FANNY PRICE AND MOLLY GIBSON: BEARERS OF THE COUNTRY HOUSE TRADITION*

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Mansfield Park and *Wives and Daughters* show striking similarities not only in their themes, settings and plots but also in the characterization and function of the main characters.[1] In particular, parallels exist in the way that both heroines are elevated from their middle-class origins to the status of the landed-class families. This rise in social status is due to their traditional virtues and the value system with which they preserve the old rural tradition symbolized in the country houses. These common features are attributable first to the peculiar consciousness of an age impelled by industrialization. Secondly, the heroines' elevation is a product of the unique English class system in which social mobility had been tolerated in the past but was now accelerated by industrialization. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the similarities between these works in order to prove that both works represent a fusion of the nostalgic impulse of the era and the peculiar characteristic of the English class system.

The underlying motif of both novels is the conflict between the traditional power based on land and the new power based on capital. This contrast develops into a struggle for survival, with the old order facing an invasion by the new power and the resulting erosion of its own traditional values. The two estates, Mansfield Park and Hamley Hall, exemplify the inherited culture of the gentry, now endangered by social and economic upheaval. In order to illustrate the conflicts, both works skilfully employ a triangular love relationship. The triangle, consisting of the second son of the landed class, the heroine with traditional virtues, and a city-oriented beauty,

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provides the basis of plot development, and the contrasting characterizations of the heroine and the beauty represent the tension between the country and the city. Fanny Price and Molly Gibson symbolize the country and its tradition, Mary Crawford and Cynthia Kirkpatrick the city and urbanization.

In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny recognizes the superiority of nature over artificiality, ascribing this mainly to the pacifying power of nature, and its powerful moral influence in human nature. Mary, on the other hand, has a 'decided preference for London life'[2] and thus fails to understand rural life and her own duties as a member of the landed class. Such a propensity is clearly observable when, by insisting on having her harp fetched by horse in the middle of harvest, she offends 'all the farmers, all the labourers, all the hay in the parish' (*MP*, p.48). Moreover, her inability to understand the significance of the clergy in rural society is discernible in her objection to Edmund's wish for ordination. Ignoring the fact that the clergy, as much as the landed class, is a vital component of rural society she complains that Edmund exaggerates the consequence of the clergyman. Avrom Fleishman asserts that 'Mary is portrayed... with an ethos of refined nihilism - as the exemplar of aristocratic decadence'.[3] In contrast, Fanny influences Henry Crawford, an absentee landlord, to be aware of his paternalistic duties on his estate. As a result, he begins making acquaintances amongst his tenants and villagers whom he had never seen before. Since 'nothing could be more grateful to her', Fanny is deeply impressed by his paternalistic intention (*MP*, p.316).

Fanny and Mary are also contrasted in their attitudes towards tradition and the past. Fanny shows a deep interest in ancient things whose preservation is of utmost concern to her, but Mary is more interested in change. Fanny is eager to visit Sotherton Court, an ancient manorial residence of the Rushworths, 'with all its rights of Court-Leet and Court Baron' (p.66). There she feels respect towards the ancient estate and eagerly listens to Mrs Rushworth, while Mary only appears to listen civilly. Fanny also takes great pleasure from historical associations, imagining scenes of the past. On hearing Mr Rushworth's plan to cut down the avenue, she quotes Cowper: 'Ye fallen avenues, once more I mourn your fate unmerited' (p.46). Alistair Duckworth maintains that 'trees...have provided an emblem of organic growth throughout English literature... . On the other hand the cutting down of trees has suggested a radical break with the past'. Similarly, Fanny feels strong opposition to Henry's suggestion to 'improve' Thornton Lacey, which 'in terms of a value system that is to be found throughout Jane Austen's fiction... is a substantial and healthy estate'.[4] Naturally, Fanny's eyes turned on Crawford are grave and reproachful, while Mary praises his ability to 'improve'.

In *Wives and Daughters*, Molly Gibson exhibits her country ethos on her first visit to the Hamleys. Molly is impressed by the idyllic landscape - 'a

meadow of ripe grass... changing colour in long sweeps... great old forest trees... the silver shimmer of a mere' (*WD*, pp.62-3).[5] Her response is comparable to Fanny's romantic taste. Molly's romanticism underscores her love of the Hamleys' antiquity and old-fashionedness. It is natural that she has a good impression of Hamley Hall, because the character of its furniture, which is old-fashioned but made of good material and preserved in perfect cleanliness, is similar to that in her own house. Again, her love for antiquity parallels Fanny's great admiration for Sotherton Court. Surrounded by nature and by signs of tradition and history, Molly, at the end of the first day, anticipates her happy days at Hamley Hall, while 'snuffing up the night odours of the honeysuckle' (*WD*, p.70). The romantic taste is also evident in both heroines' literary preferences. Much as Fanny quotes Cowper and Scott, so Molly is absorbed in Sir Walter Scott's novels found in the Hamley library. Further, Molly's link to traditional *mores* is firmly established when she is accepted by Squire Hamley, a paragon of country values. The Hamleys embody tradition and the past because of their ancient lineage. In contrast to the Cumnors, members of the relatively recent Whig aristocracy, the Hamleys are Tory squirearchy, the oldest family in the shire, and readers of an old-established Tory journal. The Squire's recognition of Molly's worth validates her qualifications as the new guardian of the old English tradition and past.

Cynthia Kirkpatrick, though not as decidedly as Mary Crawford, reveals her preference for urban life. She is 'very ready to be easily persuaded into the perpetual small gaieties which abounded in her uncle's house in London, even at this dead season of the year' (*WD*, p.532). Her mutability in love affairs implies an urban ethos, since one of the features of urbanization is change, while the country symbolizes continuity and stability. Her urban preference is clear when she finally marries Mr Henderson, a London barrister. Above all, her rejection of Roger, who, 'looking like a strong-built cheerful, intelligent country farmer' (*WD*, p.186), embodies the spirit of Hamley Hall, manifests her deprecation of the country and its tradition while at the same time revealing her shallow taste and values. Since she doesn't care for people of deep feelings, her own prediction that she will get bored with Roger would be realized if she married him. Naturally she doesn't understand Roger's excellent qualities which have made him a famous traveller who will soon be distinguished in Europe. Thus, Mr Gibson ridicules Cynthia's taste and indiscretion in choosing Henderson after jilting Roger: 'I don't wonder she preferred him to Roger Hamley. Such scents! such gloves! And then his hair and his cravat!' (*WD*, p.635). Clearly Cynthia belongs in London while Molly is at home in a country town and grows by her close association with the ancient Tory squirearchy living in the village of Hamley. After all, she is a 'good little country-girl' (*WD*, p.654) as described by Lord Hollingford.

The two value systems must also be viewed in moral terms. First of all, Molly with 'her clear conscience and her brave heart' (*WD*, p.548) is modest, thoughtful for others, and honest. As Mr Gibson describes her to Roger, once set, she cannot transfer her love easily. Therefore she deserves Lady Harriet's high praise about her heroic conduct in rescuing Cynthia from Mr Preston even by sacrificing her own reputation: 'the child is truth itself... I both like and respect her' (*WD*, pp.554-5). Cynthia is also sweet-natured but she is not constant and she wants to be well thought of by others. She is secretive and even in Mrs Gibson's opinion, she cannot help flirting. While engaged to Preston, Cynthia is engaged to Roger, attracts Coxe, and finally chooses Henderson. This inconsistency derives from her intrinsic nature, because she likes to attract people, although she wants to avoid being deeply involved. Her inclination shows her lack of principles and shallow desire for self-satisfaction. Indeed, Molly's patience, courage, love for others and steady disposition are contrasted with Cynthia's flippant and mutable narcissism which is partly hereditary and partly attributable to her lonely upbringing. It is evident that she is morally inferior to Molly, as finally acknowledged by Roger. Actually, Cynthia says to Molly, 'I've never lived with people with such a high standard of conduct before' (*WD*, p.430). Regarding Fanny and Mary, Fanny's higher morality is manifest in the theatrical episode, and Mary recognizes that her own character improves in Fanny's company. It must be noted that the high morality exhibited by Fanny and Molly is a requisite for 'the lady of the manor'. With their fine qualities, Fanny and Molly preserve the old rural tradition.

Both novels show that this rural tradition is endangered by the invasion of the city ethos. The triangular relationships delineate the perilous state of the country threatened by the irresistible charms of the city. In *Mansfield Park* Edmund Bertram is by virtue of 'his strong good sense and uprightness of mind' the true heir to the country tradition, rather than his elder brother, who is 'careless and extravagant' (*MP*, p.19). Yet his infatuation with Mary makes him blind to the evils of the theatricals, which symbolize the intrusion of the new values. Eventually he realizes that 'Fanny is the only one who has judged rightly throughout, who has been consistent' (p.147). A similar situation exists with Roger Hamley who is hindered from inheritance because of primogeniture, but has interest in the estate. Squire Hamley trusts Roger and considers him qualified to preserve the legacy of Hamley Hall. Yet, despite his strong character, Roger feels an overwhelming attachment to Cynthia. In both novels, the more eligible sons are tempted by the city *mores*, being attracted to the sophistication of the girls with city inclinations. Indeed, the old England exemplified by Mansfield Park and Hamley Hall seems moribund and laden with spiritual and economic problems.

The problems of the Bertrams and the Hamleys are reflected in the ineligibility of the first sons, suggesting that the main lines of the ancient families are not likely to prosper. Although Edmund will someday guide Mansfield by becoming its resident clergyman, and the proximity between the great house and the parsonage portends Edmund's assumption of his vocation, the future of the great house is in doubt because of Tom Bertram's disposition. Likewise, Roger Hamley achieves fame in the new science associated with Darwinism, the epitome of the new age, but the estate itself is unlikely to prosper. Despite their ancient lineage, the Hamleys can only survive by adopting an academic pursuit symbolizing the new age.

The spiritual problems of the two families stem from the unsuccessful education of their first sons. Tom has no awareness of his role as the first son of a landed family, a fact indicated by his dissipation which 'robbed Edmund for ten, twenty, thirty years, perhaps for life, of more than half the income which ought to be his' (*MP*, p.21). Although Osborne Hamley is portrayed more favourably, he had not been educated properly as would suit the first son of the Hamleys. He had been expected to have a brilliant career at Cambridge, and his parents, proud of his early academic accomplishments, had misjudged his qualities and allowed him to become a dilettante. Consequently, as Coral Lansbury maintains, 'Osborne professes to care nothing for the pursuit of agriculture, but he cannot support himself without the allowance derived from the estate'.[6] Even Squire Hamley had encouraged these traits though they ran counter to the preservation of the rural tradition, in the belief that Osborne's fastidiousness and elegance would provide him with a prosperous marriage which would restore the fame and fortune of the Hamleys. The parents' indulgence leads to Osborne's failure at Cambridge, debts, and finally his death, leaving a half-French heir born to his secret wife, a Roman Catholic nursery maid. This itself is a deadly blow to the Hamleys, but his debts also create a dire financial crisis to the already impoverished Hamleys. Clearly, the spiritual problems caused by the first sons lead to serious economic problems.

However, both families face graver financial troubles inherent in the landed system. First of all, Squire Hamley cannot cope with the changes brought about by industrialization. Lansbury argues that 'a man like Squire Hamley was becoming anomalous in English agricultural life. He was unable to dispose of his property because of entails and family sentiment.'[7] The Bertrams cannot evade inherent financial problems either. The Mansfield estate is not sufficient to support the Bertrams' luxurious way of living, and their income does not derive solely from their lands in England. Indeed, the 'most important and most perplexing historical fact of the novel is that the estate of Sir Thomas Bertram depends on a sugar plantation in the West Indian island of Antigua'.[8] It is in fact a literary myth that the old rural tradition was

maintained solely by local agriculture. The reality is that 'the improving landlords of eighteenth-century England and Scotland derived their wealth from colonial property, mineral rights, and urban rents rather than the profits of agriculture'.[9] In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Caribbean sugar industry produced new wealth, and the Bertrams exemplify a landed family who gained wealth through the sugar industry. Their precarious financial situation is clearly described by Mrs Norris: 'Why, you know Sir Thomas's means will be rather straitened, if the Antigua estate is to make such poor returns'(*MP*, p.26). Furthermore, the eldest son's laxity and lavishness aggravate the unfavourable circumstances caused by some losses on his West India estate. This reliance on resources outside of England points up the deterioration of the landed class. Indeed, Mansfield is not self-sufficient, depending on a colonial holding whose problems are threatening the comfort and luxury of the family.[10]

Despite their many predicaments the Bertrams manage to sustain their inherited culture by means of Fanny's traditional virtues, as do the Hamleys with Molly's. The process by which Fanny rises from the most insignificant to the most valued person at Mansfield parallels Molly's increasing significance at Hamley Hall. At the onset of *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas's fear that his son will fall in love with Fanny hinders him from consenting to adopt her. Before accepting Fanny, Sir Thomas insists that distinctions be made between his daughters and Fanny. Fanny will be made to remember that 'she is not a *Miss Bertram*' (*MP*, p.11), because of the difference in their rank. This implies that the difference in station renders the match between Fanny and either of the sons socially inappropriate. Similarly, Squire Hamley, at the initial stage of his acquaintance with Molly, declares: 'it would never do for him [Osborne] to fall in love with Gibson's daughter - I should not allow it' (*WD*, p.56), because as the first son of Hamley, descending from the heptarchy, Osborne deserves a grand match. As for Roger, the Squire wants him to marry a girl with fortune, because he will not inherit the estate. However, the Squire's predilection for good birth reveals itself when he learns of Cynthia's aristocratic ancestry. After all, he likes 'honourable blood' and Molly 'comes of no family at all...' (*WD*, p.411). Even his affection toward Molly does not lead him to prefer her over Cynthia as a prospective wife for Roger.

Obviously, traditional English class consciousness hampers Fanny and Molly from being recognized in these country houses. Fanny, in particular, begins life at Mansfield in a very lowly position, as clearly indicated by Mrs Norris's treatment of her. But Lady Bertram's gradual recognition of her usefulness is eventually shared by Sir Thomas. After disappointment with his own daughters' flippancy, he discovers Fanny's merits characterized not only by sweetness but by firm principles, consistency and a strong sense of duty and

finally he feels that 'Fanny was indeed the daughter that he wanted' (*MP*, p.368). Molly makes similar progress at Hamley Hall. After gaining Mrs Hamley's affection by her tender care and sweet temper, she gains the Squire's admiration and ultimately his recognition that she is the best candidate for Roger's wife. Squire Hamley's affection toward Molly proves that she shares his traditional virtues and values. With her virtues, Molly transforms herself from an outsider to the most indispensable person at Hamley Hall, as indicated by Squire Hamley's words: 'I look upon you as a kind of daughter more than Madam there!' (*WD*, p.662). His words perfectly conform to those of Sir Thomas. Both Fanny and Molly thus overcome their lower class origins and are recognized by the masters of the houses as virtuous and valuable 'ladies'.

The virtues and value systems of Fanny and Molly are discernible in their fine judgment, thoughtfulness to others, consistency and strong-mindedness. Under a modest and docile surface each heroine holds firm principles which do not yield to injustice and poor judgment. The episode of the theatricals shows Fanny's consistency and moral principles to be superior even to Edmund's. Her refusal of Henry further highlights her strong-mindedness. Since the match is a great opportunity that will never re-occur, Fanny's refusal arouses Sir Thomas's extreme displeasure, and she is temporarily banished to Portsmouth. His assessment of her independent spirit as 'wilful and perverse' is partly justified, because she defies her benefactor to whom she owes the welfare of her family as well.

Molly's strong-mindedness is best revealed when she faces up to the shrewd Preston in rescuing Cynthia from him. Since Molly sacrifices her own reputation by meeting with Preston alone, her conduct proves her courage and determination to set things right. Even Preston perceives her excellent qualities: 'He forgot himself for an instant in admiration of her. There she stood, frightened, yet brave, not letting go her hold on what she meant to do, even when things seemed most against her...' (*WD*, p.507). Molly also exhibits her strong character by boldly refusing to see Lady Harriet at the Miss Brownings'. The class consciousness of Victorian society would have made an ordinary girl gladly accept such a proposal as honourable, and Molly's defiant attitude displays her remarkable strength. As a matter of fact, Molly has shown strong-mindedness since her childhood, being often called naughty and passionate. As she grows up, supported by her sensibility and intelligence, her impulsive temper turns into a fair and courageous temperament. In fact, Molly's temper is well balanced by her perseverance, modesty and firm principles.

It is significant that Molly's intelligence contributes to taming her temperament. In her childhood, she shows remarkable interest in learning despite her father's objections. Since her father interferes with her every

intellectual attempt, she reads every book accessible regardless of its value. Later, Roger helps Molly to develop her intellect. He guides her to read books of greater value than the fiction and poetry which she has been used to. As a result, he finds her 'his most promising pupil' (*WD*, p.152). Naturally, Lord Hollingford, who has a deep interest in biology, acknowledges Molly's intelligence and interest in sensible things. Such intelligence and strong-mindedness contribute to her courageous forbearance when her reputation is sacrificed for Cynthia. Lansbury rightly says that Molly's 'goodness is not passive, a denial of action, but the positive force in the novel'.[11] Likewise, Fanny's mind was improved with Edmund's assistance, for 'he recommended the books which charmed her leisure hours, he encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment' (*MP*, p.20). For both heroines, intelligence is a vital component of good character, and intellectual development accompanies increasing social acceptance.

Fanny and Molly this make significant progress in establishing their reputation and gaining appreciation by the traditional landed families. Significantly, their virtues correspond to the virtues of the traditional landed classes. History tells that gentlewomen were not docile 'angels', the middle-class ideal of womanhood, but were women brave enough to fight enemies. These women could manage estates and took care of the poor. Therefore the strong characters of Fanny and Molly place them firmly in the tradition of the gentlewoman. Moreover, their intellectual development links them to the many educated women in the landed classes. Their paternalistic attitudes characteristic of 'the Lady Bountiful' also qualify them as 'ladies of the manor', since *noblesse oblige* is a traditional ideal of the English landed classes.[12]

The heroines' elevation to the landed families reflects a unique aspect of English class structure: social mobility. This mobility, traditionally tolerated, was stimulated by industrialization. Compared with the continent, England was 'distinguished by the ease with which it has opened its ranks'.[13] After financial success, the middle classes sought cross-class marriages with the landed families in order to obtain honourable blood. On their part, the impoverished landed families also chose cross-class marriage with the successful middle-class families. In so doing, the English landed classes avoided in-breeding and its resulting physical and mental stagnation.

At first sight, social mobility seems profitable to the lower classes, but in fact it has proved more advantageous to the ruling classes. In addition to its contribution to political stability and the economic rescue of the impoverished landed classes, this mobility provided affluent brides for younger sons of the landed classes who were hindered from inheritance due to primogeniture. Above all, it avoided in-breeding and brought in fresh blood energetic enough to survive the age in transition. By means of the new blood, the effete landed

class that had been losing their resilience and generative ability were revitalized to continue their old lineage. Indeed, 'blood restoration'[14] proved profitable to the ruling classes. The elevation of Fanny and Molly is a version of blood restoration, although the ascendancy of these two heroines is due not to new money, but rather to their traditional virtues uncontaminated by new values. By accepting Fanny and Molly, the two old families preserve the traditional spirit of the country houses. As Tony Tanner observes, 'without going outside to the unformed world of Portsmouth for fresh potential, the world of Mansfield Park may wither from within'.[15] Similarly, without absorbing Molly's new blood, the spirit of Hamley Hall would surely succumb to the new power.

Fanny and Molly, despite their lower social origins, come to marry the symbolic heirs of the old families, and are elevated to the status of the spiritual 'lady of the manor', due to their traditional virtues associated with the gentlewoman. At the same time, they revitalize the old families with their young blood, restoring the vitality and potentiality of the effete gentry that is threatened with decay in the face of the new industrial society. The old rural tradition symbolized in the country houses manages to survive with the help of Fanny and Molly who will proceed to pass down the values of this inherited culture to their own offspring. In this sense, both novels represent a quest for a new repository for the traditions and values of the declining landed class. Therefore *Mansfield Park* and *Wives and Daughters* are fusions of the nostalgia for the past and 'the removable inequality' of the English class system.

NOTES

1. W A Craik maintains that 'Molly most closely parallels Jane Austen's Fanny Price... in both her role in the action, and functions.' (*Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel*, London: Methuen, 1975, p.247)

2. Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, New York: New American Library, 1979, p.199. Parenthetical references are to this edition and employ the short form of title, *MP*, where necessary.

3. A Fleishman, *A Reading of Mansfield Park*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1967, pp.30-31.

4. Alistair M Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971, p.53.

5. For page references to *Wives and Daughters*, see 'Bibliographical Note', p.iv.

6. Coral Lansbury, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis*, New York: Barnes & Noble, 1975, p.193.

7. Lansbury, p.184.

8. Igor Webb, *From Custom to Capital*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981, p.102.

9. Richard B Sheridan, *Sugar and Slavery*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1973, p.474. Quoted in Webb, p.106.

10. This precariousness at Mansfield is caused by the anti-slavery movement. In the West Indies, the brutality to slaves was so severe that they were 'literally used up, without much attention to their care, and then simply replaced by fresh ones...'. The abolition of the slave trade, then, would necessitate the re-organization of the slave labour force which was an extremely difficult task for an absentee landlord such as Sir Thomas, to organize. Together with the poor harvest caused by drought, the abolition of the slave trade would surely cause the Bertrams serious problems. Indeed, the exploitation in the colonies, which had supported many landed families, was being brought to an end by the new trends of the age, and landed families who could not adapt to the new age, such as the Bertrams, were most likely to suffer. See Webb, pp.106-7.

11. Lansbury, p.204.

12. For the traditional strength of gentlewomen, see Ann S Haskell, 'The Portrayal of Women by Chaucer and His Age', *What Manner of Woman*, ed Marlene Springer, New York: New York University Press, 1977. About paternalistic attitudes of gentlewomen, see David Roberts, 'The Paterfamilias of the Victorian Governing Classes', *The Victorian Family*, ed Anthony Wohl, London: Croom Helm, 1978. About learnedness, especially in the Elizabethan court, see Doris Stenton, *The English Woman in History*, New York: Macmillan, 1956, pp.120-150.

13. David Castronovo, *The English Gentleman*, New York: Ungar, 1987, p.14.

14. In *The Novels of Anthony Trollope*, Oxford: OUP, 1977, p.114, James Kincaid refers to the marriage between Frank Gresham and Mary Thorne as 'blood restoration'.

15. Tony Tanner, *Jane Austen*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986, p.148.