extensive conversation about the church: the upward social movement of clerics as the generations pass, what makes a good clergyman, and what organized religion ought to look like. Hugh D. McKellar has shown that the Church of England had undergone a great deal of change by the time Austen was writing her novels (28). Austen includes subtle details about the church in her texts, but some of these details may go unnoticed by modern readers (28). Changes, especially in the social position of clergymen, are evident in *Mansfield Park*. Sometime between Mrs. Norris's day and Mary Crawford's, the prospect of marrying a cleric had come to be acceptable, if not yet desirable. After Lady Bertram married Sir Thomas, Mrs. Norris (née Miss Ward) "at the end of half a dozen years, found herself obliged to be attached to the Rev. Mr. Norris, a friend of her brother-in-law, with scarcely any private fortune" (*MP* 5). Miss Ward became Mrs. Norris only when she despaired of making a "good" match rather than because she was particularly excited at the prospect of marrying the Reverend Mr. Norris. In fact, McKellar suggests that being given the living at Mansfield by Sir Thomas was a condition of Miss Ward's willingness to marry Rev. Mr. Norris (31).

However, as McKellar does, readers must compare the situation of Rev. Mr. and Mrs. Norris and that of Edmund and Mary Crawford. Mary is not poor to begin with, but she is willing to at least entertain the idea of marrying Edmund, who is bound to live modestly at best, without the guarantee of the living at Mansfield (which has been sold to Dr. Grant to help Sir Thomas cover Tom's debts). This change is dramatic and indicative of some of the changes happening during Austen's lifetime. Moreover, Austen's choice to include details of the Norris's

marriage allows direct comparison of young Miss Ward's reaction to marrying a clergyman, described as having been done as a last resort, and Mary's reaction to the same. Mary's willingness to marry Edmund is treated neither as a perfect situation nor the worst one, which further adds to the realism of the novel at large and of Edmund's character specifically.

Mary Crawford comments on the general improvement of English churches and clerics as the years progress. Mary offends Edmund's sensibilities by suggesting that couples would generally prefer to sleep in rather than feel obligated to attend Sunday morning services (62). Attempting to mollify him, she concedes that clergymen are growing better looking with each succeeding generation that enters the field (62). Therefore, readers can conclude from Mary's assessment that even as the profession of the clergy was becoming more socially acceptable in the middle- and upper-class societies, the profession was also drawing more members from those circles. One action serves to complement the other: it is easier for Mary to imagine marrying a clergyman than it was for Miss Ward because the clergymen of Mary's generation are closer in station to her than they were for Miss Ward when she was looking for a husband. However, the fact that Mary hesitates in attaching herself to Edmund because of his lack of financial prospects shows that, while their station improving, clerics were not yet among the elite in society. Edmund himself acquiesces that "[a] clergyman cannot be high in state or fashion. He must not head mobs, or set the ton in dress" (66). As a cleric, he will not be destined to lead the world in fashion or politics, but he is certainly not from the impoverished groups that formerly filled the ranks of the clergy in the Church of England.

Mansfield Park also features a number of conversations specifically about the role of the church and the role of clerics within it. Both Edmund and Sir Thomas declare the importance of a cleric's maintaining residence in the parish where he works. Edmund has "no idea but of

residence" (169) at Thornton Lacey after he takes orders, and Sir Thomas is even more articulate on the subject in what the text terms a "harangue" (170):

"But a parish has wants and claims which can be known only by a clergyman constantly resident, and which no proxy can be capable of satisfying to the same extent. Edmund might, in the common phrase, do the duty of Thornton, that is, he might read prayers and preach, without giving up Mansfield Park; he might ride over, every Sunday to a house nominally inhabited, and go through divine service; he might be the clergyman of Thornton Lacey every seventh day, for three or four hours, if that would content him. But it will not. He knows that human nature needs more lessons than a weekly sermon can convey, and that if he does not live among his parishioners and prove himself by constant attention their well-wisher and friend, he does very little either for their good or his own." (170)

The idea that a cleric must reside in the parish he serves was by no means the common attitude in Austen's day. Tithe-rights of a parish were saleable commodities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and so some people survived on money from lands they never saw and people they never pastored to (McKellar 30). Sir Thomas's statement that a "proxy" would not be able to provide the attention that a parish really needs implies that Austen herself did not approve of the practice of having one cleric serving multiple parishes. Their inability to properly oversee the needs in the lives of the parishioners was dramatically decreased, particularly considering that the cleric's duties involved much more than simply delivering Sunday sermons (McKellar 28). These services were rendered to everyone living in the parish, whether regular attendees of his Sunday sermons or no. This discussion of whether it will be viable and desirable for Edmund to maintain his residence within the parish whose living he plans to take adds to the

realism of the novel because it was, in fact, an issue that had to be decided by every working clergyman in Austen's day.

Sir Thomas's comment is that he knows Edmund will not be satisfied to hold multiple livings, increasing his fortune at the cost of being a rector who only fills the letter of the law in pastoring over his parishes. It is a subtle compliment, positioned in the middle of a harangue, to the merit that he believes his son possesses. Sir Thomas does not compliment freely or gratuitously, yet here he gives his highest commendation to his younger son. He says that while Edmund theoretically could hold multiple livings and satisfy his clerical duties to all of them, he would not do that because he is more conscientious than others in his profession.

Edmund's decision is decidedly different from the likes of Henry Tilney, who never questions that he will split his time between the luxurious house of his father and his parsonage (though he provides a curate for his parish when he is not there). William Collins's living situation in the Hunsford parish easily allows, as McKellar points out, that "[b]etween them, Lady Catherine and Collins know exactly what is going on in every corner" of the parish (34). Collins is portrayed as nothing more than Lady Catherine's lackey and so it seems perfectly natural that he would live where he could best provide her with local gossip from the side of the parish that she does not live in, but near enough that he can be at her beck and call for when she wants to instruct him on the bettering of his situation.

It is also worth noting that the language Sir Thomas uses in speaking about what a good rector ought not to do, "do[ing] the duty" (170) of his parish, is the exact language that Collins uses to explain his ability to be absent from Hunsford parish. In his letter to the Bennet family announcing his intended visit to Longbourn, Collins says that he "can [visit for two weeks] without any inconvenience, as Lady Catherine is far from objecting to [his] occasional absence

on a Sunday, provided that some other clergyman is engaged to *do the duty of the day*" [emphasis added] (43). Seeing Sir Thomas so completely condemn the same idea that is an accepted means of maintaining Collins's parish is one of the many ways that Austen draws a distinction between the genuine cleric Edmund, and the ridiculous Mr. Collins. Sir Thomas, with Edmund readily agreeing, posits that only a subpar cleric would ever consider his profession as merely a job that had to get done once a week. This is both disparaging of Collins's character as well as approving of the way that Edmund has said that he plans to fulfill his duties.

Tilney's and Collins's situations are reasonable but not realistic the way that Edmund's is. It is reasonable that Tilney would have so many options concerning his residence that he would feel no pressure to remain in any one place consistently, because family wealth gives him freedom to go and do as he pleases. However, it is not realistic that even the second son from a family as well-to-do as the Tilneys would have entered the clergy to begin with. Although the clergy was becoming more populated by the middle and upper-middle classes, it was unlikely that someone who did not really need a profession, like Tilney, would join the clergy.

Realism is one of the most important aspects of *Mansfield Park*, especially as seen through Edmund Bertram's character and situation. He is the second son in a landed family, and so it is realistic that he would need to acquire a career. His character has lent itself to a life in the clerical state, and he has never been opposed to the profession, so it is believable that he would study to enter the church. Further, because he is portrayed as a sensitive, caring person from the time he is very young, it is sensible for him to enter a field where he would be taking on the social concerns of his local parish. As there is a living available near the family home that he loves, it is natural that Edmund would choose to take the position of cleric at Thornton Lacey.

No discussion of Edmund Bertram and his character would be complete without considering of the last two paragraphs of the novel. Austen sums up Edmund and Fanny's entry into married life and says,

With so much true merit and true love, and no want of fortune or friends, the happiness of the married cousins must appear as secure as earthly happiness can be.—Equally formed for domestic life, and attached to country pleasures, their home was the home of affection and comfort; and to complete the picture of good, the acquisition of Mansfield living by the death of Dr. Grant, occurred just after they had been married long enough to begin to want an increase of income, and feel their distance from the paternal abode an inconvenience.

On that event they 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 everything else, within the view and patronage of Mansfield Park, had long been. (321)

It has previously been stated that Edmund's character and his father's commendation preclude the possibility that he would engage in pluralism (holding multiple livings). Austen's reticence to address Edmund's potential pluralism leaves the ending ambiguous as to whether Edmund keeps the living of Thornton Lacey after he and Fanny move to the parsonage at Mansfield Park. While Austen does not say for certain that Edmund holds Thornton Lacey, she also does not confirm that he either sells it or returns it to Sir Thomas. While the final paragraphs can be read both ways, the interpretation that best fits this thesis is that Edmund fully relinquishes Thornton Lacey

upon taking up residence at Mansfield Park because of the explicit nature against pluralism seen in the multiple conversations throughout the novel.

As a person, Edmund is multi-faceted, flawed, and capable of changing. His interests vary and range from horse-riding (28) to the appreciation of "real acting" (88). He is lovingly attentive to the needs of Fanny and hates to see her being used badly by Mrs. Norris and Lady Bertram (52-53). He can also be blinded by his desire for Mary Crawford and, as a result, lose sight of taking care of Fanny's needs as he previously had done conscientiously. However, when he realizes the error of his ways, he makes a distinct turn, realizing that Mary can never be a good wife and comes to accept Fanny as the only one who will ever make him happy (319). His capacity for recognizing his erroneous thoughts, and his ability to effect purposeful change, serve to highlight the roundness and realism of his character.

It is obvious that Austen progresses and gets better as a writer. One of the ways readers see this progress is through the clerics she created. With Edmund as the exemplar, Austen has gone from writing too high-bred, too-good-to-be-true clerics (Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*), to writing unserious, too-ridiculous-to-be-believed ones (William Collins *Pride and Prejudice*), to finally coming to the point of being able to write realistic clerics who have both good and bad sides. In *Mansfield Park*, and in Edmund Bertram specifically, readers are able to see the realization of this progression which is the result of an entire career.

Edmund Bertram, historically accurate, generally realistic, and a believable character represents the culmination of a body of work. The ability to paint an accurate portrait of Edmund Bertram, the young second-son bound for the clergy, shows the extent of Austen's skill. Her numerous acquaintances and relatives within the clergy gave her resources to draw from as she crafted Edmund's character (*Jane Austen and the Clergy 2*). *Mansfield Park* offers a view of the

clergy that is reflective of Austen's time when it was important that a son not set to inherit wealth be ready to take on a profession. She represents historical truths about the entail system through Edmund (and through the comparison of his position with Maria's). Austen's increasing skill is easily seen in the portraits of clerics she created, moving to a cleric who was neither too high nor too low to be believed. Instead, Edmund represents the middle point; he is a good, but flawed individual who is able to change and displays the sensibilities typical of a nineteenth century second son.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Austen's biography is marked by numerous relations and friends in the clerical profession. Existing documents show that she was a devoted member of the Anglican Church. Whether she drew inspiration from her family and friends, or from general trends that she noted in the state of clergymen in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, her novels reflect a serious preoccupation with the church. Because there is a consistent presence of clergymen throughout Austen's six novels, readers can trace an arc in her overall development as an author by observing the evolution of her clerics from one incarnation to the next.

Pairing Henry Tilney (*Northanger Abbey*) and Edward Ferrars (*Sense and Sensibility*), the earliest type of cleric which Austen created, creates a starting point for a discussion of Austen's progress. Both are idealistic, affable exemplars of the clerical state. Tilney, in particular, is portrayed by Austen, and seen by Catherine Morland as too good to be merely human. He is socially appropriate and filially responsible. Furthermore, Tilney is able to display a sort of perfect forgiveness which Austen uses to liken him to an inerrant religious authority. Only a nearly-faultless rector like Tilney would be capable of instantly pardoning Catherine for suspecting his father of murder, but when she shows remorse for her accusation, he does just that. Austen's creation of this unrealistically flawless minister may reflect the influence of her close clerical friends, and her desire to portray the position in a good light, but the fact is that she has given readers a paragon of virtue who is almost superhuman in his comportment and attitudes.

Setting aside questions of the believability of Tilney's character, readers are left to question his development as a character. He is consistently virtuous throughout the text, and so

represents a form of character stasis. Although his actions are altruistic, there is no variance in them, and it is in that lack of variety where readers can make an assessment about Austen's capability to create a realistic, fully-rounded character. In the end, Tilney is a flat character, dominated by this one specific trait. He demonstrates no development, arriving on the scene fully-formed, like Athena from the forehead of Zeus. He maintains his elevated moral, intellectual, and interpersonal status throughout the text, and ends the novel as he began in it, an unrealistic, unchanging cleric.

Austen next offers is a pompous, obsequious cleric, exemplified by William Collins (*Pride and Prejudice*) and Philip Elton (*Emma*). Mr. Collins makes a fool of himself again and again, displaying himself to disadvantage in settings as disparate as his very public bad dancing and lack of discretion at the Netherfield ball to his private humiliatingly bad marriage proposal to Elizabeth Bennet. As a rector, Austen shows Collins to be even more aloof than he is as a person. His sermonizing cannot be very well-organized or very persuasive, since his examples of longer speeches are marked by disorder and misused terms. Mr. Collins is unbelievably foolish, and readers are unable to take him seriously.

Once again, though, Austen has created a static character. Collins may be the temperamental opposite of Tilney, but the two are brothers under the skin in terms of their roundedness or movement throughout the text. From beginning to end, Mr. Collins is unrelentingly, and unrealistically, presented as an object of derision. Readers may surmise that Collins is a necessary corrective for Austen's literary genuflection in front of the idol of Tilney, but to do so would be to confuse characterization with character development. In his interactions with other characters and with his congregation, Collins is the antipodal point to Tilney. But they both share the same stasis and lack of development. If Tilney is the literary equivalent of a statue

erected to goodness, an object for adoration, carved from stone, unchanging and unmoving, Collins is a statue erected to The Fool, immobile in his own way, just as undeveloped and incomplete as his opposite.

The final type of cleric that Austen presents demonstrates a significant leap in her ability to characterize a member of the clergy. The very human Edmund Bertram in *Mansfield Park* is neither as idealized as Tilney, nor as ludicrous as Collins. Instead, Edmund proves that he has high moral values, such as when he denounces the idea that he would ever engage in pluralism and hold multiple livings at the same time, or when he tries to prevent his siblings from acting in a play in the Bertram family home. Tilney tries to avoid scandal by always acting in accordance with both political and spiritual law.

However, he is not presented as a monolith or a lampoon. He also has character flaws. He willfully blinds himself to Mary Crawford's impropriety, making excuses for her until she makes it impossible for him to do so, in an attempt to believe she could someday be his wife. He wants to believe that he could exert a beneficent influence over her, even when her actions show that she has been tainted on the most basic level. At the end of the novel, Edmund realizes the error of his ways and turns fully to Fanny Price, the companionate love that he never noticed before because of his infatuation with Mary. This change of heart is exactly what is lacking in Tilney and Collins, and what makes Bertram a fully-developed, rounded character. Readers can see movement in him, not stasis. He addresses a serious moral flaw, and in doing so, not only becomes a better person, but a better character. While readers may not genuflect in front of him as with Tilney, or laugh at him as with Collins, they can relate to him in a way which is negated by Tilney's austerity and Collins' buffoonery.

What readers are left with, then, is Austen's progression from a ridiculously good cleric, to a ridiculously bad one, to a cleric who is an appropriate marriage of the good and bad, resulting in a very realistically human cleric. That is, the arc that Austen creates with these three representative novels shows a movement toward humanity in her characterizations of the clergy. Another way to consider this progression is as a series of smaller arcs.

In *Northanger Abbey*, Tilney is idealistic from the beginning of the novel to the end. He is unblemished throughout the text. His character moves toward no goal, and demonstrates no progress. Indeed, with such a flawless comportment, where would one progress? William Collins, in *Pride and Prejudice*, is a fool from his introduction to his final letter in the last chapters. Although he has an almost limitless potential for development, as he has so many flaws which he could address, he does not develop throughout the text. Edmund Bertram, though, changes during the story of *Mansfield Park*. He is initially presented with a significant moral blind spot, which seems to sustain itself because of his desire to wed and bed an attractive, if rakish, woman. But over the course of the text, Edmund moves to correct this imperfection. That is not to say that he achieves excellence, rather that he gets closer to it by the end of the novel, as the result of a conscious change in his character. This sense of movement within a character is one of the criteria by which a novel is judged: whether or not there is dynamism of character, one who develops and reacts to his (or her) environ in a significant way.

Taken together, the clerical figures in these three novels demonstrate Austen's developing skills in characterization. Readers see Austen move from the cloyingly perfect to the laughingly ridiculous, to the relatable human. However, looking at each individual novel, readers see that she has gone from stasis in perfection, to stasis in imperfection, to movement toward goodness from a state of imperfection. Seeing the early clerics as two polar opposites, and her most

developed cleric as one who moves from nearer one pole to nearer the other, gives critics and readers alike a new way to understand the development as a writer that is understood to occur in Austen's works.

NOTES

1. Some excellent character studies in which writers consider Austen's clerical characters without regard to their Anglican backgrounds include Lloyd W. Brown's "The Comic Conclusion in Jane Austen's Novels," *PMLA* 84.6 (1969): 1582-87; Jonathan H. Grossman's "The Labor of the Leisured in Emma: Class, Manners, and Austen," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 54.2 (1999): 143-64; Emily Rohrbach's "Austen's Later Subjects," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 44.4 (2004): 737-52; Janine Barchas's "Very Austen: Accounting for the Language of *Emma*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 62.3 (2007): 303-38; and Katherine Kickel's "General Tilney's Timely Approach to the Improvement of the Estate in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 63.2 (2008): 145-69.

2. Throughout the novel *Pride and Prejudice*, in both the Norton Critical edition cited in this thesis as well as in the Oxford University Press edition, the capitalization convention varies from "de Bourgh" to "De Bourgh." This seems not to be based on any particular character or situation, and may be left over from a printer's error. Throughout this thesis, the original capitalization is maintained as it appears in the text for quotations. Otherwise, the more frequent capitalization of "de Bourgh" is employed.

3. The cause of Austen's death is in dispute. Zachary Cope has suggested Addison's disease (182) which is marked by body aches and general weakness. F.A. Bevan contends that she actually died of Hodgkin's disease (384). What is certain is that both writers agree the illness that killed prevented Austen from writing as she neared the end of her life.

4. John Thorpe is set up as the antithesis of Tilney. Thorpe is an Oxford man, but he says that he spends most of his time drinking (chapter 9); he purports to be good with horses, but his

horses have a tendency to plunge and act skittish (chapter 9); and he claims to read only good novels, such as *The Monk*, but really the impression is that he only reads the most scandalous (chapter 7). He is ungentlemanly in his manner toward Catherine; in the thirteenth chapter he cancels Catherine's prior plans with Henry and Eleanor Tilney and virtually imprisons her on his gig (another Gothic parody) not allowing her to go and try to explain the situation. Where Tilney is cordiality and earnestness embodied, Thorpe is vulgarity and exaggeration.

5. Readers will recall these statements, that the General's emotional response to his wife and her death were less than the usual for a marriage relationship, especially as they foreshadow the General throwing Catherine out the instant he realizes that she is not as wealthy as he originally believed.

6. Mary and Henry Crawford are Mrs. Grant's half-siblings (*MP* 30).

7. The term "rake" refers to a man who is primarily concerned with putting up the appearance of a gentleman in order to woo an unsuspecting female victim. This wooing is not meant to end in the marital state, but rather only to gain the rake what he wants at that moment: sexual intercourse, money, etc. The rake's true character is usually not revealed until he has already taken from his victim what he wanted and has left her in the lurch (pregnant, ruined, penniless). In *Mansfield Park* there are two rakes: Henry and Mary Crawford. They both seek to court morally upright young people (Fanny and Edmund, respectively), and are both revealed to be amoral flirts bent on achieving selfish goals before they can corrupt their original targets. There is a rake character in each of the Austen's novels, but *Mansfield Park* is unique in two ways: it is the only one that has two rakes, and it is the only one that features a female in such a role.

8. Henry Crawford takes the completely opposite stand. His belief is that "[i]t is more difficult to speak well than to compose well" and that so long as the delivery of a sermon is excellent, the sermon and its origins are negligible (231). In Volume III, Chapter III, Crawford extends an argument with Fanny and Edmund in which he says that preaching sermons is merely performance done from the pulpit.

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