

# L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE  
UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

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## “WHAT WAS DONE THERE IS NOT TO BE TOLD!” PLANS FOR IMPROVEMENT AND DESIGNS FOR RUIN IN AUSTEN’S SOTHERTON COURT

ROBERTA GRANDI

*Mansfield Park* is probably the least appreciated novel written by Jane Austen. A prig<sup>1</sup>, inert and feeble heroine, Fanny Price has always been a sad surprise for those readers who had learnt to love Austen through Elizabeth Bennet’s wit, Elinor’s command and Emma’s liveliness. Austen’s mother herself reacted to the reading of the novel describing Fanny as “insipid” and the usually enthusiastic niece Anna admitted that she, too, “could not bear Fanny”<sup>2</sup>. Likewise Edmund Bertram lacks some charisma and mystery to make a proper romance hero, whereas the sparkle and appeal of Mary and Henry Crawford challenge the reader’s judgment on their immoral behaviour.

Nonetheless, from the point of view of the critic, *Mansfield Park* offers matchless elements for study and analysis as, by overturning the usual characterization of the protagonists, the novel evidences more clearly the unchanged system of values of Austen’s narrative. Austen portrays in this novel, hidden by metaphors and allegories, the weaknesses and the sins of Regency society while rewarding, at the same time, the virtue and honesty of her hero and heroine. One of the most important sequences, which mirrors and prefigures the key elements of the plot, is the episode of Sotherton Court that develops through chapter nine and ten but influences the entire progression of the novel.

In that episode, the family property of Maria Bertram’s fiancée is visited in order to plan some works of improvement of its park, as the fashion of the time prescribed. During the visit, the main characters walk through the garden in small groups indulging, sometimes, in improper behaviour. The object of this essay is to look at Jane Austen’s treatment of landscape gardening and improvement work in *Mansfield Park*, focusing the attention on the episode of Sotherton Park and linking the ‘external’ description of nature and the characters’ responses to it to the ‘internal’ moral interpretation of the allegorical development of characterization and plot.

Even if Austen’s novels, at a superficial glance, may appear to be set almost exclusively in house interiors, they often present key episodes set in domestic outdoors or parks. The

<sup>1</sup> Reginald Farrer in 1917 defined her “the most terrible incarnation we have of the female prig-Pharisee”, quoted in E. Auerbach, *Searching for Jane Austen*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2004, p. 167. Likewise, the famous critic Lionel Trilling believed that nobody “has found it possible to like the heroine of *Mansfield Park*”, L. Trilling, *Mansfield Park*, in *Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice and Mansfield Park, a Casebook*, B.C. Southam ed., Macmillan, London 1976, p. 212.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in E. Auerbach, *Searching for Jane Austen*, p. 167.

social and historical value ingrained in Austen's use of natural settings has been analysed and established by many scholars who have delved into a number of aspects of Regency culture related to Austen's writing. Rosemarie Bodenheimer, in her essay *Looking at the Landscape in Jane Austen*, in the attempt to assert the idea that Austen's landscapes are outer representations of the characters' inner selves, links Austen's ideas about nature and picturesque to those of William Gilpin. Affirming that "the picturesque figures as a kind of language, even a fiction, which may be either understood or abused by its speakers"<sup>3</sup>, Bodenheimer stresses how, for Austen, natural descriptions are seldom purely aesthetic elements, whereas, more often, they are revealers of the characters' interiority: "Austen's landscape writing [...] points inward, consistently pulling the emphasis away from pictorial description itself to the vision of feeling of the viewer"<sup>4</sup>. She also points out how the detailed descriptions of the landscapes in *Mansfield Park* are directly related to the evolution of the protagonist Fanny Price:

*Mansfield Park* is the only one of Jane Austen's novels to extend the use of nature description into a series of passages which mark stages in the psychological development of its heroine. Fanny Price has, of course, been associated with the tradition of sensibility: she looks out of windows and sees the sublime; she quotes Cowper against cutting down trees; she is a preserver<sup>5</sup>.

Like Bodenheimer, Marvis Batey illustrates the importance of Gilpin's work for Austen's idea of nature, that very "nature that William Gilpin had taught Jane Austen's generation to seek out and admire with a picturesque eye"<sup>6</sup>. Batey also adds interesting remarks on the detailed attention with which Austen endows her descriptions of places and settings with precise geographic locations and travelling distances. Similarly, Philippa Tristram connects Austen's taste for neoclassic nature to her sceptical attitude towards sensibility and romanticism:

Jane Austen remains a true Palladian, untouched by Rousseau. She would undoubtedly have agreed with Knight, who affirms in his *Principles of Taste* (1805) that 'All refinement of taste ... arises, in the first instance from this faculty of improved perception.' Her heroines, particularly Fanny and Anne Elliot, are properly responsive to natural beauty, but their taste is without romantic spontaneity<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> R. Bodenheimer, *Looking at the Landscape in Jane Austen*, "Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900", XXI, 1981, 4, p. 607.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 622.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 613.

<sup>6</sup> M. Batey, *Jane Austen and the English Landscape*, Barn Elms, London 1996, p. 69. See also M. Batey, *In Quest of Jane Austen's 'Mr Repton'*, "Garden History", V, 1977, 1, pp. 19-20.

<sup>7</sup> P. Tristram, *Living Space in Fact and Fiction*, Routledge, London/New York 1989, p. 164.

Other scholars have concentrated on the role of women in Regency society and on the attitude of Austen's heroines towards nature. Barbara Britton Wenner, interestingly evidences how the physical collocation of Austen's female characters in outdoor landscapes often responds to the necessity of acquiring a vantage position of "refuge and prospect"<sup>8</sup>, in order to be able, at the same time, to hide from the other's attention and observe the other's activities. Alistair M. Duckworth evidences how, according to Austen, houses and landscapes are direct reflections of their owners and, consequently, the actions of improvement planned or performed can be interpreted either as signs of moral improvement or of excess: "Throughout Jane Austen's fiction, estates function not only as the settings of action but as indexes to the character and social responsibility of their owners"<sup>9</sup>. Duckworth's analysis is particularly accurate for *Mansfield Park* and will be drawn on in several moments of this essay. Equally important is Banfield's study of the moral value of natural and artificial landscapes in the novel<sup>10</sup>.

Finally, Alison G. Sulloway's work<sup>11</sup> is of fundamental importance for the interpretation of the Sotherton episode as an allegory<sup>12</sup>. She offers the clearest analysis of the characters' expedition in the park as a direct prefiguration of the later parts of the novel. Sulloway analyses Austen's use of nature as a symbolic element where the garden represents "an androgynous space, halfway between the man's absolute freedom to travel all over England at will, and the woman's small, restricted, domestic boundaries"<sup>13</sup> and the actions performed in outer spaces act as symbolic representatives of the interior drives of the characters.

The analysis carried out hereafter focuses on both aspects of Austen's Sotherton episode. On the one hand, Sotherton is considered as a real park which needs improvement according to the fashion of the time and which reflects the taste and sensibility of both characters and author. On the other, it is also considered as a moral allegory of the future development of the plot, an allegory which needs to be interpreted from a psychological and symbolic perspective.

<sup>8</sup> B. Britton Wenner, *Prospect and Refuge in the Landscape of Jane Austen*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2006.

<sup>9</sup> A.M. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate. A study of Jane Austen's novels*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1971 p. 38. See also A.M. Duckworth, *Mansfield Park and Estate Improvements: Jane Austen's Grounds of Being*, "Nineteenth-Century Fiction", XXVI, 1971, 1, pp. 25-48 and A.M. Duckworth, *Landscape*, in *Jane Austen in Context*, J. Todd ed., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005, pp. 278-288.

<sup>10</sup> A. Banfield, *The Moral Landscape of Mansfield Park*, "Nineteenth-Century Fiction", XXVI, 1971, 1, pp. 1-24.

<sup>11</sup> A.G. Sulloway, *Jane Austen and the Province of Womanhood*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1989.

<sup>12</sup> See also C. Marsden Gillis, *Garden, Sermon, and Novel in Mansfield Park: Exercises in Legibility*, "NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction", XVIII, 1985, 1, pp. 117-125.

<sup>13</sup> A.G. Sulloway, *Jane Austen and the Province of Womanhood*, p. 198.

*Improving Nature*

The necessity to improve the landscape of Sotherton Court is presented for the first time by its owner Mr. Rushworth during an afternoon at Mansfield Park:

He had been visiting a friend in the neighbouring county, and that friend having recently had his grounds laid out by an improver, Mr. Rushworth was returned with his head full of the subject, and very eager to be improving his own place in the same way; and though not saying much to the purpose, could talk of nothing else<sup>14</sup>.

As Daniels clearly explains, “the idea of ‘improvement’ was central to landed culture”<sup>15</sup> in these centuries and the novel clearly reflects this notion from these first lines. Mr. Rushworth, a young landowner of good fortune, is extremely susceptible to the fashion of the time that identified the activity of ‘improvement’ as a sign of good education and aesthetic taste. The visit to his friend’s estate has left Rushworth with a poignant need, almost an obsession, to renovate his own property according to the modern trend. After a few lines he speaks his mind again with these words: “It wants improvement, ma’am, beyond anything. I never saw a place that wanted so much improvement in my life; and it is so forlorn that I do not know what can be done with it”<sup>16</sup>. And, however excessive it may seem to a modern reader, Rushworth’s attitude was nothing unusual in those times:

‘Every Man Now, be his fortune what it will, is to be doing something at his Place, as the fashionable Phrase is,’ writes an enthusiast in 1739; ‘and you hardly meet with any Body, who, after the first Compliments, does not inform you, that he is in Mortar and moving of Earth; the modest terms for Building and Gardening’<sup>17</sup>.

If it is evident that ‘improvement’ was one of the bywords of the time, what is less clear is what idea of nature was acted upon and which specific taste and sensibility guided designs and plans. First of all it is important to consider the fact that the Englishmen of the time were influenced by the “the firm belief that embellished nature is nature at the top of its potential and thus it is richer and not less authentic than the wild one”<sup>18</sup>. So, an observation such as Rushworth’s about his friend’s grounds,

<sup>14</sup> J. Austen, *Mansfield Park. Introduction and notes by Kathryn Sutherland*, Penguin classics, London 1996, p. 50. From now on, the abbreviation *MP* is used to indicate this book.

<sup>15</sup> S. Daniels, *Fields of Vision. Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England & the United States*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1994, p. 80.

<sup>16</sup> *MP*, p. 51

<sup>17</sup> P. Tristram, *Living Space in Fact and Fiction*, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> “[...] la convinzione che la natura abbellita sia natura al massimo delle sue potenzialità e quindi più ricca e non meno autentica della selvaggia”, M. Bellorini, “*First Follow Nature*”. *Riflessioni e note sulla semantica del giardino nella poesia e nella cultura inglese del Settecento*, ISU – Università Cattolica, Milano 2004, p. 13. The translation is mine.

“I wish you could see Compton,” said he; “it is the most complete thing! I never saw a place so altered in my life. I told Smith I did not know where I was. The approach now, is one of the finest things in the country”<sup>19</sup>,

would have been considered the highest possible praise: the work of the most famous landscape designers of the century, indeed, aimed purposely at helping nature to express its full potential of beauty.

However, taste and sensibility were in constant evolution and at the beginning of the nineteenth century an aesthetic dispute was shaking the tenets of garden design. The neo-classic, Palladian ideal, “with flights of terraces, cascades, fountains and parterres”<sup>20</sup>, had been substituted by a “Beautiful Nature” promoted by the art of Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown and, later, Humphry Repton, a “smooth beauty in landscape [that] produced an effect of satisfaction and agreeable relaxation”<sup>21</sup>. In the last two decades of the eighteenth century, this “Beautiful Nature” was challenged by another idea of beauty: the picturesque garden “modelled on nature”<sup>22</sup> and promoted by William Gilpin, Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight<sup>23</sup>. As Batey clearly explains, Austen preferred this last trend, describing the grounds of Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice* as the supreme realization of natural ‘Gilpinesque’ beauty, a place where “nature’s rude views were not rejected and the characteristic abruptness of the Derbyshire scene was preferred to smoothness and gradual deviations”<sup>24</sup>. This, however, does not imply that Austen was against improving works *tout court*: Austen “was an improver herself”<sup>25</sup>; she took part personally in the renewal of the garden at Steventon Rectory and judged with approbation some changes that Repton had performed on the property of her cousin. As already noticed, for Austen the discriminating criterion was the good or bad sense and the good or bad taste of the improvement itself.

‘Picturesque’ or ‘Beautiful’ landscapists, however, shared the common belief that it was nature itself that guided the hand of the improver and indicated the necessary changes. In *Mansfield Park* this belief is clearly expressed by Henry Crawford talking about his choices for the renewal of his property of Everingham:

with the natural advantages of the ground, which pointed out, even to a very young eye, what little remained to be done, and my own consequent resolutions, I had not been of age three months before Everingham was all that it is now<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> *MP*, p. 51.

<sup>20</sup> M. Batey, *Jane Austen and the English Landscape*, p. 68.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*. For an updated study on Lancelot Brown see J. Brown, *The Omnipotent Magician. Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown*, Chatto & Windus, London 2011.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>23</sup> See M. Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque. Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760-1800*, Scholar Press, Aldershot 1989; S. Copley – P. Garside ed., *The Politics of the Picturesque. Literature, landscape and aesthetics since 1770*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994.

<sup>24</sup> M. Batey, *Jane Austen and the English Landscape*, p. 69.

<sup>25</sup> D. Murray, *Spectatorship in Mansfield Park: Looking and Overlooking*, “Nineteenth-Century Literature”, LII, 1997, 1, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> *MP*, p. 58.



This is the aesthetic idea that will also guide Crawford's advice to Rushworth. In fact, even if the latter, at the beginning, seems inclined to turn to a professional landscape designer, convinced by Crawford's self assurance and Julia and Maria's pressure, Rushworth will ask Crawford to "inspect" the ground and "guide" his plans for improvement.

*"A mere nothing before Repton"*

The professional that Rushworth had thought to engage was no less than Humphry Repton, the heir of Capability Brown's art and reputation and, by the time Austen began writing *Mansfield Park* in 1811, the "star" of landscape design. Born in 1752, Repton began his career in 1788 with the commission at Catton Park and filled very quickly the gap left by the death of Capability Brown in 1783. During his life Repton preferred to be called "landscape gardenist" instead of the pompous "place-maker" chosen by Brown. He provided his clients with 'before' and 'after' sketches of their properties in his Red Books which he afterwards collected and published in works such as *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening* (1794), and *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1816)<sup>27</sup>.

The name of Repton appears three times in chapter six during the first discussion about the renovation work to be done at Sotherton:

"I must try to do something with it," said Mr. Rushworth, "but I do not know what. I hope I shall have some good friend to help me."

"Your best friend upon such an occasion," said Miss Bertram calmly, "would be Mr. Repton, I imagine."

"That is what I was thinking of. As he has done so well by Smith, I think I had better have him at once. His terms are five guineas a day."

[...]

After a short interruption Mr. Rushworth began again. "Smith's place is the admiration of all the country; and it was a mere nothing before Repton took it in hand. I think I shall have Repton"<sup>28</sup>.

The use of Repton's name is in part certainly due to the fact that he was the most successful landscape gardenist of the time and, thanks to the opposition of the advocates of the picturesque style, he was also one of the most discussed and criticized personalities in the artistic field. Yet the main reason for this fleeting apparition of Repton originates from the direct acquaintance Austen had of his abilities and achievements<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> For more biographic details on Repton see S. Daniels, *Fields of Vision* and J. Dixon Hunt, *The Picturesque Garden in Europe*, Thames & Hudson, London 2003.

<sup>28</sup> *MP*, pp. 51-53.

<sup>29</sup> See the account in M. Batey, *Jane Austen and the English Landscape*, pp. 80-88 and Id., *In Quest of Jane Austen's 'Mr Repton'*, pp. 19-20.

Her first experience of Repton's art was in 1806 after her mother's cousin, the Reverend Thomas Leigh, had called him in 1799 to make some improvements at his Rectory at Adlestrop, in Gloucestershire. After the work had been concluded, Jane, Cassandra and their mother visited the Rectory and were deeply impressed by the changes in the grounds. As Repton himself reported in his Red Book (later published in his *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* 1803), he "had realised that 'a little pool very near the house lessened the place by attracting the eye'. So he had it removed and arranged for the water to flow in full view of the house over rocks through the flower garden on its way to a far-off lake"<sup>30</sup>.

However, Austen had an even greater demonstration of the effects of Repton's philosophy and designs with the improvement of Stoneleigh Abbey performed in 1808-1809. The Leigh family was very ancient and had properties in Gloucestershire (Adlestrop) and Warwickshire (Stoneleigh). In 1571 the estate was divided and the branch to which Thomas Leigh belonged inherited the properties in Gloucestershire. In 1806, at the death of the last heir, Thomas Leigh's nephew James Henry Leigh, who already possessed the family manor at Adlestrop, also inherited Stoneleigh Abbey thus reuniting the family estate. Leigh immediately engaged Repton's help to improve and renew the property that had remained essentially unchanged from the Elizabethan Age. The result was an impressive Red Book that strangely has never been published<sup>31</sup> but of which Repton was very proud and which was, fortunately, described and commented by Malins. The Austens visited the property in 1806 with their cousins before the beginning of the work but Austen was regularly informed of the improvements by the reverend's sister Elizabeth.

Austen's opinion of Repton's changes was not always favourable and, as already seen before, the picturesque style was more palatable to her taste than Repton's frequent choices of "older, more static forms"<sup>32</sup>. However, Austen appreciated the philosophy intrinsic in Repton's work. The improver was to be, first of all, "intent upon rescuing the garden once again for social purposes"<sup>33</sup> and – as Repton declared in response to Knight's critiques in 1795 in his *Sketches and Hints* – was to act according to the notion that "in whatever relates to man, propriety and convenience are not less objects of good taste, than picturesque effect"<sup>34</sup>. Austen's attitude towards outer (and inner) spaces appears to be the same and *Mansfield Park* is replete with allusions and demonstrations of this guiding idea. Probably the most evident example is the shrubbery: early in chapter six, during the first discussion about the improvement of Sotherton, Lady Bertram's advice is "if I were you, I would have a very pretty shrubbery. One likes to get out into a shrubbery in fine weather"<sup>35</sup>. Even if Lady Bertram is not the soundest of Austen's characters, the allusion

<sup>30</sup> E. Malins, *Humphry Repton at Stoneleigh Abbey, Warwickshire*, "Garden History", V, 1977, 1, pp. 25-26.

<sup>31</sup> The manuscript is held at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Record Office (DR676/41/4791809).

<sup>32</sup> J. Dixon Hunt, *The Figure in the Landscape. Poetry, Painting, and Gardening during the Eighteenth Century*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore/London 1989, p. 199. For a different take on this subject see C. Winborn, *The Literary Economy of Jane Austen and George Crabbe*, Ashgate, Farnham 2004, pp. 134-135.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in C. Thacker, *The Genius of Gardening. The History of Gardens in Britain and Ireland*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1994, p. 243.

<sup>35</sup> *MP*, p. 53.

to the properties and vantages of a good shrubbery is repeated with enthusiastic accents in chapter twenty-two by Fanny Price and very closely recalls Repton's ideal of a garden where social and aesthetic purposes must be joined:

"This is pretty, very pretty," said Fanny, looking around her as they were thus sitting together one day; "every time I come into this shrubbery I am more struck with its growth and beauty. Three years ago, this was nothing but a rough hedgerow along the upper side of the field, never thought of as anything, or capable of becoming anything; and now it is converted into a walk, and it would be difficult to say whether most valuable as a convenience or an ornament [...] How wonderful, how very wonderful the operations of time, and the changes of the human mind!"<sup>36</sup>.

Suggestions of Austen's experience of Repton's work are not limited to his philosophy or ideals but also embrace very practical aspects and cover the entire *Mansfield Park*. First of all, there are powerful echoes in relation to the dimensions of the estates. When Thomas Leigh required Repton's service for the first time, it was for a property, Adlestrop, which measured roughly 100 acres. Stoneleigh's Abbey was a much grander estate and its grounds were about 700 acres<sup>37</sup>. Consequently, Rushworth's allusion to the small grounds of his friend compared to the great extension of his own park immediately invests the description with the tinge of a memory:

"Smith has not much above a hundred acres altogether in his grounds, which is little enough, and makes it more surprising that the place can have been so improved. Now, at Sotherton we have a good seven hundred, without reckoning the water meadows; so that I think, if so much could be done at Compton, we need not despair"<sup>38</sup>.

Stoneleigh Abbey is certainly the prototype of Sotherton Court, not only for its dimensions, but also for the description of the house itself. Stoneleigh was a "gabled and mulioned Elizabethan house to which had been added (1714-24) a large classical mansion of local stone"<sup>39</sup> just like Sotherton, which "was built in Elizabeth's time, and is a large, regular, brick building; heavy, but respectable looking, and has many good rooms"<sup>40</sup>. Furthermore, one of the additions proposed and realised by Repton at Stoneleigh was the creation of "a charming Wilderness"<sup>41</sup> and Sotherton can already boast one when the guests visit the grounds in chapter nine. The presence of water is another interesting element: in Stoneleigh Repton corrected the course of the river "bringing it nearer to the house by

<sup>36</sup> *MP*, p. 193.

<sup>37</sup> See M. Batey, *Jane Austen and the English Landscape*, p. 88.

<sup>38</sup> *MP*, p. 53.

<sup>39</sup> E. Malins, *Humphry Repton at Stoneleigh Abbey, Warwickshire*, p. 22.

<sup>40</sup> *MP*, p. 53.

<sup>41</sup> E. Malins, *Humphry Repton at Stoneleigh Abbey, Warwickshire*, p. 27.

constructing a wider channel to form an island, and by ensuring a sufficient flow of water by means of a weir and bridge”<sup>42</sup> and Rushworth communicates the same expectation for “his own” river: “there is a stream, which, I dare say, might be made a good deal of”<sup>43</sup>. Even more importantly, one of the main changes performed by Repton at Stoneleigh “was the removal of a prominent wall and line of young trees at the N.W. corner of the house, which cut the gardens in two and hid the river”<sup>44</sup> and Rushworth can foresee the same operation for his property:

There have been two or three fine old trees cut down, that grew too near the house, and it opens the prospect amazingly, which makes me think that Repton, or anybody of that sort, would certainly have the avenue at Sotherton down: the avenue that leads from the west front to the top of the hill<sup>45</sup>.

Naturally, Fanny’s response to this plan is an emotional appeal to the poet of the Picturesque, William Cowper: “Cut down an avenue! What a pity! Does it not make you think of Cowper? ‘Ye fallen avenues, once more I mourn your fate unmerited’”<sup>46</sup>.

However, Repton’s influence is not the only one to be discerned in Austen’s creation of Sotherton Court. Considering Austen’s admiration for the Picturesque, the presence of Gilpin’s ideas in some aspects of the description of the house is no surprise. First of all, in chapter eight, the first impression the reader gets of Sotherton Court is provided by Maria’s point of view:

She could not tell Miss Crawford that “those woods belonged to Sotherton,” she could not carelessly observe that “she believed that it was now all Mr. Rushworth’s property on each side of the road,” without elation of heart; and it was a pleasure to increase with their approach to the capital freehold mansion, and ancient manorial residence of the family, with all its rights of court-leet and court-baron<sup>47</sup>.

Miss Bertram’s triumph in the extension and importance of the property is due to the awareness that – as Gilpin explained in *Remarks on Forest Scenery*, 1791 – “the park [...] is one of the noblest appendages of a great house. Nothing gives a mansion so much dignity as these home demesnes; nor contributes more to mark it’s [sic] consequence” and that “A noble park therefore is the natural appendage of an ancient mansion”<sup>48</sup>. A lesson that

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>43</sup> *MP*, p. 53.

<sup>44</sup> E. Malins, *Humphry Repton at Stoneleigh Abbey, Warwickshire*, p. 26.

<sup>45</sup> *MP*, p. 53.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>47</sup> *MP*, p. 77.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in J. Dixon Hunt – P. Willis, *The Genius of the Place. The English Landscape Garden 1620-1820*, Paul Elk, London 1975, p. 338.

Austen's characters know very well and apply to the evaluation of a gentleman's property in every single novel (from *Northanger Abbey* to *Persuasion*, indeed, men are weighed according to their estates and incomes and women are valued by their dowries). Gilpin's description continues with his prescription for the perfect setting, "A great house stands most nobly on an elevated knoll, from whence it may overlook the distant country"<sup>49</sup> and Maria Bertram echoes this ideal through her disappointment:

It is not ugly, you see, at this end; there is some fine timber, but the situation of the house is dreadful. We go down hill to it for half a mile, and it is a pity, for it would not be an ill-looking place if it had a better approach<sup>50</sup>.

Nonetheless, Rushworth's optimism for the improvement work is perfectly compatible with a 'Gilpinesque' point of view: the cutting down of trees along the avenue aims at having "the road through the park" of "the same proportion" with the park, making it "spacious, or moderate, like the house it approaches"<sup>51</sup>. Finally, Gilpin gives Rushworth some hopes for the house location admitting the possibility of having a mansion that "stands with dignity, as Longleat does, in the centre of demesnes, which shelve gently down to it on every side"<sup>52</sup>.

### *The pleasure ground and the wilderness*

The pure aesthetic description of the artistic trends and the fashion that influenced the creation of Sotherton Court must now leave room to the symbolic and moral concerns developed in chapters nine and ten. We have seen how, in chapter eight, the approach to the house allows a gradual description of the park and main building. During the journey the characters all seem to enjoy the prospect and the ride in the open air, but, on the arrival of the party at the mansion, the atmosphere changes.

The guests are invited inside by Rushworth and his mother to have a light "collation"<sup>53</sup> before beginning the tour of the house. Wandering among "a number of rooms", all furnished with "solid mahogany, rich damask, marble, gilding, and carving" and numerous "family portraits"<sup>54</sup>, a slight sense of claustrophobia starts to seep into the general mood. When the party enters the family chapel, the threads that Austen is slowly weaving come together: just like a catalyzer, the chapel exposes the tensions and troubles among the characters. With a blunder, Mary criticizes the role and importance of clergymen just

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>50</sup> *MP*, p. 77.

<sup>51</sup> J. Dixon Hunt – P. Willis, *The Genius of the Place*, p. 340.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 339.

<sup>53</sup> *MP*, p. 79.

<sup>54</sup> *MP*, pp. 79-80.

a few moments before discovering the fact that Edmund himself is due to take orders in a short time. This event provokes a deep uneasiness and disappointment in Mary together with irritation in Edmund and Fanny. But they are not the only “triangle” to suffer the atmosphere of the chapel: Maria Bertram and Henry Crawford feel an evident disquietude at being in the place in which the former’s marriage with Rushworth will part them forever. Crawford’s innuendo – “I do not like to see Miss Bertram so near the altar”<sup>55</sup> – is a bit too open to be missed by the jealous Julia who, as consequence, jokes ostensibly on the possibility of arranging Maria’s marriage on the spot thus provoking the discomfort of everybody except the naïve Mr Rushworth.

It is at this point, when “all seemed to feel that they had been there long enough”<sup>56</sup>, that, with manifest relief, the characters leave the chapel for the open air. The transformation of the atmosphere is sudden but unmistakable:

the young people, meeting with an outward door, temptingly open on a flight of steps which led immediately to turf and shrubs, and all the sweets of pleasure-grounds, as by one impulse, one wish for air and liberty, all walked out<sup>57</sup>.

The pleasure ground, the specific term used to indicate the part of the garden closer to the house<sup>58</sup>, was the area that hosted the common social activities of the inhabitants of a mansion who could enjoy open air pastimes, stroll on the “elegant gravel walk” and wander among “knots of flowers, and flowering shrubs”<sup>59</sup> or, as in Sotherton, plants and pheasants<sup>60</sup>. Again, as the description of this area goes on, the echo of Stoneleigh Abbey – “the immediate garden had remained unaltered. What other family would have left a seventeenth-century bowling green adjacent to the house?”<sup>61</sup> – resounds:

The lawn, bounded on each side by a high wall, contained beyond the first planted area a bowling-green, and beyond the bowling-green a long terrace walk, backed by iron palisades, and commanding a view over them into the tops of the trees of the wilderness immediately adjoining<sup>62</sup>.

But this pleasure ground appears as well as a symbolic place, a “garden of pleasure”, a *locus amoenus* that is “a condensation of semantic values, a repository of meanings and symbols, a workshop of signs, as multilayered as the human soul of which it is the allegory”<sup>63</sup>. The

<sup>55</sup> *MP*, p. 83.

<sup>56</sup> *MP*, p. 84.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>58</sup> J. Dixon Hunt – P. Willis, *The Genius of the Place*, p. 341.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>60</sup> *MP*, p. 85.

<sup>61</sup> E. Malins, *Humphry Repton at Stoneleigh Abbey, Warwickshire*, p. 22.

<sup>62</sup> *MP*, p. 85.

<sup>63</sup> “un condensato di valenze semantiche, un serbatoio di significati e di simboli, laboratorio di segni, stratifi-

door “temptingly open”<sup>64</sup> is only the first of a series of locked and unlocked gates that will open upon new spaces and new temptations. Here begins the roving of the characters through what may be called a *paysage moralisé*<sup>65</sup>, a place where, along a path made up of different ‘stations’ and ‘trials’, the temperament and virtue of every character are put to hard test and where the real moral fibre of each one is revealed.

The first ‘station’ is the wilderness, proposed by Mrs Rushworth as an interesting destination, a place “new to all the party”. By adding also that the “Miss Bertrams have never seen the wilderness yet”<sup>66</sup>, through Mrs Rushworth’s voice, Austen seems ironically to preannounce that the readers have never seen the characters as they are going to appear soon, free and unruled, victims of their whims and passions. The wilderness was a part of the park where different species of plants were put and disposed in an apparently casual order – or sometimes on the form of a maze<sup>67</sup> – in order to give the impression of entering into an area of undomesticated vegetation, where real and wild nature could meet. Sotherton’s wilderness is “a planted wood of about two acres” that “though laid out with too much regularity, was darkness and shade, and natural beauty, compared with the bowling-green and the terrace”<sup>68</sup>. The characters divide into three groups – Fanny, Mary and Edmund; Maria with Rushworth and Henry; Mrs Norris and Mrs Rushworth with Julia – and, so separated, venture into the wilderness.

The first group to move outside of the terrace is the one composed by Fanny, Edmund and Mary. It is the latter, showing an adventurous and restless temperament, to propose the walk:

“This is insufferably hot,” said Miss Crawford, when they had taken one turn on the terrace, and were drawing a second time to the door in the middle which opened to the wilderness. “Shall any of us object to being comfortable? Here is a nice little wood, if one can but get into it. What happiness if the door should not be locked! but of course it is; for in these great places the gardeners are the only people who can go where they like”<sup>69</sup>.

Mary’s assured certainty that the door is locked – the second “gate” of the path – is probably a subconscious reflection of her awareness of the fascination and allure of the “idea of wandering through and perhaps even losing oneself in the natural garden”<sup>70</sup>. The door, however, proves to be open and the guests can freely roam through the woods. After a while, they decide to take some rest on a bench but soon Mary grows restless again – “I

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cato quanto l’anima di cui è stato fatto allegoria.” M. Bellorini, *First Follow Nature*, p. 17. The translation is mine.

<sup>64</sup> *MP*, p. 85.

<sup>65</sup> M. Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque*, p. 50.

<sup>66</sup> *MP*, p. 84.

<sup>67</sup> See M. Batey, *Jane Austen and the English Landscape*, p. 25.

<sup>68</sup> *MP*, pp. 85-86.

<sup>69</sup> *MP*, p. 85.

<sup>70</sup> M. Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque*, p. 62.

must move,” said she; “resting fatigues me”<sup>71</sup> – and she entices Edmund to join her for another walk leaving Fanny to “rest” alone with the promise to be back in a few minutes. The stratagem to steal some privacy is evident – “Fanny said she was rested, and would have moved too, but this was not suffered”<sup>72</sup> – and Mary and Edmund willingly decide to walk alone and “unchaperoned” in the wilderness. In this way, they fail their “moral test”. As they relate at their return, another unfastened gate led the couple to an isolated part of the park where, in complete intimacy, they were able to sit and converse but, in so doing, they did not realise that they were putting their own pleasure before propriety and respect and, engrossed by their mutual attraction, they completely forgot Fanny for more than an hour:

They were just returned into the wilderness from the park, to which a sidegate, not fastened, had tempted them very soon after their leaving her, and they had been across a portion of the park into the very avenue which Fanny had been hoping the whole morning to reach at last, and had been sitting down under one of the trees. This was their history. It was evident that they had been spending their time pleasantly, and were not aware of the length of their absence<sup>73</sup>.

The improper behaviour allowed by the privacy of the wilderness is only the first of the failed trials which Fanny, from her static position on the bench, will witness. The wanderings of the young couples – or triangles – in the woods, like a suggestive reminiscence of “a midsummer day’s dream and ultimately a nightmare”<sup>74</sup> will lead to another gate and another moral test.

### *The locked gate*

The bench where Fanny sits overlooks an area where, beyond the boundaries of the wilderness and separated by a ha-ha, the open park begins. This area, which belongs more to the countryside than to the house garden, represents the last ‘station’ of the *paysage moralisé* of Sotherton Park. The ha-ha was a sunk fence, a ditch, dug in order to separate the grounds immediately adjacent to the house from the rest of the park where cattle and wild animals could roam and graze. This architectural device, invented in the eighteenth century, could be considered “an invisible wall” that “enabled the owner to ‘look out’ into the countryside without the need for a wall”<sup>75</sup>. But the ha-ha is not the only barrier to separate the wilderness from the park; the real obstacle is an iron gate, the only locked door

<sup>71</sup> *MP*, p. 90.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>73</sup> *MP*, p. 96.

<sup>74</sup> A.G. Sulloway, *Jane Austen and the Province of Womanhood*, p. 211.

<sup>75</sup> C. Thacker, *The Genius of Gardening*, p. 167.



met by the characters during their walk. The symbolism of the locked gate is extremely powerful: the last station is a forbidden ground, an anti-Eden to which the characters will only access by escaping from the protected area of the house garden. As Tristram interestingly points out, “[in] the incident at Sotherton, [...] the movement from the garden into the park, necessitating a key, invites the dangers that Clarissa encounters when she escapes from the protective garden wall of Harlowe Place”<sup>76</sup>.

Chapter ten opens in the same situation where chapter nine had closed: Fanny sitting on the bench and waiting for Edmund and Mary to return. During her static wait, Fanny, as “the moral center of the novel”<sup>77</sup> encounters all the other young characters that come and go, ready for their temptations and their trials. From the “zone of safety”<sup>78</sup> of the bench at the limit of the wilderness, Fanny, untouched by the allurements of the park, observes the fuss and flurry of the impossible or unrequited lovers.

The first group to reach her are the members of another triangle: Mr Rushworth, Maria Bertram and Henry Crawford. These three people represent the official reason for the expedition at Sotherton and, apparently, are performing an accurate inspection of the grounds that would allow Crawford to express all his taste and experience and suggest to Rushworth the best improvements. However, the real drive that moves the characters is the forbidden passion between Maria and Henry. And indeed, the couple of future adulterous lovers will be the first to trespass the locked gate and enter the forbidden ground.

Resting for a minute near Fanny’s bench, Maria notices the iron gate and the park beyond and expresses the desire to continue there their exploration. Henry approves her idea suggesting the direction of a small hill that could “give them exactly the requisite command of the house”<sup>79</sup>. But the locked iron gate is an obstacle to the fulfilling of their wish. Rushworth is a correct and honest man and immediately finds the most obvious, and proper, solution: “he would go and fetch the key”<sup>80</sup> while the others could wait for him with Fanny at the bench. Naturally the symbolic interpretation is quite obvious and, referring to it, Heydt Stevenson speaks of “the sexualized landscape at Sotherton”<sup>81</sup>. Rushworth is the owner of the land and the future husband of Maria: they must wait for his key to open the gate and Maria cannot walk alone with Henry but must wait for Rushworth. That would be the correct choice and in this way they would pass their moral test. But, quite obviously, this does not happen.

As soon as Rushworth is gone, Maria and Henry hold a conversation rich in double entendres:

“I do not think that I shall ever see Sotherton again with so much pleasure as I do now. Another summer will hardly improve it to me.”  
After a moment’s embarrassment the lady replied, “You are too much a man

<sup>76</sup> P. Tristram, *Living Space in Fact and Fiction*, p. 244.

<sup>77</sup> B. Britton Wenner, *Prospect and Refuge*, p. 70.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>79</sup> *MP*, p. 92.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>81</sup> J. Heydt-Stevenson, “Slipping into the Ha-Ha”: *Bawdy Humor and Body Politics in Jane Austen’s Novels* “Nineteenth-Century Literature”, LV, 2000, 3, p. 324.

of the world not to see with the eyes of the world. If other people think Sotherton improved, I have no doubt that you will”<sup>82</sup>.

Henry is merely flirting with Maria, but she is on the verge of discovering the depth of her feelings realizing the mistake of getting engaged with Rushworth. As a result, when Crawford teases her again, her reply is intense and dramatic, almost an open confession of her sad truth:

“Your prospects, however, are too fair to justify want of spirits. You have a very smiling scene before you.”  
 “Do you mean literally or figuratively? Literally, I conclude. Yes, certainly, the sun shines, and the park looks very cheerful. But unluckily that iron gate, that ha-ha, give me a feeling of restraint and hardship. ‘I cannot get out, as the starling said’”<sup>83</sup>.

The quotation from Laurence Sterne’s *Sentimental Journey* “becomes a way of predicting plot”<sup>84</sup>. Maria feels trapped in a golden cage into which she has willingly entered. Henry appears to her to be the only possible way out of it and her acceptance of his temptation is the prelude to the real betrayal, the adulterous relationship that they will entertain after Maria’s marriage with Rushworth. Crawford, perfectly understanding Maria’s feelings and perceiving her readiness, tempts her to “sin” by provoking her sense of independence and autonomy:

“And for the world you would not get out without the key and without Mr. Rushworth’s authority and protection, or I think you might with little difficulty pass round the edge of the gate, here, with my assistance; I think it might be done, if you really wished to be more at large, and could allow yourself to think it not prohibited”<sup>85</sup>.

Naturally, Maria’s response is precisely what Henry expects: “Prohibited! nonsense! I certainly can get out that way, and I will”<sup>86</sup>. Maria craves for Henry’s “assistance” in “passing round the gate” to be “more at large” and, even if the action is evidently “prohibited”, she refuses to see the impropriety in order to move towards the beguiling sense of freedom that the forbidden ground seems to promise. As Marsden Gillis very effectively points out, here “transgression is literally played out before us”<sup>87</sup>.

<sup>82</sup> *MP*, p. 92.

<sup>83</sup> *MP*, p. 93.

<sup>84</sup> B. Britton Wenner, *Prospect and Refuge*, p. 71.

<sup>85</sup> *MP*, p. 93.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>87</sup> C. Marsden Gillis, *Garden, Sermon, and Novel in Mansfield Park*, p. 121.

Fanny, “feeling all this to be wrong”<sup>88</sup>, demonstrates a strong sense of propriety and a farsightedness that, perhaps not completely consciously, make her foresee the direst consequences<sup>89</sup>: “you will certainly hurt yourself against those spikes; you will tear your gown; you will be in danger of slipping into the ha-ha. You had better not go”<sup>90</sup>. Evidence of her improper behaviour, and vaguely hinting at sexual imagery<sup>91</sup>, the “tearing of the gown” and the “spikes”, are immediately perceived as dangers to be avoided by choosing the other option: to wait for Rushworth’s key. Maria’s failure of her test will not have immediate consequences – “I and my gown are alive and well”<sup>92</sup> – but, in the long term, Maria’s escapade will lead her to ruin.

The future adulterous lovers immediately disappear from Fanny’s sight looking for some privacy and leaving her alone again, worried and shocked by their behaviour. The next character to reach her is Julia who, finally freed from the company of the two chaperones, is desperately looking for Crawford. On hearing Fanny’s account of Maria and Henry’s going through the locked gate she exclaims “I think I am equal to as much as Maria, even without help”<sup>93</sup> and she immediately sets off to follow them. Austen’s choice to make her pronounce this sentence has, again, a strong prophesising value: Julia will commit another kind of improper action, certainly less serious than Maria’s, but she will do everything by herself, without Crawford’s assistance. In chapter forty-six, just after the news of Maria’s adultery, Fanny is informed of Julia’s elopement with Mr Yates and, later in chapter forty-eight we are also acquainted with the real reason for it: the desire to avoid the return to a house where the sin of her sister would have resulted in a stricter control over herself. As Austen explains “Maria’s guilt had induced Julia’s folly”<sup>94</sup>. In this way, the sentence that Julia pronounces just before trespassing the locked gate “I am not obliged to punish myself for her sins”<sup>95</sup> sounds particularly ironical reread in the light of the future incident.

Mr. Rushworth’s return, finally, concludes the allegorical descent: just like Fanny, Rushworth is exempt from any kind of temptation, he is the master of the house, the owner of the entire place and his key is the only legitimate tool to open every gate. Rushworth’s immunity is in part due to a certain dullness of mind and his lack of reaction to the many flirtatious exchanges between Maria and Henry confirms this. However, he is not so dense as not to see the reason behind Maria’s decision to trespass the gate with Crawford, as his unexpected question to Fanny clearly demonstrates: “Pray, Miss Price, are you such a great admirer of this Mr. Crawford as some people are?”<sup>96</sup>.

When finally the young people have all finished their rambles, it is time to go back

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>89</sup> See also the idea of ‘prevention’ in E. Wright, *Prevention as Narrative in Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park*, “Studies in the Novel”, XLII, 2010, 4, pp. 377-394.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>91</sup> See J. Heydt-Stevenson, *Slipping into the Ha-Ha*, p. 310.

<sup>92</sup> *MP*, p. 93.

<sup>93</sup> *MP*, p. 94.

<sup>94</sup> *MP*, p. 433.

<sup>95</sup> *MP*, p. 94.

<sup>96</sup> *MP*, p. 95.

to Mansfield Park. The adventure has ended, the midsummer day's dream has finished leaving a vague sense of obnubilation and some dim presages for the future. On the way back, the light-heartedness and the expectations felt by the characters at their arrival are replaced by disappointment and irritation: "Their spirits were in general exhausted; and to determine whether the day had afforded most pleasure or pain, might occupy the meditations of almost all"<sup>97</sup>.

### *The moral of improvement*

What might, at the beginning, have appeared as an expedition through an Eden, has revealed itself to be a journey across a "flawed paradise"<sup>98</sup> where forbidden fruits can be plucked at every 'station' and lead to sin and tragedy. Many months later (in chapter twenty-five), the young protagonists Fanny, Mary, Edmund and Henry will remember that day with a mixture of embarrassment and reprobation. Miss Crawford's synthetic description of their actions has an astonishing depth of meaning: "There we went, and there we came home again; and what was done there is not to be told!"<sup>99</sup>. Mary is obviously referring to the official outcome of the expedition: the improvements suggested by Henry that have changed radically the aspect and prospect of Sotherton Court. Nonetheless, much more can be inferred from this sentence: "what was done there" cannot be narrated because many censurable things have happened that day that must remain a secret.

Understanding perfectly the double connotation of Mary's sentence, Henry replies understating the events and trying to find a justification for the general behaviour: "I cannot say there was much done at Sotherton; but it was a hot day, and we were all walking after each other, and bewildered"<sup>100</sup>. He also manifests a certain regret and unease, affirming to have changed his mind since that day: "I should be sorry to have my powers of planning judged of by the day at Sotherton. I see things very differently now"<sup>101</sup>. The problem is that no real change, no real growth has followed the Sotherton episode. The allegory has not been understood. The premises for ruin set at Sotherton are still at work under the surface. The adultery will be consumed and the elopement will take place.

The following dialogue, where Crawford appears to be still toying with plans for improvement, reinforces the feeling that the characters have not much changed. This time the object of Crawford's attention is Edmund's future parsonage Thornton Lacey. Austen's judgment here is strong and direct; this time there is no room for ambiguity: Henry's idea of improvement is completely wrong because it derives from a wrong assumption and pursues a wrong aim. For Thornton Lacy, Crawford forecasts at least a five summers'

<sup>97</sup> *MP*, p. 99.

<sup>98</sup> A.G. Sulloway, *Jane Austen and the Province of Womanhood*, p. 212.

<sup>99</sup> *MP*, p. 226.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibidem*

work for the place to be “liveable”<sup>102</sup> and proposes radical changes such as the removal and displacement of the farmyard in order to hide the blacksmith’s shop, the re-orientation of the main facade of the house, the creation of a new garden, the annexation of the adjacent meadows and some alteration to the stream<sup>103</sup>. The wrong assumption is that Edmund will be able and willing to perform such an expensive improvement of his property, an idea that the latter immediately rectifies: “I must be satisfied with rather less ornament and beauty”<sup>104</sup>. The wrong aim is to lead Edmund to change his property’s appearance to gratify Mary’s mundane ambitions. Whereas Edmund, in fact, is perfectly satisfied to give his house “the air of a gentleman’s residence”<sup>105</sup>, Crawford intends to transform it into a “place”, a term that at the time was used to identify a gentleman’s “mansion, a country house with its surroundings, the principal residence on an estate”<sup>106</sup>, and make Edmund appear “the great landholder of the parish”<sup>107</sup>.

This is the kind of improvement that Austen disapproves of, a project that aims at deceiving the onlookers making the landowner appear more important and rich than he really is. As Duckworth clearly explains,

“improvements” or the manner in which individuals relate to their cultural inheritance, are a means of distinguishing responsible from irresponsible action and of defining a proper attitude toward social change<sup>108</sup>.

Henry Crawford’s idea of improvement and his social behaviour are utterly irresponsible and, consequently, immoral. Instead, the responsible and moral plans for improvement are those made by Edmund for his parsonage, which will be realized with his good sense. As Austen clearly demonstrates in *Mansfield Park*, “good taste here is always a moral quality”<sup>109</sup>.

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<sup>102</sup> *MP*, p. 223.

<sup>103</sup> *MP*, pp. 223-224.

<sup>104</sup> *MP*, p. 224.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>106</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>107</sup> *MP*, p. 225.

<sup>108</sup> A.M. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate*, p. ix. See also A.M. Duckworth, *Mansfield Park and Estate Improvements*, p. 126.

<sup>109</sup> Quoted in M. Andrews (and attributed to Alexander Pope), *The Search for the Picturesque*, p. 52.