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Jane Austen and Edward Said: Gender, Culture, and Imperialism

Susan Fraiman

1. "See Jane sit"

What is it about Jane Austen that makes headlines? *Mansfield Park* (1815) takes up relatively little space in the vastness of Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), yet one reviewer after another has seized on Austen's novel as emblematic of the cultural tradition Said shows to be inextricable from European colonialism.¹ Topping Michael Gorra's full-page review for the *New York Times Book Review*, for example, is the eye-catching question, "Who Paid the Bills at Mansfield Park?" Gorra goes on to highlight the discussion of Austen as "one of the best chapters" in Said's book.² Irving Howe, in the pages of *Dissent*, though denying the relevance of colonial Australia to *Great Expectations*, lingers approvingly over Said's suggestion that slavery in Antigua is the dark underbelly of *Mansfield Park*.³ Likewise John Leonard, reviewing *Culture and Imperialism* for the *Nation*, begins his analysis of Said's sequel to *Orientalism* with a striking image of Austen: "See Jane sit, in the poise and order of *Mansfield Park*,

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1. See Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. Tony Tanner (London, 1966), hereafter abbreviated *MP*; and Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993), hereafter abbreviated *C*.

2. Michael Gorra, "Who Paid the Bills at Mansfield Park?" review of *C*, in *New York Times Book Review*, 28 Feb. 1993, p. 11.

3. See Irving Howe, "History and Literature: Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*," review of *C*, in *Dissent* 40 (Fall 1993): 557–59.

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not much bothering her pretty head about the fact that this harmonious 'social space,' Sir Thomas Bertram's country estate, is sustained by slave labor on his sugar plantations in Antigua." His next paragraph renders Said on Albert Camus in similar terms, as a character in his own imperialist primer ("watch Al run away"), but by then the device has lost its sting. And while reviewers friendly to Said repeatedly cite Austen as definitive proof of his claims, hostile reviewers invoke her with even greater vehemence as the figure most implausibly tied by Said to imperialist wrongdoings.⁴

If, as Leonard implies by omission, Jane Austen is not only "pretty" but "little," why the apparently big role in Said's exposé of the canon's partnership with imperialism? For one thing, as W. J. T. Mitchell notes in his piece for the *London Review of Books*, Said himself places Austen first in his lineup of cultural suspects. He does this, I think, partly for chronological reasons, arguing that not only the venturesome *Robinson Crusoe* but also the stay-at-home novels beginning with Austen prepared the way for Kipling's and Conrad's more overt colonial thematics later in the century (see *C*, p. 75). But Mitchell suggests another explanation for the foregrounding of Austen that Gorra, Howe, and Leonard unselfconsciously reproduce: "The choice of *Mansfield Park* (and of Jane Austen) as Said's opening literary example is a way of forcing this issue [of the novel's complicity with colonialism] into the open."⁵ For it is, as Mitchell observes, because of the tacit sense precisely of Austen's "littleness," the genteel narrowness of her concerns, that word of her hand in the plundering of Antigua gets our attention. A similar logic is at work in Eve Sedgwick's notorious linkage of "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl" (1991).⁶ Juxtaposing *Sense and Sensibility's* screening of sex with

4. John Leonard, "Novel Colonies," review of *C*, in *Nation*, 22 Mar. 1993, p. 383. For negative reviews featuring Austen, see, for example, Rhoda Koenig, "Limp Lit," review of *C*, in *New York*, 1 Mar. 1993, pp. 119–20; review of *C*, in *Wilson Quarterly* 17 (Spring 1993): 86–87; and "Guilt and Misery," review of *C*, in *Economist*, 27 Feb. 1993, p. 95. For an exception, see Michael Wood, "Lost Paradises," review of *C*, in *New York Review of Books*, 3 Mar. 1994, pp. 44–47, which endorses Said's thesis while taking issue, as I do, with his reading of *Mansfield Park*.

5. W. J. T. Mitchell, "In the Wilderness," review of *C*, in *London Review of Books*, 8 Apr. 1993, p. 11.

6. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991): 818–37; rpt. in *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion across the Disciplines*, ed. James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry Harootunian (Chicago, 1994), pp. 105–24.

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nineteenth-century anti-onanist writings, Sedgwick herself, no less than the journalists who wagged their heads at it, plays upon the oxymoronic scandal of such a pairing. In spite of much revisionary work on this author, the yoking of gentle Jane to sex, subversion, or slavery still has the power to shock, registering thus the persistence of Austen's reputation for piety as well as the ongoing violence of debate between proponents of various new Austens and defenders of the old. The context for these remarks about Austen's place in Edward Said's influential book is my own investment in the woman writer that feminist critics have variously and laboriously wrested from the fray—a contradictory figure neither pretty nor little, with widely engaged interests and independent views, more self-conscious and profane than the flatly conservative figure of *Culture and Imperialism*. Said's typing of Austen is, I will finally suggest, symptomatic of a more general gender politics underlying his postcolonial project.

2. The "fully acculturated Englishman"

The cherished axiom of Austen's unworldliness is closely tied to a sense of her polite remove from the contingencies of history. It was Q. D. Leavis (1942) who first pointed out the tendency of scholars to lift Austen out of her social milieu, gallantly allowing her gorgeous sentences to float free, untainted by the routines of labor that produced them and deaf to the tumult of current events.⁷ Since Leavis, numerous efforts have been made to counter the patronizing view that Austen, in her fidelity to the local, the surface, the detail, was oblivious to large-scale struggles, to wars and mass movements of all kinds. Claudia Johnson (1988), for example, has challenged R. W. Chapman's long-standing edition of Austen for its readiness to illustrate her ballrooms and refusal to gloss her allusions to riots or slaves and has linked this writer to a tradition of frankly political novels by women.⁸ It is in keeping with such historicizing gestures that Said's *Culture and Imperialism* insists on *Mansfield Park*'s participation in its moment, pursuing the references to Caribbean slavery that Chapman pointedly ignored. Yet while arguing vigorously for the novel's active role in producing imperialist plots, Said also in effect replays the story of its author's passivity regarding issues in the public sphere. Unconcerned about Sir Thomas Bertram's colonial holdings in slaves as well as land and taking for granted their necessity to the good life at home, Said's Austen is a veritable Aunt Jane—naïve, complacent, and demurely without overt political opinion.

I will grant that Said's depiction of Austen as unthinking in her refer-

7. See Q. D. Leavis, "A Critical Theory of Jane Austen's Writings," *The Englishness of the English Novel*, in *Collected Essays*, ed. G. Singh, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1983), 1:61–146.

8. See Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago, 1988), pp. xvi–xvii.

ences to Antigua fits with his overall contention that nineteenth-century European culture, and especially the English novel, unwittingly but systematically helped to gain consent for imperialist policies (see *C*, p. 75). While defending the pleasures of many a specific text, Said agrees with critics such as D. A. Miller and Franco Moretti that the novel as a genre served conservative ends. It was, Said asserts, one of the primary discourses contributing to a “consolidated vision,” virtually uncontested, of England’s righteous imperial prerogative (*C*, p. 75). Austen is no different from Thackeray or Dickens, then, in her implicit loyalty to official Eurocentrism. At the same time, Said’s version of Austen in particular is given a boost by the readily available myth of her “feminine” nearsightedness. The advantage of beginning with Austen is, as I have said, to grab us by the collar; but I think its effect is also to ease us into his argument with a female novelist framed in reassuringly familiar ways. Sanctioned in large part by traditional scholarship, this rendering of Austen is further enabled, I would argue, by Said’s highly selective materialization of her. I mean this in two senses. First, whereas in subsequent sections *Aida* is lovingly embedded within Verdi’s corpus and *Kim* within Kipling’s, and notwithstanding Said’s claim that *Mansfield Park* “carefully defines the moral and social values informing her other novels” (*C*, p. 62), this single text is, in fact, almost completely isolated from the rest of Austen’s work. Yet had Said placed Sir Thomas Bertram, for example, in line with the deficient fathers who run unrelentingly from *Northanger Abbey* through *Persuasion*, he might perhaps have paused before assuming that Austen legitimates the master of Mansfield Park. If truth be told, Said’s attention even to his chosen text is cursory: Austen’s references to Antigua (and India) are mentioned without actually being read, though Said stresses elsewhere the importance of close, specific analysis. Maria Bertram is mistakenly referred to as “Lydia” (*C*, p. 87)—confused, presumably, with Lydia Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*. And these are just a few of the signs that *Mansfield Park*’s particular complexity—including what I see as its moral complexity—has been sacrificed here, so ready is Said to offer Austen as exhibit A in the case for culture’s endorsement of empire.

But the picture of Austen is disembodied in not only a textual but also a larger social sense. Though recontextualized as an English national in the period preceding colonial expansion, Austen’s more precise status as an unmarried, middle-class, scribbling woman remains wholly unspecified. The failure to consider Austen’s gender and the significance of this omission is pointed up by Said’s more nuanced treatment of Conrad. According to Said, Conrad stands out from other colonial writers because, as a Polish expatriate, he possessed “an extraordinarily persistent residual sense of his own exilic marginality” (*C*, p. 24). The result is a double view of imperialism that at once refutes and reinforces the West’s right to dominate the globe. As Said explains, “Never the wholly incorporated and fully acculturated Englishman, Conrad therefore preserved an

ironic distance [from imperial conquest] in each of his works" (C, p. 25). Of course Austen was not, any more than Conrad, "the wholly incorporated and fully acculturated Englishman." Lacking the franchise, enjoying few property rights (and these because she was single), living as a dependent at the edge of her brother's estate, and publishing her work anonymously, Austen was arguably a kind of exile in her own country. If we follow out the logic of Said's own identity politics, Austen, too, might therefore be suspected of irony toward reigning constructions of citizenship, however much, like Conrad, she may also in many respects have upheld them. The goal of this essay is to indicate where and, finally, to suggest why Said so entirely misses this irony. 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.

3. "The beauties of Mansfield"

Said's opinion that Austen is culpably indifferent to slavery in Antigua depends on a repeated but questionable assertion: that Mansfield Park epitomizes moral order and right human relations; thus Sir Thomas's colonial endeavors, underwriting all this happiness, must be condoned if not actually applauded. Said is not alone in seeing *Mansfield Park* as a celebration of the real estate named in its title, with all its resonance of tradition, wealth locked up in land, property passed from father to eldest son. Tony Tanner's 1966 introduction to the Penguin edition is an elegant example of this opinion; Ruth Bernard Yeazell's attractive 1984 essay borrows from anthropology to reach a similar conclusion about the book's investment in reinforcing the boundaries of the Bertram property.⁹ Such "conservative" readings inevitably cite the Portsmouth chapters toward the end of the novel, in which Fanny Price disowns her native city and petit bourgeois family in favor of Mansfield and its harmonious ways—and Said's is no exception. What all of these overlook, however, is the extreme irony of Fanny's idealizing retrospection:

At Mansfield [as opposed to Portsmouth], no sounds of contention, no raised voice, no abrupt bursts, no tread of violence was ever heard; . . . every body had their due importance; every body's feel-

9. See Tanner, introduction to *MP*, pp. 7–36, and Ruth Bernard Yeazell, "The Boundaries of *Mansfield Park*," *Representations*, no. 7 (Summer 1984): 133–52.

ings were consulted. If tenderness could be ever supposed wanting, good sense and good breeding supplied its place; and as to the little irritations, sometimes introduced by aunt Norris, they were short, they were trifling, they were as a drop of water to the ocean, compared with the ceaseless tumult of her present abode. [*MP*, p. 384]

The confident sequence of negatives breaks down here with the concessionary “if” that allows the occasional absence of tenderness at Mansfield. This is followed by Fanny’s unsure approach to an unoriginal metaphor—“as a drop of water to the ocean”—that attempts to discount the quantity of aunt Norris’s cruelty. The conspicuous banality of Fanny’s idiom sets it off, however, from that of Austen’s narrator and indicates the degree of ironic distance from Fanny at this point.

But even had this description not unraveled on its own, we need only contrast it with the preceding three hundred pages to grasp its utter implausibility. The Mansfield we have seen has been nothing but contention, jealousy, and insensitivity to others. Fanny herself has been its most frequent victim, though one of Austen’s themes is this heroine’s inability to speak her hurt. Fanny, like the many critics who stress her passivity, is even less able to acknowledge her own pivotal role in Mansfield’s bitter generational conflicts and consuming sexual jealousies. After all, Fanny has been exiled for flatly disobeying Mansfield’s patriarch, and she has done so out of passionate illicit love for her cousin Edmund. Portsmouth, I agree with Yeazell, is crowded, chaotic, greasy, and alcoholic—awash with stereotypes of the urban poor. But for all this, it only literalizes what at Mansfield is disorder of a more profound and hypocritical kind. At Portsmouth, two sisters tussle over a silver spoon. At Mansfield they wage an unspoken battle over Henry Crawford, as Mary and Fanny do over Edmund. Portsmouth is dirty. Mansfield is adulterous. Portsmouth’s patriarch drinks, curses, and ignores his daughters. The father at Mansfield intimidates, exploits, and also ignores his daughters. Portsmouth is noisy. Mansfield’s greatest evil is its dishonest silence.

Said’s premise, therefore—that “Jane Austen sees the legitimacy of Sir Thomas Bertram’s overseas properties as a natural extension of the calm, the order, the beauties of Mansfield, one central estate validating the economically supportive role of the peripheral other” (*C*, p. 79)—is undercut by Austen’s own critique of the moral blight underlying Mansfield’s beauty, which she achieves not least by blurring the normative class opposition between Mansfield and Portsmouth. What Said calls a validation of the English estate as “home,” justifying its subjugation of “abroad,” I see as an inquiry into Mansfield’s corruption that challenges the ethical basis for its authority both at home and, by implication, overseas. Austen does, it is true, ultimately allow Mansfield and some of its sinning inmates to be redeemed, and to this extent she reaffirms the governance of British landowners. As a crucial qualification, however, she

declines to make her heroine the next mistress of Mansfield, though Tom Bertram's illness specifically raises the possibility that Edmund will inherit. Tom's survival, placing Edmund and Fanny temporarily at Thornton Lacey and finally not in Mansfield itself but in its adjacent parsonage, suggests Austen's wish to register, even at the end, some disdain for what Mansfield represents. (There is, from the outset, a slap at primogeniture in the younger son's role as hero and the older's marked delinquency.) Said's designation of Fanny as Mansfield's heir (see *C*, pp. 84, 89) is therefore inaccurate. In fact, Austen pointedly counters the centrality of Mansfield in Fanny's heart by settling her firmly on its perimeter.

4. Patriarchal Values

The character most closely identified with Mansfield Park and its colonial subsidiaries is, of course, Sir Thomas Bertram. Said thus argues not merely that Austen celebrates Mansfield but more specifically that she backs Sir Thomas in his domestic and colonial ventures. Austen is implicated through a series of equations aligning Fanny with her wealthy uncle, conflating Austen with her diffident heroine, and thereby tying the author herself to slavery, in spite of an ethical outlook that might seem to preclude this. Said remarks, for instance, that Sir Thomas's overseas possessions "give him his wealth, occasion his absences, fix his social status at home and abroad, and make possible his values, to which Fanny Price (and Austen herself) finally subscribes" (*C*, p. 62). Said describes Sir Thomas as Fanny's "mentor" (*C*, p. 89), and he is not the first critic to link uncle and niece, especially in their view of the young people's rage for home theatricals. I would point out, however, that when Sir Thomas sets sail Fanny grieves not (as her cousins think) for him but, on the contrary, "because she could not grieve" (*MP*, p. 66). Likewise on his return, she feels only a resurgence of "all her former habitual dread" (*MP*, p. 193). And though Sir Thomas and Fanny are finally reconciled, the key moral and political confrontation of the book remains, in my opinion, that played out between this nobleman and the timid young woman who, astonishingly, stands up to him by refusing to marry Henry Crawford.

The significance of this confrontation is condensed for me by Fanny's response when asked point-blank if her affections are engaged by another: "[Sir Thomas] saw her lips formed in to a *no*, though the sound was inarticulate, but her face was like scarlet" (*MP*, pp. 316–17). Here Fanny does and does not confess her terrible desire for Edmund. She mouths a denial but cannot quite speak it; moreover, the word of disavowal she attempts is countered by the somatic affirmation of her blush. Finally, while her "no" in this immediate context would suppress her longing, Fanny's "no" to Sir Thomas (and Henry) in the scene as a whole tacitly asserts her right to reject and also to love where she will. Turning

down Henry, Fanny declares her passion for Edmund against all norms of female modesty. In addition, she condemns Henry's history of carelessness with women and questions the double standard that dooms the fallen woman while promising to reform the rake. Crossing Sir Thomas, she declines to enrich her family by sacrificing herself and so dishonors the ideals of female and filial obedience. Regarding the sexual politics of marriage, therefore, far from sharing Sir Thomas's values, Fanny stages a significant rebellion against them. Threatened by the givens of gender relations in her day, she murmurs a negative that is only partly muted by her uncle's dread presence.

If Fanny's values, in light of the gender struggle central to *Mansfield Park*, cannot without violence be assimilated to those of Sir Thomas, neither can Austen be simply identified with her characters. The collapsing of author into character would be questionable in any case, but especially so given what I have already suggested is Austen's ironic rendering of Sir Thomas and, at times, of Fanny herself. This brings me to Sir Thomas's Antiguan connection and why his West Indian plantation makes the brief appearance that it does. Said quotes the line in which Fanny's inquiry into the slave trade is met with a "dead silence," and seems to suggest that Austen's novel, like the Bertram household, has nothing to say about slavery, when in fact the organization of both is premised upon unfree people (quoted in *C*, p. 96). My view, by contrast, is that Austen deliberately invokes the dumbness of *Mansfield Park* concerning its own barbarity precisely because she means to rebuke it. The barbarity she has in mind is not literal slavery in the West Indies but a paternal practice she depicts as possibly analogous to it: Sir Thomas's bid (successful in Maria's case if not in Fanny's) to put female flesh on the auction block in exchange for male status.¹⁰

For this and other domestic tyrannies, including the casual import and export of Fanny Price, the slave trade offers a convenient metaphor.¹¹ It is a figure made possible by the confluence of abolitionist and feminist discourses emergent in Austen's day, and it takes for granted—as several scholars have argued Austen did—that slavery is a moral offense. Later

10. Michael Wood points out that the "dead silence" passage follows directly on Edmund's remark to Fanny that she has recently become "worth looking at." His sense of the connection thus made between the objectification of women and slaves agrees with my own (Wood, "Lost Paradises," p. 46).

11. Said himself refers to Fanny at one point as "a kind of transported commodity." But he goes on to stress her "future wealth," likening her expansion into *Mansfield* to Sir Thomas's into Antigua, so that Fanny-as-commodity becomes Fanny-as-colonialist (*C*, pp. 88, 89). I have already noted that Fanny does not, in fact, inherit *Mansfield*, but I should add that, in any case, even the "best" marriages did not increase but actually contracted the personal wealth and rights of women in Austen's day. See Lee Holcombe, *Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England* (Toronto, 1983), and Susan Staves, *Married Women's Separate Property in England, 1660–1833* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990).

writers, notably Charlotte Brontë, would make more conspicuous use of slavery as a metaphor for class and gender wrongs among the gentry, but a rather explicit instance occurs in Austen's own next novel, *Emma* (1816).¹² In a well-known passage (surprisingly unremarked upon in *Culture and Imperialism*), Jane Fairfax likens the commodification of British women by the "governess-trade" to that of Africans by the "slave-trade," hinting that the sale of "human intellect" is no more tolerable than the sale of "human flesh."¹³ From a feminist perspective, it seems all-too-obvious that in *Mansfield Park* slavery functions similarly: not as a subtext wherein Austen and Sir Thomas converge but, on the contrary, as a trope Austen introduces to argue the essential depravity of Sir Thomas's relations to other people. This is not to say that *Mansfield Park* takes much real interest in Antigua and its laborers per se; I agree with Said that they are largely elided and always subordinated to the English material. The imperialist gesture is to exploit the symbolic value of slavery, while ignoring slaves as suffering and resistant historical subjects. As such a symbol, however, slavery in *Mansfield Park* is far less incidental and inadvertent than Said suggests. Ideologically, moreover, the implications of its use are mixed: though evacuating the specific content of slavery in the New World, placing its greatest emphasis elsewhere, this figure also turns on a moment of imagined commonality between English women and African slaves, a potentially radical overlap of outrage.

5. *The Isle of Wight*

Said makes clear that the defining affect of colonialism is arrogance. I have said that Austen's relation to colonialism may be complicated, though not entirely mitigated, by her protest on behalf of women like herself. As a footnote to this comment, I would like to look briefly at what she says about arrogance as a worldview. I think, for example, of *Persuasion*'s meditation on the arrogant occupation of space. Sir Walter Elliot and his daughter Elizabeth are unable to see beyond the bit of land they happen to inhabit, as if its contours and horizons, its interests and intrigues, were the only thing in the world. Emotionally, a reader of Said would recognize, the stage is set for imperial conquest, for such people

12. See Karen Sánchez-Eppler, "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition," *Representations*, no. 24 (Fall 1988): 28–59, which discusses white feminist uses of the slavery metaphor in an American context. On Austen's opposition to slavery and on its role as a metaphor in *Mansfield Park*, see Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (Totowa, N. J., 1983), pp. 116–19; Johnson, *Jane Austen*, pp. 106–8; and Moira Ferguson, "Mansfield Park: Slavery, Colonialism, and Gender," *Oxford Literary Review* 13, nos. 1–2 (1991): 118–39. On Brontë's ambiguous use of this metaphor, see Susan L. Meyer, "Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy of *Jane Eyre*," *Victorian Studies* 33 (Winter 1990): 247–68.

13. Austen, *Emma*, ed. Ronald Blythe (Harmondsworth, 1966), p. 300.

go abroad only to discount the significance of other populations and outlooks. Anne Elliot, by contrast, is described as “nobody with either father or sister: her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way;—she was only Anne.”¹⁴ With little sense of her significance at home, Anne need not travel very far to have her relative “nobodyness” confirmed and to wince at the solipsism of other Elliots.

Anne had not wanted this visit to Uppercross, to learn that a removal from one set of people to another, though at a distance of only three miles, will often include a total change of conversation, opinion, and idea. She had never been staying there before, without being struck by it, or without wishing that other Elliots could have her advantage in seeing how unknown, or unconsidered there, were the affairs which at Kellynch-hall were treated as of such general publicity and pervading interest; yet, with all this experience, she believed she must now submit to feel that another lesson, in the art of knowing our own nothingness beyond our own circle, was become necessary for her.¹⁵

Austen’s target here is the dying but still haughty aristocracy. Far from questioning colonialism, *Persuasion* celebrates (as a meritocratic alternative) the British navy that made it possible. Yet I can’t help thinking that her text here bears somewhat on Said’s project of exposing the provincialism underlying colonialism. There is such sensitivity to the way self-importance manifests itself in space, and such severity about mistaking local agendas for “general” and “pervading” ones. Surely Anne’s lesson in her “nothingness beyond [her] own circle” is an implicitly anti-imperialist one. Moreover, it suggests once again the crucial operation of gender in Austen, for Anne is able to learn this lesson—and Austen to teach it—because as an apparently unmarried woman she is exiled from power.

Mansfield Park, too, castigates people who, while pretending to worldliness, see nothing beyond their own noses, and even its upstanding heroine is occasionally blinkered by personal interest. Like *Persuasion*, this novel criticizes solipsism primarily as a constituent of personality, not of foreign policy, but there is one conversation in which the limitations of its characters are phrased in explicitly geographical terms. Complaining of their uncouth cousin, Maria and Julia Bertram mock Fanny’s inability to “put the map of Europe together” or name the “principal rivers in Russia.” They marvel especially at her bad sense of direction:

“Do you know, we asked her last night, which way she would go to get to Ireland; and she said, she should cross to the Isle of Wight.

14. Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. D. W. Harding (London, 1965), p. 37.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

She thinks of nothing but the Isle of Wight, and she calls it *the Island*, as if there were no other island in the world." [MP, p. 54]¹⁶

Compared to the wealthy Bertrams, and even to her seafaring brother William, poor Fanny is, to be sure, less adept at manipulating nations, less masterful in her relation to the globe. The Bertram sisters are also right to boast of their superior fluency in chronologies of English kings and Roman emperors, for their schooling in hegemonic traditions has been more thorough than Fanny's. On the other hand, Fanny's navigational mode as described in this passage is itself a rather imperialist one, for it begins and ends by fetishizing a single island. This island not only happens to resemble Britain in its ability to eclipse others such as Ireland and Antigua, leaving it the exclusive point of reference, but bears a name suggesting the pseudoracial basis for its priority. Austen's major point here is clearly to satirize Maria and Julia's class condescension to their simple cousin, but I believe she also likens all three girls to one another and ridicules them for their lordly outlook upon the world. I offer this passage as additional evidence that Austen is both more aware and more critical of the imperial mind-set than Said appreciates; it catches her, indeed, in an attitude of irony toward "*the Island*" and its loyal subjects that inclines, gently, in the direction of his own.¹⁷

6. *Sensitive but Not Maudlin*

Mansfield Park as I read it, then, has little patience with high-handed patriarchs, their eldest sons, Regency sexual mores, or traditional marital practices, and even England itself is not above criticism. Its irreverence—bearing out Austen's earliest juvenile sketches, resonating with the other mature novels, and anticipating the final, unfinished *Sanditon*—suggests to me a less complacent view of power relations, especially gender relations, than Said is prepared to acknowledge. His inattention to Austen's feminist critique of authority is both the logical result and an ideological cognate of his failing, similarly, to remark upon the last two decades of intensive feminist commentary on this writer. Asserting that "the best account" of *Mansfield Park* is Tony Tanner's (*C*, p. 342 n. 36)—admirable when first published in 1966 certainly, but hardly definitive in 1993—

16. Said quotes the "map of Europe" line to illustrate Austen's preoccupation with spatial issues. Thanks to Scott Fennessey, whose paper, "Conjunctions of Geography and Society in Austen's *Mansfield Park*," first got me thinking about the Isle of Wight.

17. For another instance of Austen's skeptical patriotism, see *Northanger Abbey*, ed. Anne Henry Ehrenpreis (Harmondsworth, 1972), in which the hero begins by chiding the heroine, "Remember that we are English, that we are Christians" only to end with the ominous picture of England as a place "where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies" (p. 199).

Said appears curiously unaware of the revolution in Austen scholarship instigated by such figures as Nina Auerbach, Patricia Meyer Spacks, Lillian Robinson, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Rachel Brownstein, among others. He therefore feels free to list Austen among those evincing the conservatism of the novel form, arguing that “the consolidation of authority [in Austen, Balzac, Eliot, and Flaubert] includes, indeed is built into the very fabric of, both private property and marriage, institutions that are only rarely challenged” (C, p. 77). Feminist accounts, by contrast, have brought out precisely Austen’s tactful challenge to the gender injustices of both of these institutions. Tying the novel’s authorization of empire to the “authority of the author” (C, p. 77), Said further overlooks what feminist critics since Virginia Woolf have seen as the anxious and impaired authority of the female writer. More disconcerting still than his neglect of revisionary axioms concerning nineteenth-century women writers is that Said makes no mention of Margaret Kirkham (1983) or Moira Ferguson (1991), previous scholars specifically addressing the slavery theme in *Mansfield Park* from a feminist perspective. And though he makes positive passing reference to innovative studies of imperialist discourses by Lisa Lowe (1991) and Sara Suleri (1992), he doesn’t specify their chapters mobilizing ideas about gender. Nor is there any dialogue with his student, Suvendrini Perera (1991), whose book on empire and the English novel identifies the feminist Orientalism of texts such as *Persuasion* and *Jane Eyre*, while arguing that “home” was a construct policing British women as well as colonial “others.” Even Gayatri Spivak, the most celebrated feminist postcolonialist, is altogether absent from *Culture and Imperialism*.¹⁸ The pertinence of these names to Said’s project is not, I hasten to say, their simple political correctness as females or feminists but the way their analyses intersect with and would serve to complicate one that proceeds for the most part along a single axis.

While I am not the first to note the paucity of women and feminist criticism in Said’s work, it remains a question how these exclusions can coexist with Said’s oft-stated appreciation for feminism’s political uses.¹⁹

18. See Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1991); Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India*, (Chicago, 1992); Suvendrini Perera, *Reaches of Empire: The English Novel from Edgeworth to Dickens* (New York, 1991); and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York, 1987) and *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York, 1990). Other more recent books on the nexus of gender and colonialism include Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (Minneapolis, 1993), and Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York, 1995).

19. Aijaz Ahmad singles out Said’s essay on *Mansfield Park* (first published in 1989), noting its failure to recognize upper-class women as “differentially located in mobilities and pedagogies of the class structure” (Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* [London, 1992], p. 186). See also Fawzia Afzal-Khan, review of C, in *World Literature Today* 68 (Winter 1994): 229–30. Afzal-Khan laments Said’s neglect of work by postcolonial feminist critics.

In a 1989 interview, for example, he described his excitement at feminist works by Joan Scott, Helen Callaway, and Jean Franco,²⁰ and in *Culture and Imperialism* he stresses the significance of women's movements in Egypt, Turkey, Indonesia, China, and Ceylon, whose participation in nationalist struggles, by voicing internal opposition, helped to make these less monolithic (see *C*, pp. 218, 266). Said's reading of *Kim* as "an overwhelmingly male novel" (*C*, p. 136) is itself, at times, incipiently feminist, and he points out more than once the masculinism of much nationalist discourse. Of Aimé Césaire's use of "man" in *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, he observes parenthetically, "the exclusively masculine emphasis is quite striking" (*C*, p. 280), and another parenthesis conscientiously admits that Ali Shariati's alternative to orthodoxy "speaks only of 'man' and not of 'woman'" (*C*, p. 334). The relegation of such glosses to parentheses is telling, however—they are safely contained and in no way reorient Said's line of argument—as is the far more frequent tendency to quote sexist language without any comment. But the most obvious testimony to both interest and uncertainty regarding feminist agendas is offered by a passage from the book's introduction. Highlighting feminism's contributions to Middle Eastern and postcolonial studies, Said cites Lila Abu-Lughod, Leila Ahmed, and Fedwa Malti-Douglas, whose recent books on women have begun to redress what was once "an aggressively masculine and condescending ethos" (*C*, p. xxiv). Following this, however, his terms of praise take an ambiguous turn; these works are, he declares, "both intellectually and politically sophisticated, attuned to the best theoretical and historical scholarship, engaged but not demagogic, sensitive to but not maudlin about women's experience" (*C*, p. xxiv). Why the sudden urge to reassure and qualify here? Why the worry lest scholarship by and about women, as a function of the more lachrymose sex, turn out to be embarrassingly soft and weepy? And why, finally, the seeming insecurity about "engaged" scholarship, the need to disparage the waved fist and tearful face as if they were, or so he implies, inconsistent with carefully reasoned criticism? Keeping these questions in mind, my next section speculates that the troubling sexual politics of *Culture and Imperialism* may be bound up with a largely subliminal strategy of opposition to imperialism, a gender allegory employing the "feminine" in unreconstructed ways—that is, as an essentially devalued category.

7. *Lady Bertram's Shawl*

Poststructuralism would seem to have discredited for good any notion of absolute impartial truth, and feminists have long since dismantled

20. See Jennifer Wicke and Michael Sprinker, "Interview with Edward Said," in *Edward Said: A Critical Reader*, ed. Sprinker (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), pp. 248–49.

the old, hierarchized dichotomy between male/objective and female/subjective. Nevertheless, the quotation above speaks to how critics continue to stigmatize scholarship perceived to be heartfelt and also gender it as feminine. On the one hand, Said's defense of politically invested work by female scholars against implied charges of emotional excess justifies his own style of impassioned scholarship; on the other hand, by raising these charges specifically in relation to women, it also effectively distances the male author from a denigrated mode. The gender logic of this defense is reiterated later in the book in a section devoted to the oppositional writings of four, male, Third World intellectuals: C. L. R. James, George Antonius, Ranajit Guha, and S. H. Alatas. Celebrating the political content of their work, Said insists he does not mean "oppositional scholarship must be shrill and unpleasantly insistent" (C, p. 258). Given the strong coding of "shrill" as feminine, this protest seems once again calculated to secure the gender status of work whose "masculinity" is endangered by the depth of its feeling. And it doesn't hurt, of course, that the exemplary four are male to begin with.

But the "masculinity" of anti-imperialist projects such as Said's is on the defensive for another reason as well. As many have observed, the tropes Said mapped so unforgettably in *Orientalism* veil the East in a cluster of "feminine" attributes. It is mysterious, sensual, beckoning, undisciplined, and naturally subordinate to a West imagined in correspondingly "male" terms—and Said notes in his new book that Europe makes use of a similar vocabulary to depict Africa, Australia, and other "distant lands" (C, p. xi). As Suleri has remarked, this gendering of the colonial encounter persists in counternarratives protesting the "rape" of colonial peoples and places. She argues further that the "colonial gaze" may actually regard the colonized less as female than effeminate, and the result may therefore be feelings of sexual panic in the male colonizer.²¹ From the perspective of the Third World male, however, to the extent that his resistance is mediated by imperialist frameworks, it hardly matters whether he is constructed as "woman" or "effeminate" man, for in either case his normative masculinity is called into question. One function, then, of Austen's primacy in Said's account of European culture, along with the marked masculinity of the resistance cultures he puts forth in counterpoint, may be to invert the received gendering of the colonial couple: to "remasculinize" the colonized male (and emotional male critic). This is accomplished most obviously by the predominance of men and male quest plots in Said's discussion of anti- and postcolonial texts—James Ngugi's and Tayeb Salih's rewritings of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for

21. Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India*, p. 16. Joseph A. Boone elaborates on the West's coding of Arab males as homosexual. Noting that "Said's failure to account for homoerotic elements in orientalist pursuits is a telling omission," Boone reinforces my sense of Said's stake in realigning Eastern men with dominant conceptions of manhood (Joseph A. Boone, "Vacation Cruises; or, The Homoerotics of Orientalism," *PMLA* 110 [Jan. 1995]: 92).

example (see *C*, pp. 210–11). But the gesture is completed by Said's more subtle characterization of early imperial culture as "feminine," which helps to explain the paradigmatic status accorded to Austen. For though his book takes on European culture generally and does in fact range widely among genres, nations, and eras, its argument nevertheless implies a kind of synecdoche in which this culture is best represented by the novel, the novel by the English novel, and the English novel by Austen. Said opens his reading of *Mansfield Park* by quoting Raymond Williams on Austen's limited perspective "from inside the houses" as opposed to William Cobbett "riding past on the road" (quoted in *C*, p. 84). While Said wants to go beyond Williams's class analysis, his Austen, too, is tied to and constrained by a domestic purview in a specifically gendered way. Defined thus, her work is offered as "the perfect example" (*C*, p. 59) of the hegemonic geography emergent in the preimperialist period, centered on a Eurocentric formulation of the category "home." Positioned at the beginning of his genealogy and at the heart of his argument, Austen's fiction works, at least in part, to characterize as domestic and to sex as feminine the larger body of European culture.

In addition to its science of interiors, *Mansfield Park* as representative text has something else to offer the project of feminizing Europe. Demonstrating the careless, everyday use of colonial materials by Austen and her characters, Said cites Lady Bertram's request that Fanny's brother William sail to India, "that I may have a shawl. I think I will have two shawls" (quoted in *C*, p. 93). Given that Lady Bertram dozes through *Mansfield Park*, a figure of indolence without a shred of moral credibility, it is risky to assume that her appetite for imported goods is approved by the management. What this passage does reinforce, however, is an image of Europe as the leisured consumer of more than one shawl, kept in luxury by the backbreaking labor of colonial workers. It offers, in other words, an inverted sexual metaphor in which the recumbent, feminized East rises to its feet, and the veil that once symbolized its mysterious allure reappears as a shawl, a figure for the consumerism of a pampered and feminized West.

8. *A Token of Peace*

The cover of *Culture and Imperialism* features a 1907 painting, *The Representatives of the Foreign Powers Coming to Hail the Republic as a Token of Peace*, which I look to for a final illustration of the gender politics underlying Said's anti-imperialism. The painting shows a phalanx of dignitaries in official dress gathered ceremonially on some outdoor steps. Buildings just visible in the background, a tricolor in each window, suggest Paris. The diplomats face forward, clutching olive branches in gloved hands. Front and center are pink-cheeked men almost uniform in height and

dressed in Western garb. Peeking from the back row are two ruddier faces and one brown. To the far right are half a dozen miscellaneous figures with complexions, clothing, and headgear vaguely suggesting Eastern and African origins. All of these are shorter than the Westerners and, to judge by their irregular positions and unmatched stances, have little sense of military discipline. The uneven outline of their heads makes a jagged falling-off from the block of massed Westerners. Overhead is an awning topped with flags, but the non-Western representatives, exceeding this frame, are exposed to the elements. The most prominent flags, with one exception, are easily recognizable as those of Britain (the naval red ensign), France, and the United States. Those farther back include Italy and imperial Germany, but seem mostly to have been improvised by the artist. Finally, there are three explicitly symbolic elements. First, receptacles of olive branches bear the labels "Paix," "Travail," "Liberté," and "Fraternité." Second, a small lion sits frowning in the foreground—persuaded, it seems, to lie down at last with the lambs. And third, standing to the left in profile, a larger-than-life woman wearing a flowing red gown extends an olive branch over the heads of the company. She supports a shield which, though partly obscured, appears to read: "Union des Peuples."

It doesn't take long to realize that Said means this painting ironically. In this "union" under French auspices as in the European novel, Enlightenment rhetoric and good intentions cannot disguise the fact that non-Westerners get left out in the cold. Western flags still get top billing, and if all men are equal, Western men are clearly more equal than others—more central, more imposing, and more knowable. This is a crucial political judgment to make, and Said has done so for many years with exceptional brilliance and conviction. Yet I turn, in closing, to the cover of *Culture and Imperialism* because its ironized female icon also begins to suggest the problematic status of women and the feminine in Said's text. In the painting I describe, the lone female figure is largely an abstraction, no less than the lion at her feet, the branch in her hand, and the shield at her side. Towering over the heads of European men, she stands for their blond, benevolent patronage—and, from Said's point of view, their hypocritical peace. The effect of the cover, therefore, like the argument inside, is to leave out actual women while feminizing the wiles of imperialist culture, scorning them in a language indebted to sexist gender norms. Women did, of course, help to rationalize imperialism, and Austen is guilty along with the rest. But Said's balance sheet still has her paying more than her share of the bills. This occurs in part because, like the angel of false peace, she, more than any other single figure, is made to bear the symbolic burden of empire. No wonder that, when Suleri reviewed Said for the *Village Voice*, she used Austen as a shorthand for those texts whose interest in imperialism is hidden from view: "For every Sal-

man Rushdie, there is a Jane Austen.”²² Moreover, because Austen is abstracted from her specific historical context, her Eurocentrism is uncoupled from what was for her as a woman her incompletely realized citizenship. Off-center in relation to the dominant culture, Austen was no more fully embraced by official fantasies of democracy than the darker “foreign powers”—a fact her novels suggest she pondered. In reading Austen thus, it is not my intention to pick up the pieces of a shattered idol; like Said, I am more interested in secularity and imperfection. I offer this complicating view, rather, as a token of the hope I share with him for a more genuine and just union of peoples.

22. Suleri, “The Secret Sharers: Edward Said’s Imperial Margins,” review of *C*, in *Voice Literary Supplement*, 8 June 1993, p. 31.