

INTRODUCTION

COMPOSITION AND PUBLICATION

Mansfield Park, the third of Jane Austen's novels to be published, appeared in three volumes in May 1814. It was the first to be written, and probably to be conceived, after Austen settled down to write at Chawton in 1809. Her first book, *Sense and Sensibility*, was accepted by the publisher, Thomas Egerton, by February 1811, and according to her note, *Mansfield Park* was 'begun somewhere about Feby 1811 – Finished soon after June 1813'.¹ Yet the approximation of these dates contrasts with the precise ones her sister Cassandra gives for the composition of *Emma* and *Persuasion*, *Emma* taking fourteen months from 21 January 1814 to 29 March 1815, and *Persuasion* the year from 8 August 1815 to 6 August 1816.² On this dating, *Mansfield Park* took about twenty-eight months to write, compared to the slightly longer *Emma*, which took half that time. And though the earlier novel, according to the memorandum, was more or less 'finished' in June, it was eight or nine months more before the manuscript was taken to London to be published. Why, on this evidence, *Mansfield Park* took so long to write, and why it was then held back from publication – if this indeed was the case – are significant questions. It is clear, though, that for Jane Austen this novel's publication was very important. Explicitly set in the contemporary world, and with several references to current events

¹ Jane Austen, *Plan of a Novel and Other Documents* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), facsimile following p. 35.

² R. W. Chapman (ed.), *The Novels of Jane Austen*, vol. 6: *Minor Works* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), plate facing p. 242. Cassandra's note repeats her sister's dates for *Mansfield Park*.

Introduction

and controversies, *Mansfield Park* marked the beginning of a new phase of her writing.

These memoranda may conceivably suggest that Austen was merely planning the novel in early 1811. Deirdre Le Faye comments that ‘it seems unlikely that the actual writing of this work could have started at so early a date’ as February 1811, since Austen was then busy with both *Sense and Sensibility* (correcting proofs) and revising *Pride and Prejudice*.³ She conjectures that *Mansfield Park* was begun after *Pride and Prejudice* had been finished, ‘probably in the spring of 1812’, thus reducing the time taken in actual writing to just about the same as *Emma*. References in Austen’s surviving letters during 1813 have usually been assumed to indicate the progress of the novel’s composition, and might support Le Faye’s suggestion, if we assume that Jane Austen’s requests for information refer to a project that is at that moment on hand. Jane’s letter to Cassandra at Steventon of 24 January 1813, for example, mentions that there is no Government House in Gibraltar, so that ‘I must alter it to the Commissioner’s’. (A speech of William Price in vol. 2, ch. 6 casually refers to the women’s fashions he has seen there.) In the same letter, Austen mentions that the party at the rectory the previous night formed a ‘round Table’: ‘I made my Mother an excuse, & came away; leaving just as many [six] for *their* round Table, as there were at M^{rs} Grants. – I wish they might be as agreeable a set.’⁴ This is a reference to the ‘round game’ played at the parsonage by those characters not occupied with Whist, which occurs in the next chapter of vol. 2.

But the letter assumes Cassandra’s knowledge of the novel, and the tone of shared familiarity resembles Austen’s references to incidents in other novels like Frances Burney’s: it is therefore possible that Austen’s writing has advanced well beyond this – not half-way – point at this date. The reference to ‘Ordination’ in the next letter of 29 January 1813, in which it appears that Jane has asked Cassandra,

³ Deirdre Le Faye, *Jane Austen: A Family Record*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 197.

⁴ Deirdre Le Faye (ed.), *Jane Austen’s Letters*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 199.

Introduction

at that time staying with their eldest brother James, a cleric, to confirm some information – ‘I am glad to find your enquiries have ended so well. —If you c^d discover whether Northamptonshire is a Country of Hedgerows, I s^d be glad again.—’⁵ – probably refers to Edmund’s visit to his friend near Peterborough, where ‘they were to receive ordination in the course of the Christmas week’ (vol. 2, ch. 8). But it sounds, again, as if this is already written into the text, since Austen is pleased to find from Cassandra that what she has assumed is correct. The reference to hedgerows may point to a moment in vol. 2, ch. 4, when Fanny declares ‘Three years ago, this was nothing but a rough hedgerow’, but R. W. Chapman’s speculation that Austen had some idea of using it as a device to get Fanny to overhear a conversation seems more plausible.⁶ Whatever one concludes, it is notable that, on the sisters’ timetable, it would have taken Austen almost two years, and on Le Faye’s nine or ten months, to reach the twenty-fifth chapter out of forty-eight by this date, leaving the rest of the novel, more than half in length, to be finished within the next six months. This is not impossible, but it might well be that *Mansfield Park* has been written out by this time, having been begun nearly two years before, and that it is now being revised, or rewritten, or that the author is polishing it up.

At any rate, work on the novel must have been interrupted, and in part overshadowed, by the ‘long illness’ and inevitable death of Eliza, the wife of Jane Austen’s brother Henry, on 25 April 1813. Jane Austen went to their London home in Henrietta Street on 22 April, coming back to Chawton on 1 May, and returning later. But by mid-year (6 July) she was able to announce – in the postscript to a letter to her brother Frank, then in Sweden – that she has made a nice profit on *Sense and Sensibility*. With the money she had from selling *Pride and Prejudice*, she writes, ‘I have now . . . written myself into £250.—which only makes me long for more.— I have something in hand – which I hope on the credit of P. & P.

⁵ Le Faye (ed.), *Letters*, p. 202.

⁶ R. W. Chapman, *Jane Austen: Facts and Problems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), p. 83.

Introduction

will sell well, tho' not half so entertaining.'⁷ This 'something in hand' evidently involves mentioning 'two or three' of Frank's 'old Ships' (which would be in vol. 3, ch. 7) and she asks whether he minds. So the Portsmouth chapters are certainly already written. Having something 'in hand' does not necessarily mean, though, 'completed and ready for publication'. Austen is perhaps as likely to mean something in progress, being dealt with at this moment, or in other words, in the course of being revised.

Jane Austen might then be still working over the novel at this time, and therefore 'Finished soon after June 1813' may not tell the full story of the novel's completion. Judging from the surviving manuscript of the cancelled chapters of *Persuasion*, Austen worked on her texts, revised phrasing, rewrote paragraphs (which involved pasting a new version over the original) and inserted substantial additional passages, in the process of revising a text that was itself then further revised, and then largely discarded for a new version. The manuscript of *Sanditon*, though it is evidently a first draft, also suggests that some intense revision took place as a novel was being put together and also, presumably, at later stages. This may give a clue to the long period of *Mansfield Park's* gestation, and also perhaps to the delay, after it was said to be 'in hand', in getting the manuscript to the publisher.

Given Jane Austen's keenness to publish, and to make money, this slowness is intriguing. In September 1813 Jane was at Henry's again, but only for a brief three-day visit. Frank had evidently pointed out that if she used the genuine names of his ships in the novel her authorship would soon be out. 'I was previously aware', she writes in her letter to him of 25 September 1813, 'of what I sh^d be laying myself open to—but the truth is that the Secret has spread so far as to be scarcely the Shadow of a secret now—& that I beleive whenever the 3^d appears, I shall not even attempt to tell Lies about it.—I shall rather try to make all the Money than all the Mystery I can of it.'⁸ Austen could easily have used fictional names for the ships: she is thus in this novel implicitly throwing off the

⁷ Le Faye (ed.), *Letters*, p. 217. ⁸ Le Faye (ed.), *Letters*, p. 231.

Introduction

mantle of anonymity. One explanation for *Mansfield Park's* being held back is that Egerton, Austen's publisher, may have wanted to delay it. In a postscript to her letter she told Frank 'There is to be a 2^d Edition of S. & S. Egerton advises it.'⁹ She revised that novel, and it was published, together with Egerton's (unrevised) second edition of *Pride and Prejudice* at the end of October 1813.¹⁰ The publisher, reasonably, may have wanted to make as much as possible out of the earlier novels, before their share of the market was contested by the appearance of a new novel by the same author, and Austen, who was risking money by bringing out a second edition of *Sense and Sensibility*, might have felt disinclined to risk even more on *Mansfield Park* till she saw how well the second edition of the earlier novel sold. During September and October of this year she was on a long visit to Godmersham Park, her second brother Edward's house in Kent, from whence he took her to London on 13 November. She stayed with Henry for a fortnight.¹¹ It might have been on this visit that Henry negotiated the acceptance of *Mansfield Park* by Egerton, or it might have been on another, in January 1814. At this stage Henry had certainly not read the new novel. Did Egerton agree to publish the book also without reading it? (He was to praise its 'Morality' and its lack of 'weak parts'.) But then, why another delay, between mid November and early March – three-and-a-half months – before the manuscript was delivered? Perhaps it was just the weather that impeded Jane Austen from taking it to London before March – it was very cold and foggy that winter – or perhaps she was not quite happy with her text.

An agreement certainly was reached with Egerton either late in 1813 or early in 1814 that this novel would be published, like *Sense and Sensibility*, 'on commission'. This meant that Egerton would undertake all the industrial side of the publishing venture – purchasing paper at the best price, arranging printers and distribution, etc; whilst Henry and Jane would see to the editorial side, and be responsible for proof-reading and corrections. For his work, and

⁹ Le Faye (ed.), *Letters*, p. 232.

¹⁰ Le Faye, *Family Record*, p. 207.

¹¹ Le Faye, *Family Record*, p. 208.

Introduction

risking his initial outlay, the publisher would charge the author a commission of 10 per cent on sales.¹² Jane Austen would retain the copyright. In fact it seems likely that the Austens took a very active role in the novel's publication process. Travelling together in the carriage from Chawton to London in early March, Jane and Henry read the fair copy of the novel – the manuscript ready for the printers. Then Egerton, following the usual practice of farming copy out to different printers, sent the first and the third volumes in Jane Austen's fair copy to G. Sidney, of Northumberland Street, off the Strand, whom he had previously used for the second and third volumes of *Pride and Prejudice*, and the second volume to Charles Roworth of Bell Yard, Temple Bar.

Jane's being in London at this time, coupled with her eagerness for profit, suggest some speculations. A tantalising fragment of a letter written from Henry's address on 21 March, meaning that Jane had been in London for three weeks, a long visit, contains the phrases 'and only just time enough for what is to be done. And all this, with very few acquaintance in Town & going to no Parties & living very quietly!' With no parties, and few acquaintance, what is Miss Jane Austen (if she is speaking of herself and not of Henry) occupying herself with in town? It seems plausible that she is working on the proof sheets as they arrive from the two printers. She adds 'Perhaps before the end of April, *Mansfield Park* by the author of *S & S*.—P. & P. may be in the World.'¹³ This estimate, not so far off the mark, contrasts with her pessimistic estimate of the progress of *Sense and Sensibility* in 1811, when on 25 April she had said 'I have scarcely a hope of its being out in June' and had actually to wait till November, despite, as she writes, Henry's hurrying the printer. It suggests that the Austens (both of them on the spot for the whole printing process this time) really now have the novel 'in hand', that they are working actively and energetically with the publisher and printers to get this one out, and possibly making up for lost time.

¹² Jan Fergus, *Jane Austen: A Literary Life* (London: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 16–17.

¹³ Le Faye (ed.), *Letters*, p. 262.

Introduction

The book was advertised as ‘this day . . . published’ in the *Star* on 9 May 1814, which, it seems, was correct.¹⁴

It still remains rather a mystery why the novel took so long to write, and why it was so long before it was handed over to the publisher. I speculate that *Mansfield Park* is a novel that has been carefully revised, and in places, perhaps, thoroughly rewritten. It is unlikely, since paper was so expensive, that Austen actually rewrote the whole novel before she copied it out for the printers; but it is likely that before she was ready to submit the volumes to the publisher, she went over her manuscript. In this period she could check details: whether ordination could take place during the Christmas week, such things as the names of ships or the distances between places, and possibly add some items to make the book more vivid. One sign of this revision process might be the double time scheme of the novel. There is no reason to dispute Chapman’s correlation, in the first appendix to his 1923 edition, of the calendar of its events, beginning with the ball on 22 December, with the calendar of 1808–9. When William Price earlier declares ‘This is the Assembly night’ at Portsmouth, this correlation would almost certainly make that day a Thursday, which was correct. But this calendar does not fit with other references such as to the *Quarterly Reviews* whose pages are supposedly turned over at Sotherton in mid-1808, since that journal was first published in February 1809. Such an oversight might suggest that Jane Austen, coming back to the first volume after several months (perhaps more than a year), has decided to ignore the dating entailed by her original mapping of the time scheme. Why should she be pedantic about it anyway? When Fanny Price, at Portsmouth, notes that Easter was ‘particularly late this year’, the calendar of 1809 is also disregarded. This reference, very late in the novel (vol. 3, ch. 14), might also suggest that Austen, writing, or rewriting, in 1813 when Easter was indeed very late, has forgotten, or abandoned, a scheme set out in 1811. Most writers would certainly want to return to the earlier chapters of a novel that

¹⁴ David Gilson, *A Bibliography of Jane Austen*, 2nd edn (Winchester: St Paul’s Bibliographies, and New Castle, Del.: Oak Knoll Press, 1997), p. 49.

Introduction

is completed so long after they first put pen to paper. 'I hope when you have written a great deal more', her aunt advises Anna Austen, a few months later, on 9 September, 'you will be equal to scratching out some of the past'.¹⁵

Both Jane and Henry Austen must have realised that a bad bargain had been made when, probably to save Henry trouble during his wife's fatal illness, Jane Austen had sold the copyright of *Pride and Prejudice* to Egerton outright. By October 1813, *Pride and Prejudice* has been well received, and gone into a second edition. Jane Austen, as her letters to Frank suggest, is now a confident, nearly professional and successful author. This new novel will consolidate her reputation, and recover some of the money that, through circumstances, she has forfeited with *Pride and Prejudice*. Like Henry, at this time a successful banker, she is ambitious and, as she was later to say, 'greedy' for more. These assumptions would find some confirmation in details of the novel's first publication. Once with the publisher, the first edition of *Mansfield Park* was produced quickly and, it seems, cheaply. In the arrangements for publishing 'on commission', printing and paper costs were charged to the author. The paper used for *Mansfield Park* is thinner than the paper used for *Pride and Prejudice*, and because each page has twenty-five, not twenty-three lines as in the earlier novels published by Egerton and printed by the same printers, it looks as though they were under instructions to save money on paper.¹⁶ Almost certainly the edition was of a cautious 1,250 copies.¹⁷

It is plausible to suggest then that Jane and Henry, who might have felt he had let her down over *Pride and Prejudice*, together determined to make *Mansfield Park* yield as much profit as possible to the author. *Sense and Sensibility* had been published at 15s. When *Pride and Prejudice* was announced, '18s', Austen wrote indignantly to Cassandra on seeing Egerton's advertisement in January 1813, 'He shall ask £1-1- for my two next, & £1-8- for my stupidest

¹⁵ Le Faye (ed.), *Letters*, p. 276. ¹⁶ Fergus, *Literary Life*, p. 144.

¹⁷ Chapman, *Facts and Problems*, p. 157; Fergus, *Literary Life*, p. 145.

Introduction

of all.¹⁸ She is already regretting the decision to sell *Pride and Prejudice* outright, and determined to publish for herself from now on. In the event *Mansfield Park* was published again at 18s, but (partly because of the care taken over the printing) Austen did make money. Most calculations suggest that her profit, after paying Egerton commission, was between £310 and £350, about three times as much as the sum for which she had sold *Pride and Prejudice*. The novel was not reviewed, but Austen's surmise that 'on the credit of P. & P.' it would 'sell well' was correct. She tells her niece Fanny Knight in a letter of 18 November 1814 that 'the first Edit: of M. P. is all sold', and that Henry 'is rather wanting me to come to Town, to settle about a 2^d Edit:'.¹⁹

The pressure that Austen indicates in the fragment of her letter from London during the printing of *Mansfield Park* may go some way towards explaining why this first edition of *Mansfield Park* is badly printed. It is a text with many rather obvious errors. But novels were not highly regarded, and the Austens may have struggled to get the printers to do even the poor job they did. As the cheapness of the printing and the original binding in plain boards suggest, *Mansfield Park* of 1814 is a product, like Austen's earlier novels, destined in large part for the circulating library market. It is usually suggested that these, by this time established in most towns, large and small, would have taken at least three or four hundred of a new publication likely to appeal to their readers. There were many non-commercial book clubs too, and these might also order any successful new novel. Since *Pride and Prejudice* had certainly been a success (Egerton's second edition is advertised at the back of his issue of *Mansfield Park*), the advance orders for *Mansfield Park* are likely to have been on the high side. Three-volume novels were the pulp fiction of the day: their shelf-life was short, three months if you were lucky, and those unsold, then as now, were remaindered or pulped. These were objects to be consumed; read and disposed of. But at 18s, *Mansfield Park* was not cheap. As the proprietors of circulating

¹⁸ Le Faye (ed.), *Letters*, 29 January 1813, p. 201.

¹⁹ Le Faye (ed.), *Letters*, p. 281.

Introduction

libraries advertised, one could borrow and read many volumes for less than that sum. You did not expect to reread a novel, so the ordinary gentleman or lady with a modest income – the audience to which Austen's novels are plainly addressed – rarely bought them. For the same outlay you could borrow many from the local library and return them often, as Mary Musgrove does in *Persuasion* (vol. 2, ch. 2). As Robert Southey wrote in his *Letters from England* (1807), 'In truth, the main demand for contemporary literature comes from these libraries, or from private societies instituted to supply their place . . . It is not a mere antithesis to say that they who buy books do not read them, and that they who do read them do not buy them.'²⁰

Thus, having told her niece that a second edition of *Mansfield Park* is envisaged, Austen in her next letter has to decline Fanny's congratulations as premature. 'It is not settled yet whether I *do* hazard a 2^d Edition . . . People are more ready to borrow & praise, than to buy—which I cannot wonder at'.²¹ But having done so well with the first edition of the novel, Austen was 'very greedy' for the increased profit that a second edition would promise, as she had written to Fanny on 18 November.²² Publication on commission is obviously again the arrangement envisaged for another edition; a risk, as Austen intimates, even for a novel that has sold out in its first, and made the author a handsome sum. But negotiations with Egerton may have broken down; Deirdre Le Faye speaks of Egerton's 'refusal' to bring out a second edition when the Austens met with him on 30 November, but it is not clear what went on.²³ Only fragments of letters survive for the months between November 1814 and September 1815, months during which *Emma* is completed and prepared for publication.

By this time Henry has moved from Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, south-westwards to 23 Hans Place, Sloane Street, in the

²⁰ Robert Southey, *Letters from England* (1807), ed. Jack Simmons (London: Cresset Press, 1951), p. 349, Letter 16.

²¹ Le Faye (ed.), *Letters*, 30 November 1814, p. 287.

²² Le Faye (ed.), *Letters*, p. 281. ²³ Le Faye, *Family Record*, p. 220.