(MIS)APPROPRIATING (CON)TEXT: JANE AUSTEN’S MANSFIELD PARK IN CONTEMPORARY LITERARY CRITICISM AND FILM

Scott Caddy

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts, English Literature

August 2009

Committee:

Piya Lapinski, Advisor

Stephannie Gearheart
ABSTRACT: (Mis)appropriating (Con)text: Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* in Contemporary Literary Criticism and Film

Piya Lapinski, Advisor; Stephannie Gearhart, Advisor – 2nd Reader

In this thesis, the critical tradition of Jane Austen’s novel *Mansfield Park* (1814), the historical context of the novel, and a contemporary film adaptation are re-examined. The film in question is Patricia Rozema’s 1999 adaptation, entitled *Mansfield Park*. In Chapter I, the critical tradition of the novel is examined in order to determine what consensus, if anything, scholars have come to in regards to an accepted reading of the novel. By examining this criticism a historical context unique to the novel is uncovered. In Chapter II, Austen’s personal letters and contemporary authors are scrutinized in terms of the debate over abolition at the time. Because most scholars of the novel see slavery as an important or central theme in the novel, the historical context becomes integral to any reading of the novel; it also becomes intrinsic to any adaptation of the novel into film. Chapter III uses the arguments outlined in Chapter’s I and II to re-evaluate Rozema’s *Mansfield Park* to revitalize and reinterpret the debate over Austen (as an author and person) in regards to any critical tradition of her works. Overall, this thesis examines how the criticism of the novel and/or film has become a battle over who Jane Austen is, was, and what kinds of political sentiments she had. Focus has been taken off the text(s), resulting in a critical tradition more concerned with control over critical readings instead of discourse over meanings and interpretations of *Mansfield Park*. 
To Patrice, for her support, love, and encouragement

To my family – Mom, Dad, and brothers Paul and David – for their support and encouragement

in my lifelong pursuit of education
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my advisors for this project, Piya Lapinski and Stephannie Gearhart. Both of these wonderful professors have encouraged my intellectual pursuits and constantly pushed me to do more with the information I discovered. Piya was (and is) supportive of myself pushing the boundaries of the discourse concerning the topic at hand, and it gave me more confidence in my abilities as a thinker and writer. Without her comments, suggestions, careful insight, and research suggestions, this thesis would not have been as carefully and vigorously written as it is now. This thesis began as a small idea for a mock conference essay in an introductory graduate course on research methods for English studies. At the time, I had no idea or desire to expand that conference paper into anything larger. However, because of her ability to identify areas of interest in her students, Piya, who was my professor for that particular research methods course, had guided me and encouraged me to pursue this particular topic beyond my original work. I would like to thank and acknowledge Piya for aiding me in picking a topic in which I have become heavily invested.

I would also like to acknowledge Stephannie Gearhart for her work in helping me shape a more focused analysis of film than I previously had. While I did not have any courses with Stephannie during my time at Bowling Green State University, she guided my research and thoughts much the same way as if I had been her student. Her knowledge of adaptation theory, and film studies helped me gain a knowledge regarding literature and film that was previously unattainable, due to my stubbornness in seeing literature as superior to film. Without her guidance and direction regarding these areas of my thesis, I would not have presented as complete an argument as I had desired. For this, I acknowledge and thank Stephannie for helping to expand my knowledge and my interests in regards to critical studies of literature and film. Thank you to both advisors for your dedication during this arduous process.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I: <em>MANSFIELD PARK</em>: PAST AND PRESENT CRITICISM</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Foundation of Contemporary Literary Criticism for <em>Mansfield Park</em></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Edward Said to “Radical” Readings of Austen</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realigning Radicalism: Criticism of Radical Readings of Austen</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II: HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF <em>MANSFIELD PARK</em></td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History as an Objective Narrative</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austen and Clarkson: Abolition and Imperial Complicity</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction to the Film and the Use of History</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III: PATRICIA ROZEMA’S <em>MANSFIELD PARK</em> – CRITICISMS OF</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADAPTATION</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Space of Mansfield Park: The Novel and the Film</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Film: Fidelity, Adaptation, and Interpretation</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symptom of a Greater Problem</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION: REACHING AN ORGANIC WHOLE – ENDING THE (MIS)APPROPRIATION</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OF (CON)TEXT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

In the world of Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* is often seen as her darkest and least “Austen-like” novel of the five she completed. While her other novels are full of sardonic wit, poignant satire, and easily discernable romantic plots, *Mansfield Park* seems to be devoid of a central theme, lacking any specific plot, and only containing an easily discernable weakling of a heroine. If anything, the past 40 years of criticism have heavily changed the opinion of the novel. It has turned one of Austen’s least appreciated novels into a text that generates a bevy of criticism concerning a vast range of themes, topics, and ideas. In this thesis, I wish to explore the recent critical tradition of *Mansfield Park*, take a look at some historical context, biographical contexts, and examine one adaptation of the novel, Patricia Rozema’s *Mansfield Park* from 1999. In doing so, I hope to expand recent criticism to work towards a more holistic and organic reading of *Mansfield Park* as two parallel texts – one as a film and one as a novel. Outlining the discourse of these two texts will, hopefully, give the critical tradition of *Mansfield Park* a needed revitalization. My goal is to expand the discourse beyond arguments and battles over Austen as an author.

In Chapter I, “*Mansfield Park*: Past and Present Criticism,” the critical tradition of the novel is explored, from Avrom Fleishman’s landmark essay “*Mansfield Park* in it’s Time” through contemporary readings by scholars like Edward Said, Moreland Perkins, Susan Fraiman, Maggie Malone, and Moira Ferguson. Most attention is paid towards Fleishman’s impact in changing the debate on *Mansfield Park* and shifting the focus away from the demerits of Fanny onto topics such as ordination, space, slavery, and morality. Said picks up where Fleishman left off, running with the topic of slavery in his crucial work “Jane Austen and Empire.” This essay marks one of the first accounts where Austen is criticized for what Said calls “passing”
references and remarks regarding Sir Thomas Bertram’s plantation in Antigua. For these passages, Said finds Austen to be more entangled in the empire than at first glance. His reading of *Mansfield Park* is furthered (and critiqued) by sympathizers such as Maaja R. Stewart, Laura Chrisman, Susan Fraiman, Moira Ferguson, and – to an extent – George Boulukos. Said’s argument is later contested by radical and more historically concerned scholars such as Moreland Perkins, Ruth Perry, Michael Steffes, Brian Southam, and Maggie Malone. Collectively, the latter scholars cite many of Austen’s personal letters and the historical context of the novel to battle the notion that Austen was complicit within the empire. In fact, they argue, Austen had abolitionist sentiments, since she claims to have read (and “enjoyed”) a work by noted abolitionist Thomas Clarkson.

Chapter II, entitled “Historical Context of *Mansfield Park*,” takes a much more critical and focused look at the specific historical and biographical documents cited to support Austen’s position as an abolitionist. At first glance, it appears Austen has some abolitionist sentiments, or was at least aware of the debate over the slave trade and the abolition movement at the time. Since the novel was set to take place after the abolition of the slave trade, much is made of the historical context. While the critical work involving the context has garnered much attention and sympathy, a more expansive look at the historical moments before and after abolition reveals some startling complications and contradictions. Examining Clarkson’s *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, as well as some secondary critical work examining Clarkson’s legacy as an abolitionist, and exploring some of the other history leading up to the Parliamentary vote for abolition uncovers a troubling attitude: there is still an air of staunch imperialism in Clarkson’s work. Clarkson, other abolitionists, and sympathizers of the abolition movement were still concerned with control of Africans abroad, which troubles the definition of
the term “abolitionist.” Uncovering some racist and imperialist attitudes in endeavors abroad by noted abolitionists like Clarkson, it becomes problematic to associate Austen with the legacy of abolition in a positive light. The historical analysis then gives way to a brief interlude into the film, examining praise and criticism of Rozema’s adaptation based on the historical information included in *Mansfield Park* (1999).

The third and final chapter, “Patricia Rozema’s *Mansfield Park* – Criticisms of Adaptation,” takes an approach grounded in film, adaptation, and literary theory to better understand both the dissent and praise of her film before providing a new, more critical look at the film as its own unique text. Utilizing texts by noted film and adaptation theorists as Linda Hutcheon, Sue Parrill, Robert Stam, and Alessandra Raengo, and examining reviews of the movie by scholars such as Mireia Aragay, Claudia Johnson, Barbara Kantrowitz, and Keith Windschuttle, Rozema’s *Mansfield Park* is closely read and analyzed with the text before departing on its own path as a new part of the critical tradition of *Mansfield Park*. This new path, much like Rozema’s adaptation, is heavily informed by the past critical tradition of the novel, but embarks on a more reflective journey, hoping to wrest control of the discourse away from radical scholars and back into a more neutral and discursively encouraging area. Additionally, by looking at a couple of interviews with Rozema by James Berardinelli and Hiba Moussa, some insight is given into Rozema’s intention regarding her adaptation, which works specifically influenced her interpretation, and how she views the film in light of the discourse preceding it.

In the conclusion, I explore my analysis and see where other, future scholars of *Mansfield Park* might be able to utilize my assessments to further or critique the topics and arguments I have suggested. What I hope this thesis does is give new insight into a mostly one-sided
discourse and revitalize the debate over who has control over the elements of a critical tradition. Is it necessarily healthy for the critical realm of *Mansfield Park* if it is dominated by one particular reading over any other? Can we, as scholars, assure that discourse is invigorating, informative, ever expansive, and devoid of stagnation? Will there ever be a reading that does not concern itself with “possessing” the author, as Aragay argues (181)?

My overarching suggestion with this thesis is that we do not concern ourselves so much with how Austen was or what sentiments she had. Instead, we should shift the focus back to her texts and what kinds of themes, meanings, and commentary they provide for her society and her particular historical moment. This is not to say her personal or biographical situations and sentiments did not influence her writing, but only that they do not supersede the actual arguments and commentary she was providing via her texts. It seems to me, especially when it concerns the historical context, that too much is done to prop up and objectify Austen’s contemporary thinkers and their respective texts. Because of this, Austen’s text is buried beneath a plethora of rhetoric and association as opposed to being the focus of analysis. In keeping the analysis focused on the text - whether it is the film, novel, or both – the analysis will hopefully build off of and continue a rich critical tradition which has, so far, been very inclusive with the diversity of readings provided. There is no sense in attempting to set Austen and her texts in stone to placate our postmodern desires; doing so would hinder future criticism from adding to the critical tradition, stunting the growth of the discourse.
CHAPTER I: MANSFIELD PARK: PAST AND CRITICISM

The peculiar nature and place of Mansfield Park in Jane Austen’s body of work has drawn much scrutiny from Janeites and academics alike. In the world of Janeites, Mansfield Park is often overlooked for its unclear themes, lack of an overpowering plot-drive love story, and seemingly meek, apathetic heroine in Fanny Price. Academics and scholars tend to view Mansfield Park as a fairly enigmatic text in terms of theme as well; is the novel about ordination? Or is it about the education of children? Is Austen making an argument for conventional modes of thought, spirituality, and morality against modern philosophies of wealth and prosperity? What can be made of the fleeting references to Antigua and the slave trade? Was Austen an abolitionist, or was she simply presenting the changing gentry class at a time when slavery was being abolished? The only certainty, it seems, lies in the complexity of the novel; it addresses and tackles many different issues all at once and, at times, individually. Much of the recent criticism concerning Mansfield Park, as a novel, has been focused on Austen’s particular commentary (or lack thereof) on slavery, abolition, and the concept of “ameliorating” the former plantation owners.

In the scholarly realm of Jane Austen, there are two primary camps sticking to two varied and opposing readings of Austen - the conservative Austen and the radical Austen. The focus of both sides turns towards the notion that Fanny Price – the meek heroine of the novel – becomes Austen’s vehicle for either (or both) a) a critique of the slave trade through the subjugation and subsequent control exercised over Fanny by Sir Thomas Bertram, her uncle, baronet of Mansfield Park, and owner of a plantation in Antigua, or b) a more analogous critique of the patriarchal system as whole, where Fanny is read as being subjugated like a slave, and thus steps in for the invisible slave body, giving the reader a means to critique slavery and women’s
oppression at home as symptoms of an oppressive system. Essentially, the latter point views Austen and *Mansfield Park* as critiquing the whole system of patriarchal empire, where Fanny is used as a vehicle to critique the slave trade and the position of women within the empire (both by Austen and the critics themselves). The former point concerns itself with the limitations of Austen’s critique of slavery. It also suggests that Austen herself is complicit and participates in the imperial society she sometimes critiques. These two distinct readings diverged out of a break from the critical tradition of *Mansfield Park*. Prior to these contemporary readings, readers often criticized Austen’s portrayal of Fanny as boring, weak, and uninteresting, which made the novel unreadable or devoid of any clear themes. A close reading of the novel provided by Avrom Fleishman in 1967 broke open the debate over the clear themes of *Mansfield Park*, eventually leading to the critical point we see today. However, the past critical tradition which was concerned with the family structure, ordination, and the overall moral (and sometimes physical) landscape of the novel indirectly laid the foundation for current, slavery-focused arguments of the recent decades.

*The Foundation of Contemporary Criticism for Mansfield Park*

Avrom Fleishman’s 1967 piece “*Mansfield Park in Its Time*” is an exceptional, holistic view at contextualizing both Austen and *Mansfield Park*. As well, Fleishman attempts to address and explain each of the major themes present in the novel. His analysis, while looking at the possible influence of Evangelism on Austen at the time, focuses mainly on “uncover[ing] the effect on the gentry of the political and economical transformations of the time, see[ing] how the novel assesses that class’s strengths and weaknesses in facing the challenge of contemporary history” (1-2). This is not, in any way, to dismiss the coverage of the Evangelical aspects of Fleishman’s essay; it is simply to explain how this particular methodology has lent itself to the
contemporary analysis of the novel (and, eventually, depicted by and criticized within the film adaptation). The particular commentary on politics and economics is what led to the criticism following Fleishman’s essay, eventually giving way to contemporary criticism surrounding the slavery/abolition issue.

In particular, Fleishman’s attention to the play *Lover’s Vow* in *Mansfield Park* is what led the way for the political and sociohistorical commentary we see today. As he suggests, concerning *Lover’s Vows*, it would have offended much of the “Evangelical, Platonic, and ‘Puritan’ attitudes” prevalent during Austen’s time (7). The special reason for this offense? “[*Lover’s Vows*] Continental political radicalism expressed in the conventions of sentimental comedy” (Fleishman 8). Because of its close relation to French Revolution ideology, Fleishman argues that the rejection of the theatrics of *Lover’s Vows* by Fanny and Sir Thomas Bertram parallels the gentry class’s criticism of a move towards more liberal politics by the aristocracy (Fleishman 10). This criticism has lead to some of the more radical and conservative portrayals of Austen and *Mansfield Park*, putting the political context front and center for the reader. Eventually, this contextualization is what led to more biographical portrayals of a “radical” Austen, one who sympathized with and possibly exhorted abolitionist sentiments.

By focusing on the placement of Antigua and the sugar plantation of the Bertrams in *Mansfield Park*, Fleishman sets the tone for future analysis of race, slavery, and abolition. “The survival of Mansfield Park,” Fleishman says, “is called into doubt by yet another matter of concern…this representative gentry estate is not self-sustaining but depends for its existence on colonial landholdings…” (15). This is one of the first moments in critical reading of *Mansfield Park* where specific attention is paid to the consequences of slavery and colonialism on the
health of the estate. It also calls into question the very nature of Sir Thomas’s absence and what, exactly, transpires during his trip:

But what are we to make of the fact that Mansfield is not a self-sufficient estate, that the family’s way of life is threatened, and that the large and airy rooms depend on an external and troubled colonial holding for their support? And if a question about off-stage action may be admitted, what does Sir Thomas do in Antigua to make secure the sources of his income? (Fleishman 16).

These particular questions are what drive much of the postcolonial and gendered readings of Mansfield Park today, echoed by Edward Said, Moira Ferguson, and others. Another particular insight provided by Fleishman gives way to what are considered more “radical” readings of Austen, which align her more liberally with contemporary abolitionists: “We know she had read the work of Thomas Clarkson, the author of The Abolition of the African Slave Trade and one of the few writers on public affairs to whom she makes allusion in her letters” (17). This opens up the possibility for more biographical interpretations regarding Austen’s relationship to abolitionist texts, discourses, and political commentary at the time. What is also interesting about this quote from Fleishman is that he overlooks the mention of danger by Edmund upon his father’s return from Antigua in Chapter 11:

Edmund looked round at Mr. Rushworth too, but had nothing to say.
“Your father’s return will be a very interesting event.”
“It will, indeed, after such an absence; an absence not only long, but including so many dangers” (MP 101; emphasis in italics mine).

Clearly whatever Sir Thomas was doing involved a great deal of danger for himself, the family, his monetary interests, or involving his political influence as a baronet. While this seems to be an oversight by Fleishman, it is later picked up by Said and his opposing Austen scholars (and eventually Rozema in her adaptation of Mansfield Park in 1999).

A. Walton Litz’s follow-up article in 1975, “Recollecting Jane Austen,” reiterates the need to review the criticism of Mansfield Park and shift to the direction Fleishman had
established. More often than not, in the 1940s and 1950s, *Mansfield Park* had often been “the most uncongenial of [Austen’s] novels,” with a “debilitated heroine” and “uncertainties of tone and viewpoint” (Litz 675). What this essentially lead to, according to Litz, was criticism that was “beyond rational…attack[ing] *Mansfield Park* as if it were an affront to their personal artistic and ethical values” (675). However, original attempts to abandon such irrational criticism were also failures in the sense that they did not address any historical realities. Lionel Trilling, as read by Litz, approaches the play *Lover’s Vows* and recognizes Fanny’s reluctance to take part as significant. However, he uses fear of impersonating and role-playing as the reasons behind her rejection, ignoring (and maybe refusing) to read into any historical implications of Fanny’s refusal to take part in a politically driven play (Litz 676). In looking at Fleishman, however, Litz provides both an endorsement and interesting foresight into the direction of future criticism of *Mansfield Park*: “Here the problem of methodology is squarely confronted. Fleishman realizes that the novel, unlike the short poem, can only with difficulty be discussed as an organic whole” (Litz 677). Interestingly enough, he calls into question one part of Fleishman’s “organic” reading: “Sir Thomas’s visit to his estate in Antigua may well have been prompted by the contemporary economic crisis and the problems of slavery, but are these really essential parts of the novel?” (678). In praising Fleishman for his holistic reading, he also condemns the analysis of the Antigua references as inessential to the novel. It is perhaps this sentiment, followed by his suggestion that Austen would have done more to include such an issue into *Mansfield Park*, which has lead to both readings of *Mansfield Park* as an imperialist or abolitionist text (Litz 678). Those offended by Litz’s notion that slavery was an inessential part of the novel would eventually dig into her biographical texts to show how involved she was in the abolitionist discourse, or use such “inessential” references to prove her complicity within
empire. Without knowing it, Litz had effectively sealed the fate of criticism concerning
*Mansfield Park* for years to come. It was not until 14 years later when Edward Said would pick
up the topic of slavery in *Mansfield Park* to revitalize criticism and forever alter the landscape of
Austen scholarship, at least to the present day.

*From Edward Said to “Radical” Readings of Austen*

On the conservative side, Austen is read, in the words of Edward Said’s “Jane Austen and
Empire”, to be “more implicated in the rationale for imperialist expansion than at first sight”
(84). “How are we to assess Austen’s few references to Antigua [in *Mansfield Park*], and what
are to make of them interpretatively?” asks Said; answering his own question, Said makes the
claim that Austen “conclude[s] that no matter how isolated and insulated the English place (e.g.
*Mansfield Park*), it requires overseas sustenance” (89). Said asserts Austen’s position on the
issue of slavery as a passive subject, accepting of the institution as a necessity for economic and
social stability at home. He defines her references to the Bertram family’s plantation as
“passing,” with Austen seemingly uninterested or seeing empire in such a way that only warrants
a “casual” allusion (89). Said does point out that there is a material connection between
*Mansfield Park*, the estate, and Antigua; “what sustains life [at Mansfield Park] is the Bertram
estate in Antigua, which is not doing so well,” prompting Sir Thomas to leave and attend to (or
rather maintain) “overseas sustenance” which stabilizes the wealth at home (89). In addition to
Said, some scholars have taken more varied approaches towards Austen’s apparent complacency
and complicity in regards to slavery. Said is echoed by Jon Mee in “Austen’s Treacherous Ivory:
Female Patriotism, Domestic Ideology, and Empire,” where his analysis hinges on the idea that
“Austen privileges the condition of white gentlewoman over any concern about black slaves”
(85). Ayi Kwei Armah, in his 2006 article “Don’t Mention Slavery,” gives a much more
damning critique of the “dead silence” in the novel than Mee or Said: “Mansfield Park buries the issue of African humanity under the ‘dead silence’ of persons profiting from the destruction of that humanity,” while also showing that, according to Austen, “…the discomfort of a couple English sisters is given more weight than the immense suffering of hundreds of Africans reduced to slavery” (44-5). Any readings of Austen which paint her as a writer produced by her social milieu and context, says Armah, or “the suggestion that as a writer of fiction, the author had no choice,” is “unnecessarily disingenuous,” giving Austen a way out of the discussion on imperialist implications in her novel (45). Such readings of Austen as conservative end up ranging from ones where she was socially constructed as conservative (Said) to ones where she is being actively conservative (Mee and Armah). There readings are also supported by the way Antigua is mentioned in the novel: simply by a blank line. It is not mentioned by name, either on purpose or out of courtesy. It is unclear, but the absence of Antigua in name is certainly there: “Mr. Bertram set off for ------“ (Austen 50).

Susan Fraiman, in her article “Jane Austen and Edward Said: Gender, Culture, and Imperialism,” differentiates her reading of Mansfield Park from Said, Mee, and Armah, only insofar as the particular questions she asks of Austen:

My point, I should stress, is not to exonerate Austen of imperialist crimes. Surely Said is right to include her among those who made colonialism thinkable by constructing the West as center, home, and norm, while pushing everything else to the margins. The question I would raise is not whether Austen contributed to English domination abroad but how her doing so was necessarily inflected and partly disrupted by her position as a bourgeois woman (809; emphasis mine).

Fraiman, in a less aggressive manner than most of Said’s critics (whom I will devote time to shortly), points out that the limitations of Said’s and Mee’s readings of Mansfield Park rest in Austen’s particularly complicated position as an educated woman of middle-to-upper class standing who, paradoxically, was not a full citizen in the eyes of the English government. In
other words, it is not such a simple criticism to paint Austen as a fully enamored figurehead of colonialism and imperialism when she, herself, did not enjoy the full rights and privileges her white male counterparts did. As I have emphasized in the passage from Fraiman’s work, that does not to exonerate Austen or ignore any complacency or complicity in the functions of imperialism. It is simply that attention must be paid to her position as a woman, subjugated to a particular extent within the patriarchal system of imperialist, early nineteenth-century England.

Building on this more complex notion of the female position in English society during Austen’s time, Moira Ferguson’s “Mansfield Park: Slavery, Colonialism, and Gender” further complicates both feminist and postcolonial readings of the novel by suggesting Austen was not putting forth an argument for or against slavery, but for an amelioration of the enterprise itself. *Mansfield Park*, argues Ferguson, “…entertains the option of emancipation – as opposed to abolition…,” a position that was popular amongst the landed gentry and plantation owners at the time (118-19). Moreover, Ferguson argues that “Mansfield Park initiated a new chapter in colonialist fiction as old and new abolitionists came to terms with the fact that the Abolition Bill [in 1807] did not fulfill its minimum requirement – amelioration of inhuman conditions” (129). While Austen herself may have supported abolition – though the actual extent of her support is not accurately known – the “plantocratic paradigms” exemplified in *Mansfield Park* complicate any support Austen may have had (Ferguson 121). While Sir Thomas becomes reformed towards the end of the novel, shifting from a malevolent patriarch to the prototypical benevolent master, his reformation (amelioration) only re-establishes his position at the top of the hierarchal order at Mansfield Park (and, consequently, in society as well). This is affirmed by Ferguson, saying that Austen’s “recommendation for a kinder gentler plantocracy, however, do anything but confront that institution head on…paradoxically, [Sir Thomas’s] moral reformation
reconfirms his control” (Ferguson 130). This view on amelioration over abolition is echoed by George Boulukos, in “The Politics of Silence: Mansfield Park and the Amelioration of Slavery.” “Amelioration,” he says, is “a position on slavery that would have been familiar to Austen’s early nineteenth century audience…[it] was attractive to plantation owners not only because it imagined slaves happily embracing their slavery, but also because it staved off public demand for emancipation” (362). Proponents of this particular concept, explains Boulukos, “held that slavery and colonialism were morally redeemable and potentially even heroic pursuits” (362). As Said and Fraiman wrestle with Austen’s involvement within the empire (and whether her position as a woman has any influence on her involvement), Ferguson and Boulukos contextualize the more conservative readings of Austen and Mansfield Park with prevalent views of amelioration and emancipation against abolition during the timeframe of the novel. (Note: While most scholars agree that the novel takes place after the Abolition Bill is passed in 1807, there is some disagreement over exactly how long after. Estimates range anywhere from 1808-1813, the year before the novel was published). Another factor in Mansfield Park that might lean towards the readings presented by Said, Fraiman, Ferguson, and others regards Fanny Price’s brother, William, who is an officer in the British Navy. Her father is also a naval officer. Any wealth they made would have been partially incurred from ensuring safe passage of slave ships prior to abolition, and enforcing abolition laws once the bill passed in 1807. In short, even the Prices relied on slavery directly or indirectly, and would have been affected by abolition. This is, curiously enough, a similar situation to the one Austen and her family was in (which I will touch upon shortly).

Also in response to Said, theorist Laura Chrisman offers a collective approach to reading space that is generated in a combination of methodologies and approaches used by Said, Frederic
Jameson, and Gayatri Spivak. Chrisman’s book *Postcolonial Contraventions: Cultural Readings of Race, Imperialism and Transnationalism* offers a view of spatial analysis which takes particular attention to the modern imperial metropolis. Most interesting is her assertion about late nineteenth-century imperialism and the possibility that it “broke down rather than introduced absolute, spatial boundaries between countries and peoples” (56). Her assertion runs counter to Said’s reading of *Mansfield Park* and space, where there appears to be some kind of spatial boundary. She claims that being able to go from the imperial homeland (i.e. England) to the colonial metropole signifies a boundary broken through imperialism. The reason she brings Spivak and Jameson into her reading, alongside Said, is to cover all areas lacking in their postcolonial theories; to cover political, economic, social, and spatial interpretations which are not allowed in their individual approaches (Chrisman 57). In short, Said set the stage for a reading of a more conservative Austen, while Fraiman, Ferguson, and Chrisman have offered varying degrees of analysis to cover some missing dynamics of gender and material space that govern (as we shall see) readings of a more radical Austen.

Radical scholars, like Moreland Perkins, point to biographical contexts of Austen for a more radical position on slavery. Looking at her personal letters during the time period where she would have written *Mansfield Park*, Perkins, in his article “*Mansfield Park* and Austen’s Reading on Slavery and Imperial Warfare,” notes that Austen had a profound liking to an essay by Thomas Clarkson (*History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Salve Trade by British Parliament*, 1808). In a letter to her sister Cassandra, Perkins points out that Jane Austen was in much in love with Capt. Pasley, who wrote “Essay on the Military Police & Institutions of the British Empire,” as “[she] ever was with Clarkson” (5). This profound liking and approval of Clarkson leads many Austen scholars to believe she was an
abolitionist and, therefore, unconcerned with empire. Michael Steffes, in his article “Slavery and 
*Mansfield Park: The Historical and Biographical Context,” even points out that
“…consciousness of slavery as a moral and political issue was not only pervasive in the broad cultural context in which Austen lived and wrote, but…in her own social milieu as well” (29).
Citing numerous passages by Clarkson and Austen’s own brother Edward, Steffes concludes that “while we could wish for definitive evidence that [Edward] had shared his [anti-slavery] opinion with Jane Austen before *Mansfield Park* was written, it is of considerable interest that, despite family connections with slave holders, an Austen sibling expressed anti-slavery opinions” (28).
Combined with Perkins’s assertion that Austen in fact read and enjoyed celebrated abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, it is easy to assume, amongst radical scholars of Austen, that she may have held anti-slavery or abolitionist sentiments. Brian Southam, in his 1995 *Times Literary Supplement* article “The Silence of the Bertrams,” also sides with the more radical scholars after revisiting Said’s reading of *Mansfield Park*:

> Where does Jane Austen stand in this [the slavery issue]? With Sir Thomas, as Said suggests? Or with her heroine? Readers of the novel will decide for themselves. But the logic of history, biography, and the text itself places Austen beside Fanny Price. *Mansfield Park*’s ‘power to offend’ is not, as Said would have us believe, to render Fanny Price (and her creator) friends of the plantocracy. At this notable moment, in the lion’s den, Fanny is unmistakably a ‘friend of the abolition,’ and Austen’s readers in 1814 would have applauded the heroine and her author for exactly that” (14).

Southam, even after contextualizing Said and asserting his “anticolonial” reading as essential to recent and future criticism of *Mansfield Park*, falls back into a favorable reading of Austen because of the “logic of history, biography, and the text itself.” This particular reading, which informs much of the criticism that eventually appears in Rozema’s adaptation of *Mansfield Park*, also informs some of the criticism which sees Austen criticizing the whole patriarchal structure behind the institution of slavery.
Maggie Malone, another radical scholar of Austen, asserts that within the text of *Mansfield Park*, Austen associates the plight of Fanny with that of the slaves in her article “Patriarchy and Slavery and the Problem of Fanny in *Mansfield Park*.” Throughout *Mansfield Park*, Malone argues that Austen shows her “…underlying real, if unconscious, attitude toward patriarchy, slavery and the plight of the penniless gentlewoman” (28). Right away, the connection is made between the slave and the “penniless gentlewoman” (Fanny), as both are subject to different forms of oppression under the same system of patriarchy. Malone compares Fanny to a slave throughout her article, saying “like a slave, she can only obey or disobey” and that she, too, is “…like a slave, torn from her home at an early age and transported to Mansfield Park, ‘the plantation’” (33). Here, in a more radical reading of Austen, Fanny is equated to the plight of the slaves, which is also used to implicate Austen’s supposed abolitionist or anti-slavery sentiments. Steffes also adds to this common reading of Austen, saying that she is “…far from being complicit in slavery, [since] Austen makes it the core of her satire in the novel” (30).

Steffes also uses biographical texts to support his claim:

The only mention of Antigua in Jane Austen’s surviving letters seems to confirm that her intention was satirical: ‘I wonder whether you happened to see Mr. Blackall’s marriage in the Papers last Jan. We did. He was married at Clifton to a Miss Lewis, whose Father had been late of Antigua…He was a piece of Perfection, noisy Perfection himself which I always recollect with regard’…It will be clear to readers of Austen’s letters that she does not approve of Mr. Blackall. The word noisy is probably enough to convey that, although we also have a statement in a letter from later in Austen’s life which makes the negative reading even more obvious: ‘pictures of perfection as you know make me sick & wicked’” (29).

Using these biographical materials is a staple of more radical readings of Austen and *Mansfield Park*. Much like Perkins had earlier stated that Austen had read and appreciated contemporary texts on abolition, Ruth Perry, author of “Jane Austen, Slavery, and British Imperialism,” also highlights some biographical texts to support a more radical reading of Austen. According to
Perry, Austen, on top of the texts mentioned by Perkins and the letters presented by Steffes, also had read and enjoyed *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1786), by Clarkson as well (28). On top of this “liking” of an abolitionist’s text, Austen’s family had also expressed some anti-slavery sentiments, despite the position of her brothers in the British Navy (Perry 27). Essentially, Perry adds in more biographical works to both reiterate a personal reading of Austen and to support the Fanny-as-slave narrative put forth by Malone. Fanny’s question about the slave trade, which was met with “dead silence,” is meant to start her own “rebellion” against her master (Sir Thomas). This comes to a head when she refuses Henry Crawford’s marriage proposal – “she [Fanny] will not mate and breed as they [The Bertrams] direct her” (Perry 30; *MP* 291).

These opposing theoretical frameworks outline the specific paradigm wherein criticisms of *Mansfield Park* have fallen. While Fraiman and Ferguson do the most overt application of any kind of feminist analysis – when it comes to gender, power structures, and the particular case(s) of subjugated and oppressed people(s) – more radical scholars (Steffes, Perkins, Perry, and Malone) offer up readings of Austen and *Mansfield Park* that, somehow, get labeled as more liberal or less conservative than that of Said, Fraiman, and Ferguson. Even Boulukos, whose definitions of amelioration help flesh out the context of Austen’s audience at the time, takes a “radical” approach to his reading of Austen and Said:

Further, I contend, these critics [Said, Fraiman, Ferguson] flatten out the cultural moment of slavery in Romantic-era Britain in two ways: first, they accept a canonical and aesthetically extraordinary novel as simply representative of its culture; and secondly, they allow the broad category of ‘Imperialism’ to stand in for the specific histories of slavery and colonialism in that time (362).

In other words, while he supports the notion that Austen exemplified a popular view of the slave trade at the time, taking *Mansfield Park* at face value, in regards to Austen’s involvement with
empire and the slave trade, is a problematic endeavor. Boulukos argues that *Mansfield Park*, in and of itself, is only representative of Austen’s critique of empire and slavery, not her participation in those activities. This also falls in line with the biographical readings of Austen and *Mansfield Park* because it urges readers to consider her personal thoughts and ideas on slavery and abolition before assuming (or assigning) her position on the matter. This emphasis on Austen’s experience is one tenet of certain feminist methodologies, and should, in no way, be discounted in terms of critical analysis at this point. However, the desire to read Austen as somehow radical, abolitionist, or at the very least anti-slavery, tends to be more indicative of a redemptive theoretical position than a critical one. If Said had not criticized Austen’s apparent complicity in the empire and slavery would there be as much attention paid towards the slave trade in *Mansfield Park* as there is now? Where/when does criticism go from the beginning of discourse to an area of reclamation, desire, and defense? It seems that while the more radical readings of Austen and *Mansfield Park* include more historical context (and rightfully so), there is a sense that Austen and her text must be protected from less-than-friendly critiques of her as an author, person, and her works in general. There is also a hesitation to side with Said and be critical of the text for its inability to address what many have argued to be a pervasive issue in her time. Therefore, it is necessary to bring about more rigorous and reflective criticism of the more prominent, radical readings of Austen, *Mansfield Park*, and the biographical and sociohistorical texts which appear to have influenced her writing of *Mansfield Park*.

*Realigning Radicalism: Criticism of Radical Readings of Mansfield Park*

Said, paying particularly close attention to space in *Mansfield Park*, brings up the issue of domesticity:

…for much of the first half of the novel the action is concerned with a whole range of issues whose common denominator, misused or misunderstood, is space: not only is Sir
Thomas in Antigua to make things better there and at home, but at Mansfield Park, Fanny, Edmund, and her aunt Norris negotiate where she is to live, read, and work, where fires are to be lit; the friends and cousins concern themselves with the improvement of estates, and the importance of chapels (i.e. religious authority) to domesticity is envisioned and debated (85-6).

Said is right to claim that space is the common denominator amongst all issues within *Mansfield Park*; in fact, some readings of *Mansfield Park* focus specifically on the domestic space and how it reflects some of the same issues of empire, slavery, gender, and shifting power dynamics.

Maaja Stewart, looking at *Mansfield Park* in a chapter from her book *Domestic Realities and Imperial Fictions*, notes that the absence of Sir Thomas (as he tends to Antigua early in the novel) allows the power dynamic at Mansfield Park to shift from the center to the margins (123). More specifically, and in contrast to the assertion made by Boulukos about the “flattening” of *Mansfield Park* by Said, Stewart argues that “…the West Indian discourse had penetrated the domestic realm, thereby changing the perceptions of power relations and affecting quotidian experiences” (111). If Boulukos argues against the sweeping generalization that *Mansfield Park* is somehow representative of the culture at the time, Stewart asserts that any discourse regarding slavery has an effect on the domestic sphere/space. This particular space, while the subject of Austen’s books, is also Austen’s personal setting. To imply that taking *Mansfield Park* as representative of its culture is somehow “flattening” the text dismisses the historical work by numerous scholars to prove that Austen was aware, active, and involved with popular discourse on slavery and abolition. In a way, Boulukos is dismissive of the impact that a lot of the radical (though problematic) readings of Austen have had on the critical discourse. Not accepting the idea that what happened abroad in the West Indies directly affected the matters at home in England is, in a way, to discount the whole of *Mansfield Park* as a text. The problem is in the oppressive “flattening” of culture and the writing of a woman (like Austen) as somehow
unrepresentative of the greater culture she is a part of; while it is impossible for one text to
exemplify the entire plurality of a culture, to dismiss Austen’s text as some extraordinary
exception essentializes her work as somehow disconnected or distanced from the actual
discourse occurring during Mansfield Park’s cultural moment. My use of the term “flattening”
here is meant to explain the way that the connection between contemporary events and writing
are too easily seen as congruent; however, by creating such a term and using it to criticize Said, it
appears that Boulukos has also flattened the critical progress the discourse of Mansfield Park.

Another glaring problem with Boulukos’s thesis is the concept of narrative, particularly
as it pertains to colonialism and the history of slavery. He suggests that Said (and scholars such
as Fraiman, Chrisman, and Ferguson) lump together all narratives or representative narratives of
England at the time under the umbrella of “Imperialism,” perhaps ignoring some of her radical,
more nuanced critiques of slavery and patriarchy. However, if we consider Fraiman’s statement
about Austen’s position being particularly complex as a bourgeois woman writer without full
citizenship, coupled with Mee’s argument that Austen is privileging the English gentlewoman
over the slave, we see that Boulukos’s statement regarding Said’s overgeneralization of
“Imperialism” is also an overgeneralization. Said himself may harp too much on the strictly
postcolonial analysis of Mansfield Park, but Said’s sympathizers and partners-in-theory examine
his limitations as a way to explore the complex position of Austen as a woman writer. Another
problem with this umbrella statement by Boulukos’s has to do with the use of Clarkson by so
many radical Austen scholars. If her narrative, not to be taken as culturally representative and
not to be lumped so quickly together with “Imperialism,” is compared to the works of Clarkson,
there is an underlying argument regarding the two texts: Clarkson’s essays are taken as the more
representative text in terms of culture and the discourse on slavery and colonialism.
If this were not the case, why would radical scholars go to such great lengths to use Clarkson’s essays as proof that Austen is, in fact, involved in the discourse? Is there an underlying notion that, since Austen is a woman writer, there has to be proof she read something about abolition and slavery to be involved in the discourse? Certainly, in her contemporary moment, it was difficult for women to really interject on any discourse regarding law or social practices (despite the confinement of women to the private, social sphere). In a roundabout way, Boulukos and other radical scholars, by going to great lengths to prove she had read and was involved in the discourse on abolition and slavery at the time, also prove that she does not have any authority in her narrative regarding abolition and slavery without the context of Clarkson’s essays. In a sense, the radical scholars completely undo Austen’s female narrative on a male-dominated subject by propping her up with a patriarchal, male narrative. While she did read another text related to abolition in the same letter where she mentions Clarkson (Pasley’s Essay on The Military Policy and Institutions of the British Empire, 1810), there is no other overt mention of Austen reading any other abolitionist texts. This is not to say she was unaware of such texts, but we are without any overt mention of her having read them or an approval of them in the same sense of her approval of Clarkson.

There are also parallels between Clarkson and Austen in regards to their complacency and complicity with empire which get ignored. As Perry had explained (and as I had hinted at earlier), Austen’s brothers had strong anti-slavery sentiments, while Austen’s own uncle owned a plantation in Antigua (Perry 27). In his book Thomas Clarkson: The Friend of Slaves, Earl Griggs looks at the life of Thomas Clarkson with specific focus on his days fighting for abolition in the British Parliament. After abolition of the slave trade in 1807, in which Clarkson had much influence, the African Institution was formed by Parliament. The policy of the institution was as
such: “to see that the laws recently enacted in England and other countries for abolishing the African slave trade should be effectively enforced; to labour, as far as possible, for the abolition of the slave trade by foreign powers; and to encourage the civilization of Africa” (Griggs 95).

“Encourage the civilization” has a dubious, dual meaning in this usage. Clarkson was an advocate for the authenticity of African civilization, so it may be read that this is what is meant by encourage – promoting authentic African civilization. Such an idea is problematic on its own, however; African civilization and culture would be “promoted” by an outsider who is part of a great imperial nation. This also would re-emphasize the particular hierarchy of colonizer/colonized; if Clarkson truly feels that he must promote the authenticity of African civilization, it only proves his belief and assumption of his social position above the Africans. It is as if Clarkson is saying “Since they cannot promote their own culture in a way which we - England, the empire, the imperialist nation – cannot understand, I shall do it for them.” This encouragement, however, seems to refer to the continual spread of empire. Griggs explains how Thomas Clarkson’s brother, John Clarkson, was in charge of a fleet of ships carrying Africans back to Africa. They arrived in Sierra Leone and Lt. John Clarkson was appointed superintendent of a colony by the Sierra Leone Company. This company was noted for its abolitionist stance, as well as its mission to spread Christianity and European civilization throughout Africa. Thomas Clarkson wrote to his brother often and even sent him money to support this cause. Thus, while Clarkson may have supported abolition vehemently, he still valued the empire. Earlier, when I pointed out Steffes’s comment pertaining to Austen’s “social milieu” concerning slavery, he also mentioned that members of her family had connections with slave holders. Steffes even points out that

…General Mathew, father-in-law of Jane Austen’s brother James, was a West Indian proprietor. The Austens’ ‘Aunt Perrot,’ Mrs. James Leigh-Perrot, had strong family
connections in Barbados. Of more potential importance is Mr. Austen’s trusteeship of a plantation owned by the Nibbs family, making slavery a social fact with which he was directly connected (27).

So while much attention is paid to her position on slavery by radical scholars, with special attention paid to personal letters, the evidence used to support her awareness is also supportive of assumptions made by Said on the conservative side. Austen (whose family not only relied on the navy for sustenance but apparently slave-holding as well) may have been much more implicated in the spread of imperialism than at first sight. Hence, it is problematic to say she was an abolitionist as well. However, it is also problematic to assume that Clarkson is the standard to which the discourse of slavery is set. Has anyone, for instance, done a reading of *Mansfield Park* as being critical of Clarkson’s work? Looking at it, hypothetically, from that perspective, we might see *Mansfield Park* not as a critique of slavery, but as a critique of the discourse set forth by Clarkson. As Boulukos and Ferguson claimed, the novel seems more about the concept of amelioration as opposed to abolition; this, as Boulukos argues, is the actual viewpoint held by many plantation owners, whom Ferguson writes are of the class-level with whom Austen would actually have such discussions (Ferguson 118-19).

In his article “Decolinising *Mansfield Park* [sic],” John Wiltshire gives much more weight to the “dead silence” upon which the conflicting readings of Austen and *Mansfield Park* center: “The challenge for the postcolonial critic has been to fill that silence, charge it with political meaning,” but this silence is particularly what “bespeaks Austen’s art” (Wiltshire 313). Like Fleishman had suggested 42 years ago, we must take the text of *Mansfield Park* as a difficult, organic whole; this includes giving weight, meaning, and close attention to the instances of silence as well. Silence, as much as speaking, can “bespeak” a particular text. *Mansfield Park* is no exception. In fact, with so much criticism concerned with this particular
moment of silence, it has, in fact, become spoken. This is not to say that the readings and arguments presented by Said, Mee, Fraiman, Armah, and Ferguson end up having more weight than those provided by Malone, Steffes, Perkins, or radical scholars alike. While such readings that focus on the absence of the enslaved body, and on what Austen may (or may not have meant) by including the “dead silence” and passing references to the West Indies and Antigua, have become the political capital for movies like Patricia Rozema’s *Mansfield Park* in 1999, those readings do not argue for the more liberal and radical Austen presented by critics of Said (and his ilk).

In fact, a look at sociohistorical context may help position Austen more clearly in contemporary discourse on abolition and slavery, as suggested by Steffes. However, in doing so, radical scholars perhaps overlook a common position on abolition and the amelioration of plantation owners, as suggested by Ferguson and Boulukos. What if Austen, even in opposing slavery and supporting abolition, was still in favor of empire, overseas sustenance, and maintaining the order at home via colonial expansion? If Austen does not say so herself in biographical texts, does that mean we cannot read into the gaps and silences on the issues? Are we to ignore these gaps and silences, or give weight to them, much in the same way the “dead silence” in *Mansfield Park* has been given utterance? These questions still linger after years of criticism, analysis, and shifts in the literary criticism field over the past 20 years since Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*. It appears that not enough insight has been given in favor to an affirmative answer to the questions above. I would like to propose that based on the critical work outline above, it is possible and more than probable that Austen was careful *not* to be overly critical of the slave trade because of her awareness of her family’s own reliance on slavery in her uncle’s plantation in Antigua. In fact, Austen was probably more favorable of
amelioration than outright abolition, even if her sentiments echoed those of Clarkson. After all, it is not a stretch to assume that while she may have been as much of an abolitionist as Clarkson, she was well aware of the political difficulties encountered by Parliament in passing the bill (which will be covered in the following chapter). It is still difficult to pinpoint her exact feelings on the issue, but it is also not too difficult to infer that *Mansfield Park* was probably her first interjection into the debate. Reading her text as an addition to the abolition debate, despite its shortcomings and limitations as pointed out by Said, might give her writing more weight than that of an abolitionist whom, for all we know, just wrote an essay Austen found enjoyable to read.

However, looking at the historical texts of Austen’s time might also provide some insight into her contemporary moment. What we must be careful in doing (and what I will attempt to do in the following chapter) is not to put too much weight on the outside texts, even the biographical ones, in determining to what extent *Mansfield Park* is a radical critique of the slave trade, abolition, or the amelioration of plantation owners. The object, again, is to treat the novel as Austen’s own interjection into the debate and not as a reflection of the discourse. Were it a reflection of the discourse, we would definitely get more visible representations of the horrors of slavery (of which, if Austen read Clarkson, she would be more than aware). It is also important to examine the historical texts for their influence on the adaptation of *Mansfield Park* put forth by Patricia Rozema in 1999. Ultimately, it appears that the prominent, radical readings of Austen have framed the debate on the issue of slavery, leaving little room for any actual critique of these more prominent readings from a postcolonial perspective.
CHAPTER II: HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF MANSFIELD PARK

As put forth by the critical tradition outlined in Chapter I, the historical context of Mansfield Park has become an intrinsic part of contemporary readings of the novel. Had Fleishman not made a significant move towards the context, and had Said not proposed a postcolonial critique of the novel based on the assumed context, much of the accepted critical tradition of Mansfield Park would be non-existent. It has gone without much acknowledgement in the field of work on Mansfield Park that the historical context should be analyzed in any reading. There are, however, a great deal of limitations, oversights, generalizations, and conflations that have occurred with more of the pro-abolition readings of Austen’s position within Mansfield Park. It is thus necessary to examine both the critical tradition that utilizes the context of the novel and the historical context of the novel itself to garner a better understanding of a more complex, complicated, and difficult reading of Mansfield Park. This analysis of the context will also lend itself towards a more in-depth, critical analysis of the film. I want to analyze the film by taking into consideration the critical tradition of the novel, the historical context on which most of the criticism has been laid, and parts of the criticism which have neglected to analyze the historical context carefully.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, many of the readings of a more radical Austen combat Said’s reading of a more complicit, conservative Austen who distances herself from abolition movements and sentiments. Perkins and Steffes used some of Austen’s personal letters to highlight her pleasure with Clarkson’s works, using this reference as a way to combat readings that implicate Austen as complicit or complacent with the slave trade and imperialism. While the radical scholars tend to utilize the historical context mostly to combat Said (and those like him), not many go as far as Gabrielle D. V. White. In White’s book Jane Austen in the Context
of Abolition: ‘a fling at the slave trade’, Said’s reading is approached in terms of dismissal; his reading, stated by Fraiman and echoed by White, displays his lack of sensitivity and focus on the novel due to his mistake of referring to Maria Bertram as Lydia (Fraiman, qtd. in White 4). This oversight is what prompts most radical scholars to scour through historical contexts and prove, to whatever necessary extent, that Austen was aware, involved, and sometimes critical of the events occurring during her time (as if her novels themselves were not indicators). White goes further in her assertion, combating Said’s statement that we should not expect Austen to approach slavery with the “passion of an abolitionist”: “Jane Austen grew up in the time of massive mobilization of popular support for abolition, when ‘the passion of an abolitionist’ became widespread” (5). The inclusion of Antigua and the issue of slavery in *Mansfield Park*, albeit briefly and sparingly, makes the novel subversive because we are forced to include and address one of the more controversial topics of Austen’s time with our readings (White 5). Starting with this assertion, as well as other assertions made by White and other scholars, I would like to take a look at the historical context, address some areas of concern which lack clarity or contain contradictions with the critical tradition of *Mansfield Park*, and reposition the historical context in an area of discursive value. This, hopefully, will both show the danger in utilizing historical and biographical texts as an objective point of analysis and begin the critical analysis of Rozema’s *Mansfield Park*.

**History as an Objective Narrative**

The basic assumption that most radical scholars of Austen and *Mansfield Park* make concerning biographical texts and contemporary historical texts is one of objectivity. Because the letters to her sisters are Austen’s own words, they most clearly show her intent and support of certain attitudes; because Austen enjoyed Clarkson, one can (and should) obviously infer that she
had abolitionist sympathies, if not abolitionist philosophies herself. As mentioned earlier, this inference is what drives the main arguments of Perkins, Steffes, Malone, and especially White. Why else would Austen like the works of Clarkson if she did not sympathize with his sentiments? What purpose is there in her mention of his works, if not for the purpose of exhorting her own feelings on the topic of Clarkson’s work? The answer to these questions is not as cut and dried as most would suppose or think. Even if it were clear that Austen was an abolitionist or had anti-slavery sentiments, the notion that her own words defy any opposing criticism of her work runs dangerously close to a mode of silencing. Examining authorial intent or the author’s own opinions on particular topics within their work is not irrelevant or impertinent work. However, the use of such research to refute any critical reading of the author’s supposed opinions and positions is more akin to protectionism than criticism.

Let me start by further outlining White’s position, as she is the most critical and avid in utilizing Austen’s historical context to prove Said’s reading as short sighted and ineffective. The issues of absenteeism are at the core of White’s reading of Mansfield Park, where she suggests that the problems at Mansfield Park are brought on by the absenteeism of Sir Thomas. “The usual case of the absentee planter is turned on its head so that the father is absent from his family,” which White attributes to the unfolding of events that are directly caused by the character’s actions at Mansfield while he is away (23). During his time away, Maria becomes engaged to Mr. Rushworth “with a due reference to the absent Sir Thomas” (Austen 38), Tom Bertram and his friend Mr. Yates convince the family to put on the play Lover’s Vows, and Maria also attempts to seduce Henry Crawford (and he tries in return). It is particularly this absence of a moral center that White asserts was Austen’s point in creating an absentee father in Sir Thomas, which also parallels Said’s assertion that Mansfield is supposed to act as a moral
center for the characters. His absenteeism from Mansfield Park, if anything, reflects the kind of
decay in morality that, reasonably, would occur in his Antigua plantation. This is not an issue
of dispute amongst scholars; however, the assumption of moral decline is one that is often
conflated via a parallel analysis of Mansfield Park and Antigua instead of being researched in
terms of context. In other words, the (assumed) decline in Antigua is seen as a moral decline
instead of a decline economically, which would have been the case if Sir Thomas was attending
to his plantation in order to deal with the recent abolition of the slave trade.

White does explore the letter in which Austen references Clarkson much more in depth.
As she notes, the letter covers abolition, money, writing, and other issues, but that “it is
impossible to guess what led Austen to enthuse about them all [the authors and works she
describes, Clarkson among them]” (147). It is perhaps this particular attitude or analysis which
often makes the use of biographical, historical contexts problematic. They are utilized to uphold
Austen as an abolitionist in an objective sense; however, there is still skepticism as to what
extent Austen’s actual words mean and where her political sympathies actually lie. White even
outlines some other possibilities for Austen’s “approval” of Clarkson: “Much of the content of
what they [Clarkson et al.] might have been conducive to her approval. She may also have been
excited by their outstanding qualities as writers of English prose and as a professional writer
keen to appraise them” (147). Why, then, is her approval so quickly linked to abolitionist
sentiments if these other scenarios are very real possibilities? Is there not also a possibility that
Austen is being ironic (since, as White and many other readers claim, her wit and irony run
rampant in all her writing, including her letters)? It is perhaps this easy dismissal and heavy
focus on possible abolitionist sentiments that really alienates other readings of Mansfield Park
and Jane Austen. It would do us all a better service to look at some of these historical texts –
notably Clarkson – and, even if Austen sympathized with their sentiments, examine to what extent those sentiments were at all “radical” (by our standards or Austen’s contemporary standards). Essentially, the use of such texts as proof Austen was aware of the abolition debate and/or had sympathies one way or another posits that history is an objective, unquestionable narrative, dismissing the possibility that Austen herself might have been critiquing or commenting on the debate via *Mansfield Park*.

*Austen and Clarkson: Abolition and Imperial Complicity*

There is, I would like to argue, a fallacy at place when assuming that Clarkson (and thus Austen) were radical in their abolitionist sympathies. By radical, I speak mostly by our standards; they were certainly radical by standards of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. However, both were by and large not radical in the sense we understand today. Both were very much implicated in empire, the reach of imperialism, and colonization.

In his historical text “The Abolition of the Slave Trade in England”, Dale Porter outlines some historical facts about the slave trade, all of which were factors in arguments against and in defense of the slave trade. The first point he establishes concerns the prevalence of the trade itself: “The greater part of the British slave trade was concentrated in the hands of a few large Liverpool firms whose connections with the West Indian economy were neither direct nor extensive” (15). What Porter has established is that while the slave trade had an impact on England and was clearly funded and operated (indirectly) by businesses in England, the actual number of people and businesses who were heavily involved was, in fact, low. Most of the actual ships themselves, Porter notes, only managed to pass through Bristol and Liverpool. As horrible as the slave trade was, it is problematic to assume that it was pervasive in England; it seems that was concentrated in only a few places and among a few businesses that did not have
direct connections to the West Indies and Antigua. This in no way endorses or condones the practice itself; what Porter (and myself) are asserting is that the trade was a concentrated practice that was seen mostly as a business practice. In fact, in his second point, Porter says that “the primary markets for the British-carried slaves were the non-British colonies of the Caribbean” (15). It seems, then, that a move for abolition (or amelioration) of the slave trade could have had some roots in protecting the empire. If the slave trade is not benefiting England or English colonies, why should it persist?

Porter also notes that the British slave trade was under duress at the time. The following are his final four points, all concerning the financial/economical realities for the slave trade in England:

(3) British merchants were facing increased competition from foreigners, chiefly the French, in the slave trade to the non-British colonies.…(4) Living and working conditions in the West Indies made necessary a constant importation of new slaves to keep up the labor force, compensate for soil depletion, and clear new land for cultivation.…(5) Increasing costs, financial imprudence, and the recurring need to purchase slaves had reduced plantation profits and had thrown West Indian proprietors deeply into debt to their factors in England.…(6) A considerable number of people in Great Britain were directly or indirectly dependent for their living on the West Indian enterprises, whose continued success was believed to depend the supply of African slaves (Porter 15).

The first of these four remaining points ties more directly to the point concerning the bulk of slave ships carrying slaves to non-British colonies. England was competing with these colonies for their goods that, as the last point mentions, most people in England were “directly or indirectly dependent for their living” (15). To lose these sources of goods like sugar, rum, tobacco, and tea would have been devastating to England’s economy at the time. Therefore, unbeknownst to most of the English population, their livelihood depended on the enterprises in places like the Antigua plantation in *Mansfield Park*. This is also the point Said was making when he said that Austen was implying that sustenance at home meant colonies abroad.
Points four and five also hint at the economic failures of the enterprise at the time, which concerned some abolitionists who were not as into universal human rights or debates of Christian morality and law like Clarkson himself was. In fact, as Porter details later on the actual success of the abolition movement in Parliament, “the terms of the debate in England were set not by abolitionists but by their opponents, chiefly West Indian planters” (140). The West Indian planters were far more influential in the debate than Clarkson himself alluded to; the planters were heavily influential in government and public policy for the half century during and after abolition (Porter 16). Some West Indian planters even served as directors on the board of the Bank of England, with three having served as governor of the Bank of England as well (Porter 21-22). Because of their influence and positions in English society, they “…considered themselves, and were considered, highly respectable” (Porter 29). The influence of these planters cannot be ignored, and it is perhaps their influence that makes the abolition debate much more problematic than a simple question of morals noted by Clarkson in An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species (hereafter referred to as Essay).

In Essay, Clarkson states that the issue of slavery “is a matter of much importance, as the dignity of humankind is concerned, and the rights and liberties of mankind will be involved in its discussion” (2). While Clarkson was right about the “rights and liberties of mankind” being involved in the discussion, it was only himself and his friend William Wilberforce, a Parliament member, who brought such arguments to the debate. As Porter notes, Wilberforce’s argument that slavery was a “national sin” was not one that was accepted by a majority of Parliament during the debate (140). The only concern with morality that defenders of the slave trade had was early in the debate and hardly came to any fruition. The “Reverend Raymond Harris,” as outlined by Porter, had written an essay in response to Clarkson, stating that “whatever practices
were mentioned in the Bible without condemnation were sanctioned by God for all time” (33). However, most of the Evangelical and Methodist opponents of slavery had constructed extensive sermons and arguments against Harris; recognizing this, most of the planters and Parliament members with slave trade interests realized they could not win the abolition debate unless they avoided moral arguments or arguments concerning natural law (Porter 33). When Parliament did eventually pass the abolition bill in 1807, it became clear that the debate was concerned not with the moral arguments pursued by Clarkson.

The central issue in Parliament’s long discussion of the slave trade was whether its abolition could be achieved without seriously damaging British West Indian agriculture and commerce. That issue was complicated by the willingness of other European colonial powers to monopolize the slave trade for the development of their own tropical possessions (Porter 140).

Despite the moral argument presented by Clarkson via Wilberforce, Parliament was still heavily concerned and anxious about the effects abolition would have on the empire abroad. In fact, both parties in the debate on abolition “acknowledged that the slave trade was made necessary by the high rate of mortality among slaves in the West Indies,” but had only enough concern for the amelioration of their conditions under slavery so long as the “security of the white population” was intact (Porter 140).

Clarkson himself had fairly Eurocentric motives behind the abolition of the slave trade as well. In Essay, Clarkson delineates the history of slavery – both “involuntary and voluntary” – and focuses on the emergence of the commerce of slaves in his modern time (3). Through his historical assessment, Clarkson explains that Christianity is the reason for the disappearance or amelioration of the trade as civilizations advanced past the “barbarous” practice of slavery; Clarkson also references the story of Joseph from the Bible as the “first market that is recorded, for the sale of the human species” (17). As he compares the history of Greece and Egypt to the
history of Christianity, Clarkson explains that the abolition of slavery and commerce “were the necessary consequences of the feudal system,” but that the more logical reason for their abolition “were the natural effects of Christianity” (19). He furthers his own argument by saying that, in reference to the Crusades and the necessity of slavery for states like Greece to exist, “we have a positive proof, that the feudal system had no share in the honour [sic] of suppressing slavery, but that Christianity was the only cause” (20). While he bases most of his analysis of the history of slavery on the history which had been documented at the time, Clarkson exposes the imperialist mindset behind the Christian history of abolition he ardently supports:

Those, who would have otherwise had no hopes, but that their miseries would be terminated by death, were then freed from their servile condition; those, who, by the laws of war, would have had otherwise and immediate prospect of servitude from the hands of their imperious conquerors, were then exchanged; a custom, which has happily descended to the present day. Thus, “a numerous class of men, who formerly had no political existence, and were employed merely as instruments of labor, became useful citizens, and contributed towards augmenting the force or riches of the society, which adopted them as members;” and thus did the greater part of the Europeans, by their conduct on this occasion, assert not only liberty for themselves, but for their fellow-creatures (Clarkson 20-21).

While this passage outlines the abolition of slavery as a moral quest, the underlying imperialist and colonial attitude is present. The concept that Christianity had “assert[ed] liberty” for the enslaved implies that they, as human beings, were not worthy of liberty until Christianity had “[begun] to produce their effects, as the different nations were converted.” It seems that Clarkson is making more of an argument against secularism than he is for the necessity of Christianity to abolish slavery. After all, it was in the Bible itself that Clarkson had mentioned the first market of commerce for the human species. It seems here that Clarkson has exposed the underlying mindset of colonization and imperialism; even if slavery is abhorrent, it is only through the conquest and spread of Christianity that it has become abolished. This becomes much clearer during the Sierra Leone project he helped fund and run before and after the
abolition bill passed in 1807. Concern with the abolition of slavery, then, is not congruent to stopping the expansion of empire.

The treatment of Austen’s historical context treats the more amiable texts and biographical content as an “objective” look on Austen’s sympathies and philosophy. This has also been argued because of her mention of slavery and abolition in *Emma* and *Persuasion*. The problem comes from separating Austen the author from Austen the person; often, one is conflated as the other based on historical context (or in spite of it). As scholars like Steffes, Malone, Perkins, and White forcefully argue for a radical, abolitionist Austen by utilizing her approval of Clarkson (and, subsequently, Clarkson’s *Essay*), there is little questioning of the construction of such biographical and historical contexts. As Porter argues, “because abolition has usually been viewed as a moral question, its historians have overlooked difficulties in politics and parliamentary procedure which might have affected its progress” (69). This can also be said of Clarkson, who himself historicized the abolition movement in *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament* (1808). His texts on slavery are the ones that have been closely associated with the abolition of slavery, as well as works by Coleridge (“A Lecture on the Slave Trade”, 1795) and Carl Wadstrom’s *Essay on Colonization* (1794). In “Conspicuous Consumption: White Abolitionism and English Women’s Protest Writing of the 1790s,” Deirdre Coleman looks at both of these texts, as well as Clarkson’s *Essay* in conjunction with the public opinion of abolition at the time. Concerning all three, she states that during the 1790s, “abolitionism had begun to lose respectability, and in some quarters, was even considered Jacobinism” (342). This adds to Porter’s assessment that Parliament was not as concerned with the moral arguments of abolition. Parliament may not have been terribly involved with morality prior to abolition, having been caught-up in the
uncertainty of West Indian plantations should abolition take effect. In fact, as Coleman points out, all three texts still support the practice of colonizing Africa as “not only practicable, but, in a commercial view, highly prudent and adviseable [sic]” (346; also qtd. Wadstrom, EC iii).

Despite the fight for abolition that Clarkson partook in, he had also helped fund and set up a colony in Sierra Leone with his brother and several other abolitionists (Griggs 95). As Coleman elaborates, “the disastrous Sierra Leone scheme, drawn up by leading abolitionists like Granville Sharp and Clarkson in the mid to late 1780s, was clearly designed to rid London of its surplus blacks” (357). Although the Sierra Leone project was intended as a relief effort, it included “enforced transportation” for blacks determined to be slaves or former slaves (Coleman 358). Since, as Griggs points out, the scheme existed after the abolition of the slave trade, it is safe to say that Coleman’s elaboration on the abolitionists’ attitudes is damning of their intentions: “…there seems to be no doubt that fear of interracial sex was one of the prime motives. Jonas Hanway, philanthropist, abolitionist, and chief mover of the new settlement, was known for his intense dislike of ‘unnatural connections between black persons and white; the disagreeable consequences of which make their appearances but too frequently in our streets’” (358). While Clarkson may have been a friend to the slaves in his arguments, as Griggs suggests, it is clear that he supported less than friendly (and overtly racist and imperialist) actions before and after abolition in 1807.

Considering both abolitionist and anti-abolitionists in Parliament were more for the amelioration of conditions that did not threaten the white population, it is safe to assume that Clarkson, by funding and approving of the Sierra Leone project, was also very implicated in the racial hierarchy present in England and England’s colonies abroad. How, then - considering Clarkson’s precarious and privileged position as an intellect debating the slave trade at home in
England – does Austen’s approval of Clarkson make her a staunch abolitionist? Would she have really had the “passion of an abolitionist,” as doubted by Said but reinforced by White?

Considering the evidence, it is problematic to consider Austen and/or Mansfield Park to be anything like the arguments presented by Clarkson. There is a real danger in using Clarkson as a beacon of moral arguments against abolition since some of his actions and associations before and after abolition reinforced imperialist and racial hierarchies present during the slave trade. As well, conflating his texts or Austen’s biographical texts (wherein she “approves” of Clarkson) as objective historical accounts of abolition sentiments undermines the complex politics and procedures that occurred to pass the abolition bill. As Porter stated, historical accounts of abolition often focus too much on the moral argument that Parliament had ultimately ignored in the final debate over the issue. Thus, the conflation of Austen and Clarkson as likeminded abolitionists is precariously short-sighted; it seems to act more like a shortcut to a critique of Said and less favorable analyses of Austen and Mansfield Park than it acts as an actual, historical contextualization of the text and the author. These problems are evident in Patricia Rozema’s adaptation of the novel in her 1999 film Mansfield Park.

*Reaction to the Film and the Use of History*

When Rozema’s 1999 adaptation of Mansfield Park came out, some reviews and reactions were either ambivalent or heavily critical of the film’s use of history and context to present a particular interpretation of the novel. Keith Windschuttle, reviewing the film in his article “Rewriting the History of the British Empire,” talks at length about the historical context utilized by Rozema throughout the film. He makes reference of an opening scene, which “is not in the book,” where Fanny sees a slave ship in a harbor while being taken to Mansfield Park by carriage (1). Windschuttle goes on at length about historical inaccuracies in the film, noting this
opening scene as grossly inadequate because “a slave trader would have to be thousands of miles off course” from the Middle Passage to be anywhere near Portsmouth (1). In her article “Possessing Jane Austen: Fidelity, Authorship and Patricia Rozema’s Mansfield Park (1999)”, Mireia Aragay comments on the “censuring” done by Windschuttle in regards to the historical accuracy of the film: “[his] historical sensitivity is offended, for he claims that slavery and the ‘imperialist imperative’ are things of the past, and that it is only the ‘postcolonial literary critics and the gurus from cultural studies’ who perversely insist on the centrality of such concerns to current historical, cultural, and literary debates at large” (178). This critique of a fidelity-based criticism of the film – fidelity meaning that the film did not follow the book closely enough (or maybe at all) – is also echoed by critic Claudia Johnson, in her review titled “Run Mad, but Do Not Faint.” Johnson states that this break from the “fidelity” of the novel caused many “Janeites…[to take] umbrage at Rozema's deviations” (2). It appears that the lack of closeness to the novel is exactly what caused uproar in many negative reviews of the film. However, as Johnson notes, that early scene in the film, followed by another later on where Fanny discovers drawings of slaves being beaten and raped, was inserted by Rozema’s insistence on “drawing on Austen's attachment to abolitionist writers” (3).

Surely Rozema’s vision of history, as it concerns Mansfield Park, is in line with the radical side of the critical tradition of the novel Mansfield Park. In an interview completed in March 2003, Hiba Moussa, in her article “Mansfield Park and Film: An Interview with Patricia Rozema,” outlines Rozema’s intention upon using historical circumstances and biographical texts to add to her adaptation of Mansfield Park. When asked about socio-historical circumstances which affect her reading of the novel, Rozema replied that,

They affect me very much. In fact, that is what I added to Mansfield Park, the movie. I felt like we couldn’t fully understand Austen’s subtle statement about captivity if we
didn’t know the issue of slavery was raging in every home in Britain at the time. And I felt morally obligated to explain that the extraordinary amount of leisure time these people enjoyed was purchased with the sweat and blood of slaves in the West Indies (255).

Being aware of the history influencing Austen’s novel, Rozema also admits to having read Said’s “Jane Austen and Empire,” but argues that “I don’t think, however, that Austen was as unaware of her imperialism as he suggests” (Moussa 258). Rozema researched a lot of the same texts and history that has influenced much of the recent critical tradition of the novel, as mentioned in Chapter I. The opening credits of the film even state that Rozema based the film on Mansfield Park and some of Austen’s early journals and writings. James Berardinelli, in his review of Mansfield Park, stated as much himself: “For the record, the director made an intensive study of Austen before writing the screenplay, and, as is stated in the opening credits, she uses excerpts from Austen's journals and early writings in the script (they are the text of Fanny's letters and stories)” (1). It is the use of these writings, according to Moussa, Berardinelli, and Rozema herself, that allow the audience to experience the novel “[in] a form that is more accessible, yet still faithful to Austen's themes, ideas, and basic storyline” (Berardinelli 1).

While the adaptive methodology of Rozema may have warranted the use of the historical and biographical texts surrounding Mansfield Park, it is clear from her own words (as well as reviews critical of fidelity criticism of the film) that the radical side of the critical tradition has been utilized and represented. This is a result of an examination of the historical and biographical texts which lends itself to the “new” version of Austen outlined by Johnson:

Besides, there has always been another, less conspicuous, vision of Austen and her work. This other Austen is seen as alienated from the world that prettifies her, an Austen whom D. W. Harding celebrated for her "regulated hatred" and for her refusal to help "make her society what it was, or ours what it is". The iconoclastic Austen could disarm Twain in an instant, and is beloved not for the primness, propriety, or romantic conventionality imputed to her, but for the energy of her satire, for the irreverence and, to some, even the bitchiness of her wit, for the trenchant nature of her social criticism, and the complexity
of her characters' passions - passions sharpened by intelligence and intensified by good manners (1-2).

This is also the same vision of Austen that Rozema tries to personify in *Mansfield Park*, as written by Barbara Kantrowitz in her article “Making an Austen Heroine More Like Austen”:

“Ms. Rozema believes the popular image of Austen -- a prim spinster writing witty repartee between teas -- is a distortion. ‘If you met her as a teen-ager, you would have typed her as a revolutionary by nature,’ she says. ‘She had an almost surrealist bent at the beginning’” (2). The evidence is overwhelming and indicative of the direction of the discourse on the novel itself: that the radical side of the critical tradition of *Mansfield Park* has prevailed. Rozema has supplanted the meeker and milder Austen (who should not be challenged nor criticized) with a wittier, stronger, more satirical Austen who is heavily involved in political discourse, socially adept, culturally aware, alert, and critical (but who should also not be challenged nor criticized, nor should any criticism/critic in support of this “new” Austen). This is not to make an argument to regress to a more conservative reading of Austen; by no means whatsoever do I want to return to superficial, trite jabs at Fanny’s meek nature. I would rather suggest we use the criticism levied against the critical tradition in Chapter I and the criticism laid in this Chapter of the historical and biographical context to move towards a more holistic, dialogic critique of Rozema’s *Mansfield Park*. Hopefully, by shifting focus to the film, adaptation theory, and other various analyses of Rozema’s *Mansfield Park* and film theory alike, we can garner a more critical understanding of the discourse on *Mansfield Park* as it stands today. Perhaps doing so would move the discussion into a much more progressive area of discourse. This way, we might avoid privileging particular “versions” of Austen over any critical analysis of *Mansfield Park*, her biographical texts, or the historical context which has permeated the recent criticism.
Positive reviews of Rozema’s *Mansfield Park* cite her use of historical context to update and add to the novel as a big reason for the success of the film. In his review titled “Spicing Austen’s 1806 with Dashes of 1999,” Stephen Holden remarks that “where the novel alludes to the slave trading business of Sir Thomas Bertram (Harold Pinter), the pompous authoritarian who owns the estate called Mansfield Park, the movie rubs our faces in his dirty business” (E1). Here, he is referring to the inclusion of the opening scene (mentioned by Windschuttle) and some later scenes which include dialogue and images not seen in the novel. These particular additions (explored later on) have become the focal point of a large conflict over the film *Mansfield Park*. The dispute over these added scenes has also begun to spill over into discourse on the novel *Mansfield Park* and the field of film/adaptation theory. As with the critical tradition of the novel explored in Chapter I and the re-evaluation of historical context in Chapter II, this chapter will heavily invest itself in re-evaluating the criticism of the film and how we, as scholars, might rethink the discourse of *Mansfield Park* as a whole. To start off, I want to look at how space functions in the novel and the film; there appears to be an equal amount of attention paid by Rozema and some literary critics to how space is supposed to function in the text and what, exactly, the space is trying to represent in terms of meaning. I would then like to take a more focused look at the film and how its own critical tradition has paralleled that of the novel and what this means in terms of the overall critical tradition of *Mansfield Park*.

**The Space of Mansfield Park: The Novel and the Film**

To help bridge the gap between the criticism of the novel and the film, I would like to look at an area of critical concern in which both are invested: the physical space of Mansfield Park. With regards to the novel, there is a fairly rich critical tradition that has examined the
particular setting of Mansfield Park and how Austen utilized the setting to evoke particular readings from her audience. The large, wealthy estate owned by Sir Thomas is seen as a motivator for the marriage of Sir Thomas to Miss Maria Ward – Lady Bertram – and also as a means of social mobility:

Miss Maria Ward, of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the country of Northampton, and to thereby be raised to the rank of a baronet’s lady, with all the comforts and consequences of a[n] handsome house and large income (MP 5).

From the onset of the novel, the issue of social mobility, wealth, and class are fore grounded. These three issues become inextricably linked with the setting of Mansfield Park. The estate encompasses a vast park, a parsonage (wherein the Norris’s live), and the mansion. The nearby estate Sotherton, owned by Mr. Rushworth, acts as an extension of Mansfield Park, as does Thornton Lacey. Both these neighboring estates are discussed by the characters, particularly the Crawfords and Mr. Rushworth, as objects of material wealth to be manipulated to show “a man of education, taste, modern manners, good connections” (MP 225). The previous citation was in conversation with Edmund over Thornton Lacey as his future estate, but the ideology still stands – space is meant to be manipulated to reflect class, wealth, and other social standings. As P. Keiko Kagawa states in her article “Jane Austen, the Architect: (Re)Building Spaces at Mansfield Park,” “changing the physical landscape will change the social landscape of its inhabitants” (131). Thus, such radical changes as removing an entire field of farmland from Thornton Lacey or chopping down an avenue of trees at Sotherton are superficial attempts to reconfigure the social position of the estate owners by simply altering physical space. Alterations of physical space, in order to reflect attributes such as education, good taste, or modern manners, serve only to falsify such attributes in the person; no actual change is enacted within the person.
When Fanny arrives at Mansfield Park, she is immediately appropriated into this hierarchy. Sir Thomas gives Mrs. Norris orders on how to raise Fanny, on “how to preserve the minds of my daughters the consciousness of what they are, without making them think too lowly of their cousin; and how…to make her remember she is not a Miss Bertram…they cannot be equals. Their rank, fortune, rights, and expectations, will always be different” (MP 12). Fanny is to be put at the bottom of the order, but interestingly enough is placed, spatially, at the top of the house. Mrs. Norris decides that Fanny should “put [Fanny] in the little white Attic…it will be much the best place for her, so near Miss Lee, and not far from the girls, and close by the housemaids” (MP 11). While much can be said of Fanny’s position between the daughters - who are at the bottom of the family structure - and the housemaids - who are at the bottom of the social structure at Mansfield Park – it’s important to note that the attic is in fact at the very top of the mansion. While she may be between the members of the bottom part of the hierarchy or in fact below them, she is paradoxically and curiously placed at the top of the household.

Another space of significance at Mansfield Park for Fanny is the East Room. This room takes on a unique place because it is one Fanny moves into on her own accord; she is not ordered into the East Room but decides to become “mistress” of it on her own terms, as explained by Kagawa:

Fanny presides as mistress of her space, able to use and experience space as self-built for her own purposes. Where the female members of the family, Lady Bertram, Julia, and Maria are mistresses of their own space in the drawing room, the East Room is Fanny’s sitting room and like her female counterparts she is ‘equally its mistress.’ More than in any other space in the house, in the East Room Fanny is free to arrange the room and choose her own pastimes unencumbered by the expectations of other family members (138).

Here Fanny creates her own personal space and manipulates the room to her liking. While Kagawa is quick to suggest Fanny as being morally astute in her taking of the East Room, it is
also problematic. As cited earlier, much is made about how changing the physical landscape is an attempt to change the moral landscape; Mr. Crawford and Mr. Rushworth find it easy to suggest radical changes to estates in an effort to reflect certain values on a surface level. When Fanny arranges the East Room into her own personal library and gives herself space for reading and writing, she very much does the same thing – the physical landscape has changed, while not radically, to change Fanny’s social landscape. We are to assume that this change on behalf of Fanny and her personal space is an empowering act – she takes over a nearby room herself, without consent or permission, and educates herself, furthering her knowledge on her own. I do not find that because we are to sympathize with Fanny as the protagonist means we are to see this taking of the East Room any differently than the changes suggested at Sotherton and Thornton Lacey. A more problematic question, then, is this: how is Fanny’s changing of a room in Mansfield Park any different than colonizers “changing” the physical landscape of a colonized nation? How is it any different than changing the landscape for an indigenous tribe? Because one involves a greater empowerment, are we to celebrate the manipulation of space? If anything, this focus on the manipulation of rooms and landscapes highlights the imperialist desire to dominate the landscape around the colonizer, physically marginalizing and altering the colonized space.

Another noteworthy change in Fanny’s living space occurs when Sir Thomas, upon announcing Mr. Crawford’s marriage proposal to Fanny, notices that she does not have a fire in the East Room. “I am not cold, sir,” she replies; “But, you have a fire in general?” asks Sir Thomas (MP 288). Upon learning that Fanny was not allowed a fire by Mrs. Norris, we see Sir Thomas show some signs of discontent with the way Fanny has been treated. He assures her she will have a fire from now on, regardless of her aunt’s wishes, which he regards as “being carried
“too far” in Mrs. Norris’s treatment of Fanny (MP 289). This is one of the few times where Fanny’s situation is upgraded or improved upon by another member of the Mansfield Park household. At the same instance her situation is improved upon, she rejects a marriage proposal to Mr. Crawford, which would have, in terms of wealth and social standing, improved her “space” greatly. She rejects the offer of matrimony via patriarchy, but accepts the tender offer of fire and warmth from the patriarch of her current establishment. Melissa Edmundson, in her article “A Space for Fanny: The Significance of Her Rooms in Mansfield Park,” claims that “…the attic show’s Fanny’s distance from the Bertrams when she first arrives at the house, but the East Room has more to do with unity than with separation” (3). If we see her stay in the East Room as some form of independence in space and thought, then we must see her acceptance of Sir Thomas’s request for a fire as her complicity with the very structure Kagawa and other academics claim she rebels against. She is indeed unified with the rest of the household as she moves further down the house from the attic, closer to “any thing unpleasant below” (MP 140).

In the film, we see the space of Mansfield Park represented as dark, deteriorating, and tied to what Johnson sees as the moral decline of the characters, most notably Sir Thomas and his daughters: “Filmed at Kirby Hall, which is not inhabited, the country house in Mansfield Park, by contrast, is shot mostly in cream and yellow tones, and it looks cold, at times scarcely furnished, and in disrepair, corrupted by the moral crime on which it subsists and on which account it cannot thrive” (3). The differences between the spaces in the novel and the spaces in the film have to do with the shift in focus from the themes of the novel (which are plenty) to the themes of the film (which is slavery). Sue Parrill, in her book Jane Austen on Film and Television: A Critical Study of the Adaptations, quotes Rozema on the DVD Commentary as seeing slavery and the brutalization of slaves as the main issue within the text, so she
incorporated specific scenes to emphasize her particular reading (102). This particular interpretation foregrounds the issue of slavery in several ways. First, the viewer is presented with several images of the slave trade and the brutalization of slaves. In the beginning of the film, Fanny is being taken from her home in Portsmouth to Mansfield Park. Along the way, the carriage stops; Fanny sees a ship in the harbor. “Black cargo,” says the coachman. Within the first few minutes of the film, the viewer is already presented with a powerful image of slavery; interestingly enough, this particular gaze and exchange is nowhere to be found in the novel *MP*. However, since this is a reinterpretation, one can see how this added scene lends itself to a particular reading of Austen. Radical scholars tend to see Fanny Price as being equated with a slave: she is torn from her home and taken to a foreign place where she is living at the bottom of the hierarchal structure. This scene, then, places Fanny in the context of the slave trade. We see this re-emphasized later on when Fanny gazes into the harbor again upon being returned to Portsmouth as punishment for refusing Mr. Crawford’s marriage proposal. While there is no slave ship, the same song Fanny heard from the slave ship is heard briefly by the audience. Taking a closer look at the film, film theory, theories of adaptation, and interviews with Rozema, there is a trend in this “interpretation” of *Mansfield Park* that mirrors the critical tradition of the novel.

*The Film: Fidelity, Adaptation, and Interpretation*

As mentioned earlier, several critics who reviewed *Mansfield Park* upon its release in 1999 – Berardinelli, Kantrowitz, Johnson, Aragay, and Windschuttle – mentioned that there would be (and is) an uproar amongst Jane Austen purists who, as Berardinelli states, see “a strict, slavish adherence to the text [as] the only way to film a novel” (“Review of Mansfield Park”). Windschuttle is one such critic who, as delineated earlier, saw the inclusion of slavery as a main
theme in Rozema’s *Mansfield Park* as missing the “quintessential” meaning of the novel (3). However, as mentioned by Fleishman, the question of what Sir Thomas is doing in Antigua is a part of the novel that was not (during his time) being paid much attention. To cast off the topic of slavery or any postcolonial reading of *Mansfield Park* as not “quintessential” to the overall meaning of the novel is, usually, what prompts the more radical readings done by Perkins, Steffes, and White; such conservative backlash reactions to Rozema’s film also reinforce the need to ask ourselves how much fidelity – the ability to stay true to source material – actually plays a role (or should play a role) when adapting a film.

In her book *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon points out some relevant and surprising facts considering adaptations of literature into film: “…why then are [adaptations] so omnipresent in our culture and, indeed, increasing steadily in numbers? Why, even according to 1992 statistics, are 85 percent of all Oscar-winning Best Pictures adaptations? Why do adaptations make up 95 percent of all the miniseries and 70 percent of all the TV movies of the week that win Emmy Awards” (4)? It seems that if fidelity criticism held enough influence, some of the most prestigious and honored works since the beginning of television and film would not be adaptations of other texts. As Hutcheon explains in regards to fidelity criticism, it is no the proximity to the source material that should be a criterion to judge an adaptation; in fact, one should critique the adaptation *as an adaptation*, rather than representative of an entirely different work in a different medium altogether (6). In another work with biologist Gary Bartolotti, titled “On the Origin of Adaptations: Rethinking Fidelity Discourse and ‘Success’ – Biologically,” Hutcheon explores the field of adaptation and literary study to examine what she finds as critical discourse “stubbornly rooted in often unexamined values and practices” (443). She compares contemporary debates in literature and adaptation studies with the work of
Shakespeare, whom she asserts “we did not begrudge...[for] his creative borrowing” when he “transferred his culture’s narratives from page to stage and made them available to a whole new audience” (444). “How useful,” she asks, “is this kind of reductive judgmental discourse in determining either the artistic significance of a work or its cultural impact or even its vitality” (444)? In regards to Rozema and *Mansfield Park*, this question is more than relevant; it is absolutely intrinsic to the discourse at hand.

Regarding *Mansfield Park* (the film) specifically, Hutcheon offers this assessment of its function as an adaptation: “Some adaptations tackle the politics of empire from a decidedly postcolonial perspective, thereby changing the context of the adapted work considerably. Patricia Rozema’s 1999 film adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814) adds both a feminist and postcolonial critique of slavery” (152). What Hutcheon also acknowledges here is the critical tradition of the novel, which has circled around postcolonial readings of the novel concerning the topic of slavery. Ever since Fleishman asked about the role Sir Thomas plays in Antigua, critics have been debating the role of slavery in the novel and critical tradition: is it the focal point of the novel? Or is it, as Litz suggested, just to be taken as part of an “organic whole”? When it comes to the film, it appears that the adaptation leans more toward representing the radical shift in readings of the novel rather than the novel itself. In his essay entitled “Adaptation and Mis-adaptation: Film, Literature, and Social Discourses,” Francesco Casetti finds a certain trend common in Austen adaptations, though looking specifically at Ang Lee and Emma Thompson’s adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility* in 1995:

…if the question we pose is not so much what changes in thematic and formal terms between Jane Austen’s novel and the film, but rather the change in terms of communicative situations that the two texts construct and operate within, then the answer is that, while the novel appears referencing primarily life-world, the film employs the same plot to explore the possibility of constructing a melodrama in the postmodern era (85).
What Casetti points out in regards to *Sense and Sensibility* in this passage is not untrue for Rozema’s *Mansfield Park*: what we have is a film trying to recreate a plot for a postmodern audience from a long-passed time period. Because the film is also *not* a novel, certain devices are not in play, which Rozema tries to supplement by giving us Fanny-as-narrator/Austen (Johnson 2-3). This passage also falls in line with the concept of fidelity and adaptation theory presented by Hutcheon, as well as her work with Bartolotti; in a sense, adaptations of literature take on a life as a text themselves. In the case of *Mansfield Park*, that life seems to run both parallel and counter to the novel and the critical tradition of the novel.

Since Rozema herself admitted that Said’s critique of *Mansfield Park* had influenced her particular adaptation, and since the movie itself indicates it is based on the novel and some of Austen’s biographical work, the film can be analyzed, simultaneously, as both an adaptation and as symptomatic of the critical tradition of the novel. We can see where she is informed by the critical tradition in small places as well: the African American slave in a garden at Mansfield Park, and a map of Antigua strategically placed behind Sir Thomas upon his return. However, some more overt and prominent displays of slavery also indicate Rozema’s knowledge of the critical tradition of *Mansfield Park*. Getting back to the beginning scene (where Fanny leaves Portsmouth), the viewer hears a song played called “Djongna” (slavery), which “Rozema explains in her commentary on the DVD that the lyrics of the song…tell how a young African has been taken from his home” (Parrill 89). This is another addition to the text which Rozema uses to emphasize her reinterpretation of *Mansfield Park*. Clearly, we don’t get a soundtrack with the novel; music is not used to create an atmosphere like in a film. Rozema utilizes the advantages of film to create a connection between Fanny and the slaves with this song: “When this song is first heard it can easily be associated with Fanny, who, like the slaves on board the
ship, is being taken far from her home” (Parrill 89). The same song, as mentioned earlier, is heard again when Fanny looks into an empty harbor on her way back to Portsmouth. The problem with this Fanny-as-slave connection, which Malone asserts, is that Fanny is being taken away from her home and, ultimately, living with her rich uncle. The slaves on board the ship were definitely not being taken to live with their rich uncle and ultimately reap the benefits of his wealth; they were, in fact, going to work against their will for someone they’ve never met before to provide Fanny and Fanny’s uncle with the luxuries they so enjoy.

Another addition appears when Sir Thomas returns to Mansfield Park. In the novel, much like the film, all the inhabitants of Mansfield Park are surprised (or entirely shocked, if you’re Mr. Crawford). Upon discovering Maria and Henry engaging in some questionable behavior, we see Sir Thomas standing in front of a map of Antigua. The juxtaposition of this map with a less-than-pleased Sir Thomas further drives home the point that he has returned, unhappy, from his plantation in Antigua, where his slaves have probably been freed by the abolition bill. In addition to this, Rozema has a scene where Sir Thomas is discussing his recent trip to Antigua with the entire Bertram family. The discussion begins with Sir Thomas arguing that “mulattos are unable to breed within their own type.” Edmund Bertram denies this claim as utterly false, leading Sir Thomas to make a backhanded comment about how the “abolitionists are starting to make inroads.” “That is a good thing, right?” asks Fanny. Fanny then makes it a point to tell Sir Thomas she had been reading Thomas Clarkson, in an attempt to justify her sudden excitement at the mention of abolition in front of a staunch, tyrannical slave-owner. This exchange, while not in the text, is certainly informed by the critical tradition. In Rozema’s interview with Moussa, she admits to having read Said and using his essay as an influence in creating the film. Robert Stam, in the introduction to the collected works “Literature through
Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation,” also signifies the postcolonial influence on the adaptation of *Mansfield Park* – “the recent adaptation of *Mansfield Park*, by calling attention to Sir Thomas’s dependence on slavery, re-envisions the novel through the anti-colonial grid provided by Fanon, Said, and others” (16). This certainly explains her portrayal of Sir Thomas, but seems to over simplify and over estimate the actual sentiments for Clarkson Austen may (or may not) have had.

The only exchange we truly find about the slave trade in the text occurs on page 184. Fanny mentions to Edmund that she asked her uncle, Sir Thomas, about the slave trade, which was met with “dead silence” (184). This silence could mean a multitude of things: shame, guilt, ignorance, anger, reluctance, or arrogance, all of which would stem from Sir Thomas being treated as a slave owner in the one place he owns no slaves – Mansfield Park. However, we see an open and much less remorseful Sir Thomas in Rozema’s *Mansfield Park*; he unabashedly talks of the slave trade, his slaves, and takes on the role of a tyrannical plantation owner at home. The text presents us with a much more benevolent Sir Thomas, one who never speaks of his plantation in Antigua and only lashes out to regret and lament his anger later. For instance, the scene where Fanny finds Tom Bertram’s drawings does not occur in the text, nor is it implied in any manner. Fanny, in the film, comes across the book and opens it up. Much to her dismay, she finds drawings not only of slaves being beaten, hung, and raped, but finds two drawings of Sir Thomas. One picture has him beating a slave and another has him apparently forcing a slave onto him to perform a sexual act. Upon finding Fanny looking at these drawings, Sir Thomas tears them out of her hand and exclaims “My son is mad!” Parrill notes that Rozema made the film specifically for this scene. “The viewer may feel that such explicitness is unnecessary to make the point that Sir Thomas’s wealth derives from the blood of slaves,” Parrill explains in her
assessment of the scene (MP Film Book). It is this scene, though, that Rozema argues is a focal point of the film: “‘That scene,’ comments Rozema, ‘was my reason for doing the movie - or at least one of my reasons’” (Berardinelli, “Darker Side of Jane Austen”). While Rozema’s representation differs from the more benevolent Sir Thomas in the novel, her adaptation falls in line with the postcolonial sentiments acknowledged by (and also resisted by) Rozema and radical scholars within Mansfield Park’s critical tradition.

What we get, from a holistic view of the film and the theories of adaptation, is that Rozema’s Mansfield Park is, indeed, a text all its own, separate from but also parallel to the novel and its critical tradition. As Tim Watson sums up in his essay “Improvements and Reparations at Mansfield Park,” Rozema’s film “was simply the logical outcome of the revisionist historiography and literary criticism of the past twenty years or so that has placed the question of slavery at the center of discussion of early nineteenth-century British history and of Austen’s Mansfield Park in particular,” which should come as no surprise given the use of biographical and historical context outlined in Chapters I and II (53). What is left, then, is an ever bigger question – what, exactly, does this mean in terms of the overall discourse of all the texts of Mansfield Park?

Symptom of a Greater Problem

While Watson and many others see Rozema’s Mansfield Park as the logical outcome of a recent critical tradition, I find there to also be sufficient evidence to suggest that Rozema’s adaptation has also bestowed interpretive control of the novel into the hands of the radical side of the critical tradition. If we revisit some of the arguments by White, Steffes, Perry, and Perkins who argued that Austen had strong abolitionist ties and abolitionist sentiments, what we see in Rozema’s Mansfield Park is a visual fruition of their claims. Fanny directly questions and tries
to correct her slave-owning uncle on the topic of the slave trade, referencing Thomas Clarkson; visual evidence of the horrors of slavery are discovered, leading Fanny (and the viewer) to condemn the slave trade for the things it does to the enslaved. The issue of slavery is talked about and addressed in more than one instance, with Edmund even reminding Fanny that “everyone here at Mansfield benefits from the slave trade - even you, Fanny”; Tom, the heir, also makes an overt reference to slavery upon his return from Antigua: “Ah, Antigua and all the lovely people there paying for this party.” While issues of fidelity stall any real critique of Rozema’s film, visiting the novel will make clear the intention of Rozema’s adaptation of the novel: to insert the criticism which has made so much of the issue of slavery, once absent from any discourse on the novel. For that, we can appreciate her adaptation.

However, as I suggested, the adaptation itself has essentially made the more radical critical tradition of the novel the acceptable, mainstream interpretation of her work. It has been left untouched, with virtually no critics outside of hard-line conservative critics like Windschuttle and, at first, Litz. However, this radical reinterpretation of the novel by Rozema is aimed mostly at Said’s assertion that Austen was much more implicated in slavery and empire than at first glance. Her admission in the interview with Moussa suggests as much, but also points to a few areas where, lacking any criticism or insight into the context of the novel, she presents an impenetrable view of the novel/film. When Moussa asks about the ending of the film, Rozema replies by saying “Slavery may have been abolished but there were lots of other imperialistic shenanigans after that” (259). In a sense, Rozema is leaving the film and her interpretation open, suggesting that her portrayal of a radical Austen may not have such a simplistic nature. However, by examining the historical context and the works of Clarkson
himself, it becomes problematic to suggest that the abolishment of slavery was not part of “imperialistic shenanigans.”

What I mean by this is that, as Porter had outlined, the vote to end the slave trade by Parliament may not have happened were it not for the economic hardship facing the businesses, plantation owners, and other various investors in the slave trade. It was, in effect, a decision to prevent an economic drain on the empire. While we, in a post-slavery world, know slavery as an issue of ethics, morals, and human dignity, it is easy to identify with the sentiments laid out by Clarkson. Upon close examination, Clarkson, both in his arguments for abolition and actions after the abolition bill passed, still found colonization to be necessary in the “greater liberty” of the mis/displaced Africans. His horribly planned and much-maligned Sierra Leone project is evidence of such imperialistic “shenanigans” taken up by someone who, for all intents and purposes, we are supposed to take as being separate from the imperial business of England. It seems that the Austen we have been presented by Rozema and radical scholars, while witty, satirical, and ever critical of her society, has also been presented as somehow unhinged, uninvolved, and absolved of the imperialistic endeavors of England.

If anything, the treatment of Austen’s biographical and historical texts as objective narratives are what have purported the discourse into a battle over Austen as an author. This is an argument also presented by Aragay: “they [objections to Rozema’s film] reveal a struggle for possessions of the author, namely, of Jane Austen herself” (181). This struggle over the author is, in a way, also the underlying issue over what direction the discourse of Mansfield Park should go. Much like Fleishman and Litz pushed for a reading of Mansfield Park and Austen that could move past the superficial insults hurled at Fanny, Said called for a reading of Austen than investigated, to what extent, how much she was involved or complicit with empire. Radical
scholars have since departed from Said’s suggestion, combating the notion that Austen was involved with empire at all and asserting her abolitionist sentiments. Much like Johnson has explained in her review of the film, we have a new Austen, one who is witty, satirical, and moved away from being sentimental and concerned only with decorum and manners. However, as much as the previous Austen was seen as an entity not to be criticized or questioned, so, too, has become the fate of the “new” Austen presented by Rozema. The shoe is now on the other foot.

The presentation of this new Austen – represented by Rozema’s film – is a symptom of a much greater problem: the inability for discourse to include heavily critical and poignant readings of Mansfield Park that build off Said’s assertion that Austen may have been more implicated in empire than our postmodern sensibilities can bear. If anything, we should know better than to assume anything less given Western civilization’s history of slavery, colonialism, racism, genocide, and xenophobia. Austen, to the dismay of some, is not free from that legacy.
CONCLUSION: REACHING AN ORGANIC WHOLE – ENDING THE (MIS)APPROPRIATION OF (CON)TEXT

In 1967, Avrom Fleishman’s essay on *Mansfield Park* “realize[d] that the novel, unlike the short poem, can only with difficulty be discussed as an organic whole” (Litz 677). In the lasting critical tradition of the novel, historical context, and film of *Mansfield Park*, there seems to be less attention paid to reading as an organic whole. Instead, as pointed out by Aragay, more attention and energy is paid towards trying to “possess” Austen as an author (181). Rozema and radical scholars have dominated and controlled discourse as it pertains to Austen as an author; because of this, her text has become secondary and, in the case of the film, only utilized in name to further radical readings. This is not to say, however, that Rozema was entirely wrong in presenting the interpretation of her novel the way she did with *Mansfield Park*; it is, after all, largely symptomatic of the discourse of the novel and, as Watson pointed out, simply the logical conclusion of the discourse which influenced her. To pretend that my arguments here, or even arguments dissenting with Rozema and other radical scholars, are not informed by (and symptomatic of) the critical tradition of *Mansfield Park* is, in all honesty, foolish. Perhaps things have moved along so quickly that the “organic whole” mentioned by Litz has become unattainable. Maybe we have moved so far away from Fleishman’s call for more holistic readings of the *entire* novel that we are simply left wrestling with Austen and the issue of slavery.

Despite any sense of lost hope for readings that can move past the current debate of slavery, abolition, and Austen’s personal sentiments, I would like to argue that there is a renewed sense of opportunity with Rozema’s adaptation. As a scholar of (mostly) literature myself, I had to overcome the urge to abstain from viewing movies or any other adaptations of literature for fear of infidelity to the text. I can safely say, now, that film has given hope to stagnant
discourses by offering new mediums of presenting critical interpretations and readings of otherwise dated literature. If we look at other successful adaptations of Austen’s work – 1993’s *Pride and Prejudice*, starring Colin Firth; Ang Lee’s 1995 adaptation of *Sense & Sensibility*; *Emma* (1996) and *Clueless* (1995) – we find that they, much like Rozema’s *Mansfield Park*, have a life all their own as texts outside of the original novel. They end up being treated more as adaptations than *Mansfield Park* does, though. It seems that our sensibilities have been more offended by “infidelity” to the original text and less offended by the notion that this is the Austen we must accept and cannot criticize. It seems we have ignored a more grievous oversight than simple infidelity to an original text.

I would like to conclude by offering a new direction, based on the analysis I have provided in each chapter. Based on Chapter I, I would like to propose that, in terms of the critical tradition of the novel, that we wrest ourselves away from the tendency to position Austen in a way that favors particular readings, based on theoretical, political, or sociohistorical agendas or sympathies. While I do not condemn biographical and historical contextualization of an author or a novel, there is a particular point where the text becomes secondary to our fascination or desire to see the author or history in a way that is favorable to our personal sensibilities. Looking back at the critical tradition post-Said, there is a pervasive trend towards trying to argue against his assertion of Austen’s complicity in empire because, as I would argue, no one can bear to see Jane Austen painted in the same light as the imperialist nation in which she resides. Instead of simply combating critical readings of a highly canonized (and protected) Austen for destabilizing our collective view of her, we should be attempting to broaden the discourse so as not to “jettison” her work – namely *Mansfield Park* – into the forgotten realm of literary discourse.
One way to avoid this version of protectionism is to scrutinize the use of historical context. An exhaustive, or at least critical, look at figures like Clarkson (as done in Chapter II) would go a long way in realizing the vastly complicated history of abolition in England. Even for those who sympathized with the movement, there were still pangs of racism, xenophobia, and fears of miscegenation that prevented abolitionists from being as vindicated and liberated as their writings and works claimed. Austen herself even had an uncle who relied on profits from a plantation in Antigua. Regardless of how much she interacted or relied on this uncle for financial sustenance, her brothers made a fortune in the navy enforcing the slaved trade before abolition; after the bill passed in 1807, they soon made their living off of enforcing the abolition bill. Despite personal sentiments over abolition, Austen and her family had both direct and indirect ties to the slave trade and plantations in Antigua. Even if Austen is critical of the slave trade, her position is not as simple as scholars like Steffes, Perry, and Perkins argue it is.

However, it is that overly simplified position as the intellectual abolitionist that survives in Rozema’s *Mansfield Park*.

This nuanced view of abolition is one that is encouraged by a closer look at the novel, film, and historical context influencing both. Without a particularly critical eye towards anything Austen herself said, we run the risk of “hero worship.” Blindly accepting her sentiments as always amiable or always positive puts us on dangerous ground; doing the same with historical texts like Clarkson’s *Essay* allows the collective history of abolition to slip through our fingers. If anything, the examination of the context I have provided should make us question our assumptions when it comes to the “objectiveness” of history.

Lastly, as stated towards the end of Chapter III, it has become apparent that the arguments over whether or not Austen was an abolitionist have boiled down to an issue of
control. Who gets to decide who Austen was as a person and an author? Which particular readings and interpretations of Austen get to survive? Which readings get cast aside and blown off as irrelevant or simply unacceptable for our postmodern sensibilities? Can anyone really be critical of Austen’s supposed abolitionist sentiments today? It seems that these questions are all that is left. After so much (mis)appropriated (con)text with both the novel and the film, what is left is a need to revitalize discussion and steer it back in the direction of knowledge and constructive discourse instead of trying to assume control of the reins. If a reading offends us or contradicts our research, it is not a bastardization of the text. If a film does the same, it is not grounds for crying “infidelity” in hopes of gaining back power over the *Mansfield Park* as a novel. We, as critics, have all appropriated/misappropriated the text and context of *Mansfield Park* in order to keep control over the discourse.

*Mansfield Park* could have sunk with the early critics who were more concerned with Fanny’s failings as an Austen heroine than finding any themes in the novel. The discourse could have ended when Litz claimed that the references to Antigua were not of as much importance as Fleishman claimed. Scholars could have settled with Said’s postcolonial critique of *Mansfield Park* as an imperialist novel, complicit in the subjugation of slaves that are neither seen nor heard, acknowledged only by a “dead silence.” Academics and historians alike could have simply refuted Said and left the debate at Austen being more involved in abolition than we had first thought. Patricia Rozema could have ignored the critical tradition and gone with another typical period-piece when filming *Mansfield Park*. All of these events could have left us with something entirely different today, but they didn’t. We should not settle for the current discourse as it is if none of these groundbreaking events in the tradition of *Mansfield Park* were profound
enough to keep scholars silenced. With a look towards the past and an appreciation for the present, Rozema has presented us with a new challenge and a new opportunity.

The work in re-establishing *Mansfield Park* as a series of subjective historical narratives, complicated imperialist and colonial attitudes, and a commentary on a contemporary radical movement has begun anew. If anything, the novel has come a long way – its life as a text now encompasses a film, a rich history, and whole new fields of theory, criticism, and study. Truly, *Mansfield Park* has turned into Austen’s most complex, troubling, and critical text.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


http://www.reelviews.net/comment/111599.html


http://www.reelviews.net/movies/m/mansfield.html


Johnson, Claudia. “Run mad, but do not faint.” *Times Literary Supplement*, from *Times Online*. 31 Dec 1999. 24 April 2009. [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/incomingFeeds/article772901.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/incomingFeeds/article772901.ece)


Steffes, Michael. "Slavery and Mansfield Park: The Historical and Biographical Context."

English Language Notes 34.2 (1996): 23-41.


