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## Speculation and the Emotional Economy of *Mansfield Park*

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AT THE MID-POINT OF *Mansfield Park* (1814), the Bertram family dines at the Parsonage, and card games make up the after dinner entertainment. The characters form two groups, with Sir Thomas, Mrs. Norris, and Mr. and Mrs. Grant playing Whist, while Lady Bertram, Fanny, William, Edmund, and Henry and Mary Crawford play Speculation. This scene is central not only because Speculation reveals certain characters' personalities but also because another type of "speculation" occurs during the game as the players contemplate or conjecture about one another. Moreover, "speculation" in the sense of gambling functions as a metaphor for the vicissitudes of the marriage market for women. Critics have discussed Austen's word play with economic terms in *Emma* and *Persuasion*, but the valences of "speculation" in *Mansfield Park* have not been fully examined.<sup>1</sup> A close look at this aspect of the novel reveals that most characters, particularly the women, engage in speculation: assessing others' value, contemplating possible outcomes or alternatives, playing recklessly, and relying on chance as they make their financial and emotional investments in others. Thus Austen emphasizes the risks as well as the rewards of the marriage game for women.

Speculation, a favorite card game of Jane Austen,<sup>2</sup> can be played by any number of players. After everyone antes, three cards are dealt face down to each player. The dealer turns a final card face up, which determines the trump suit. Players may try to buy this card from the dealer if the dealer chooses to sell. Once this negotiation is settled, the player to the dealer's left (or to the

left of the person who now owns the trump card) turns one card face up. If this card is higher than the initial trump card, players may bargain for it. If not, the next player turns one card face up and so on, with the exception of the owner of the trump card, who does not turn over any other cards. Players may continue to try to buy the trump card or even to purchase cards that are face down on the chance that they will be high. The game ends when the ace is revealed, or all cards are turned over, with the pot going to the holder of the highest trump card. The hands are then shuffled and placed at the bottom of the deck before the next round is dealt.<sup>3</sup>

The game depends a great deal on chance in the hand one is dealt, but there is an element of strategy involved, calculating the odds that another player holds a trump card face down or whether the price of the trump card is worth the risk. According to *Hoyle's Games*, an eighteenth-century manual, "In order to play this game well, little more is required than to recollect what superior cards of that particular suit have appeared in the preceding deals, and calculating the probability of the trump offered proving the highest trump out" (131). One can play conservatively, hazarding little, losing little, and occasionally winning; or one can play boldly, paying great sums for trump cards in an attempt to win the pot.

As critics such as Alistair Duckworth and David Selwyn have noted, the way the various characters at the Grants' dinner party play the game gives insight to their personalities. For example, in addition to playing his own hand, Henry Crawford manages Lady Bertram's cards while also trying to direct Fanny's play. The narrator tells us, "It was a fine arrangement for Henry Crawford, who was close to Fanny, and with his hands full of business, having two persons cards to manage as well as his own" (279). Whereas Mary Margaret Benson argues that "we see Mr. Crawford at his best" during this scene (99), I would argue that his double-dealing character shines through in his manner of play.<sup>4</sup> As we have seen at this point in the novel, Henry enjoys dabbling in others' affairs, suggesting improvements for other gentlemen's estates in particular. Moreover, his negotiation of Lady Bertram's, Fanny's, and his own interests in the card game echoes his earlier attempt to juggle two women at the same time—Maria and Julia—reminding us of the impossibility of his disinterested involvement in cards or women. Indeed, although Fanny learns the game in short order, Henry still feels he must "inspirit her play, sharpen her avarice, and harden her heart" in competition (279). Like the other game he is concurrently playing—trying to make Fanny fall in love with him—Henry attempts to manipulate Fanny into behavior beyond her interests



and her better nature, in this case to play her cards in a manner more consistent with her cousin Maria's personality.

Because Fanny is new to the game, Duckworth contends that she is a poor card player, her lack of skill inversely signaling that she is a "socially responsible" character in the novel (289-90). The narrator, however, indicates that Fanny masters Speculation quickly, "feel[ing] herself mistress of the rules of the game in three minutes" (279), even if she does not play competitively. She is willing to sell her queen to her brother William, though it will ensure he wins the game. Henry prevents this sacrifice from occurring in his superintendence of her cards, making sure that the game will be hers. As Edmund notes, "Fanny had much rather it were William's. . . . Poor Fanny! not allowed to cheat herself as she wishes!" (284). And it is not only the winning pot that she would like to deny herself. P. R. Lynch suggests that the trump card that Fanny tries to sell William is the same queen that Henry had just refused to purchase from Mary on Lady Bertram's behalf; Fanny must have bought it from Mary while Henry's attention was otherwise engaged (22). Henry contends that this purchase was a bad bargain; Fanny has "'bought her too dearly'" and now is about to sell the card to her brother for less than "'half her value'" (284). No capitalist, Fanny is willing to sell William the trump card at a loss to guarantee that he wins the game, putting the interests of those she loves above her own. Edmund's comment is his only recorded contribution to the game, but it reveals that, as usual, he understands Fanny better than others do. While Henry would have her play avariciously, Edmund recognizes and appreciates that Fanny values William's happiness and success more than her own (Selwyn 273).

As Henry's management indicates, Lady Bertram does not take an active role in the game, mostly watching the play of others. She calls Speculation a "very odd game" and says, "I do not know what it is all about. I am never to see my cards; and Mr. Crawford does all the rest" (280). Perhaps because of her reliance on Henry, critics tend to overlook the parallels between her game play and her personality. Her participation in the card game echoes her passivity and lack of awareness of what is going on in her own family circle. For example, she does not read *Lovers' Vows*, the play her children intend to perform while Sir Thomas is away, or see its attendant dangers. She engages in no speculation about cards or about others' behavior, leaving activity and direction to others, and to Mrs. Norris in particular.

Mary Crawford, on the other hand, plays boldly. "[S]ecuring [William's] knave at an exorbitant rate," she says, "I will stake my last like a woman of spirit. No cold prudence for me. I am not born to sit still and do nothing. If

I lose the game, it shall not be from not striving for it" (282). Mary's play reflects her lively, spirited character; her notion that "every thing is to be got with money" (69); and, as we will see, her speculations in the marriage market. Her daring strategy is called into question, however. She does win the card game, but it "did not pay her for what she had given to secure it" (282), suggesting that those without prudence play at a loss.

The card game is not the only form of speculation going on in this chapter. Austen reminds us that the term also connotes conjecture or consideration. As in the card game, Crawford is the most active speculator of the evening. He relates his projections for improving Thornton Lacey, comes up with a "scheme" to rent the house himself, and finally conjectures about Fanny's dancing, assuring William that his sister is a good dancer, even though "he could not for the life of him recall what her dancing had been" (286, 291–92). In paying the compliment, he gambles that Fanny is indeed a competent dancer. Henry's admiration of Fanny's dancing and his attentions to her that evening cause yet another speculation—Sir Thomas's contemplation of Henry's interest in Fanny.

That Edmund is contemplating Mary as a wife during the card game is evident in his objection to Henry's expensive plans for improving Thornton Lacey. He states that "the air of a gentleman's residence . . . must suffice me; and I hope may suffice all who care about me" (282). Mary, along with the reader, suspects Edmund is thinking of her at this moment: she was "a little suspicious and resentful of a certain tone of voice and a certain half-look attending the last expression of his hope" and returns her attention to the card game (282). Nevertheless, Henry's descriptions of what Thornton Lacey might be lead her to consider life with Edmund, his speculation spurring hers. Sir Thomas's "harangue" on the importance of resident clergy, however, "startled [her] from the agreeable fancies she had been previously indulging on the strength of her brother's description, no longer able, in the picture she had been forming of a future Thornton, to shut out the church, sink the clergyman, and see only the respectable, elegant, modernized, and occasional residence of a man of independent fortune" (288, 289). Mary's fantasy of life at Thornton Lacey ignores Edmund's intended profession and focuses on her desired future—living half the year in London and half the year in a modern country house. Sir Thomas brings her back to reality, and "All the agreeable of *her* speculation was over for that hour" (289). By emphasizing the word "her," the narrator reminds us that Mary is not the only one engaged in speculative contemplation during the game. Sir Thomas's speech makes Fanny aware of how soon Edmund will be leaving Mansfield Park for Thornton Lacey. As a result, she "was pondering



with downcast eyes on what it would be, *not* to see Edmund every day" (288–89). While Mary's speculation comes to an end, Fanny's contemplation of what her life will be like when Edmund leaves home begins.

As all this conjecturing about potential spouses suggests, the game of Speculation can be linked to the marriage market.<sup>5</sup> The card game is an apt metaphor for the marriage market as it is a round game in which players act independently rather than cooperate with a partner as in Whist, the game played by the remaining characters at the party. While Whist more closely resembles marriage, with partners working together to their mutual advantage, Speculation corresponds to courtship, with players acting in their own interests (with the notable exception of Fanny). At the Whist table, Dr. and Mrs. Grant are paired against Sir Thomas and Mrs. Norris, his household manager if not his actual spouse. The unmarried characters (and Lady Bertram) make up the other table, appropriately so, as their final pairings are still in flux at this point in the novel.

The seating arrangement at this card table is also suggestive of potential relationships among characters. We know that Henry is seated between Fanny and Lady Bertram. Lynch assumes that "Fanny would want to sit next to William" and that men and women would sit alternately: Lady Bertram, Henry, Fanny, William, Mary, and Edmund (22). The bidding for Mary's queen, however, suggests another possibility: Lady Bertram, Henry, Fanny, William, Edmund, and Mary. If the players were sitting at a round table, this arrangement would seat the potential couples of Edmund and Mary and Fanny and Henry next to each other while placing rivals, rather than partners, directly across from each other. Mary, Fanny's rival for Edmund, would be seated across the table from her, while Edmund and Henry, potential mates for Fanny, would sit opposite each other. The arrangement suggests both the potential pairings and antagonisms of the marriage market, depicted more directly in the rivalry between Maria and Julia for Henry's attentions.

Courtship and Speculation are also associated in that this scene marks the first time Fanny is considered a player in the marriage market by her guardian, Sir Thomas. Prompted by the discussion of dancing and Henry's evident interest in Fanny, the next morning Sir Thomas announces his plans for a ball. Ostensibly given for the pleasure of Fanny and William, this ball also marks Fanny's debut into society and her eligibility for marriage, thereby fully resolving Mary's earlier question about Fanny: "Pray, is she out, or is she not?" (56). Initially, this question is settled to Mary's satisfaction ("not out") with the fact that Fanny has never been to a ball (60).

Under English law of the time, women gave up a separate legal existence, including property rights, when married. *Mansfield Park*, however, conceives of women as agents in the marriage market and to a certain extent after marriage. They are speculators, free to calculate the worth of opportunities and invest their capital, be it money or emotions, in the hopes of large returns in the form of economic security, social status, or love and happiness. Austen establishes that women are speculators on the marriage market in the first sentence of the novel when we learn that Maria Ward, "with only seven thousand pounds," landed a baronet (3). This match is notable because her uncle believes her to be "at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim" to Sir Thomas, indicating she got her trump card at a bargain (3).

As Maria Ward's success indicates, for female players a trump card in the marriage market is a man with title, wealth, and property. Not surprisingly, the eligible young men in the novel are often spoken of in terms of their estates. For Maria, Mr. Rushworth is interchangeable with Sotherton Court. Mrs. Grant believes that Maria "likes Sotherton too well to be inconstant" to Rushworth (190), the estate taking place of the man in Maria's affections. Similarly, Tom Bertram is closely identified with Mansfield Park. Mary finds "almost every thing in [Tom's] favour," with his future property—the park and the house—at the top of the list of qualities she finds acceptable (55). That Tom is "an agreeable man himself" comes fifth on Mary's list, behind "pleasant sisters" and "a quiet mother" (55). And Lady Bertram speaks of Henry Crawford as "a man of such good estate" when learning he has proposed to Fanny (384). Austen critiques a market that prizes wealth over other qualities, however, as these landed men are flawed by stupidity, a gambling habit, and inconstancy, respectively.

The remaining eligible bachelor, Edmund, has no property to establish his worth, and, therefore, Mary appraises him for less as a potential spouse. Attracted to him regardless, Mary tries to mold Edmund into a more valuable commodity by encouraging him to pursue a fashionable profession, such as lawyer or Member of Parliament, or by imagining him as a "man of independent fortune." Despite Mary's machinations, the reader recognizes his value in his kindness to Fanny and his dedication to his vocation, giving rise to a distinction between a man's financial worth and his moral worth.

In addition to Maria Ward's seven thousand pounds, we know what the younger female players have to stake for these trump cards. As daughters of a baronet, Maria and Julia have social as well as financial capital, and Mary Crawford has twenty thousand pounds. These well-staked players tend to play the game brashly. Maria Bertram, for example, in engaging herself to



Rushworth, gambles that the short-term gains of "a larger income than her father's" and a house in London will compensate for life with a stupid man (44). She comes to regret this deal when the charming Henry Crawford arrives in Mansfield shortly afterward. While not relinquishing her current bargain, Maria speculates on Henry, flirting with him and endangering her engagement to Rushworth in the hopes that Henry will declare himself. When her emotional investment in Henry fails to provide sufficient returns, she falls back on Rushworth, an investment that pays in one sense. Mary notes that Maria "has got her pennyworth for her penny" from her marriage, since her London home is "one of the best houses in Wimpole Street" (456). Despite Mary's suggestion that Maria has got her money's worth out of her bargain, one might argue that, as with Mary's winning hand at Speculation, it "did not pay her for what she had given to secure it." Moreover, Maria does not learn to play more prudently as a result of her first failed speculation on Henry. When he reappears she again takes her chances, running away with him in the hopes that he will marry her. She stakes even more the second time and is ruined, losing her husband, her family, her house in Wimpole Street, and her social capital.

Mary Crawford likewise speculates boldly on the marriage market. This perhaps is not surprising for a player who views marriage as a "transaction" and "a manœuvring business," one in which she believes one party or the other is usually short-changed (53). She initially expects to play for Tom Bertram, who will inherit his father's title and estate. But when Tom departs for the races, she finds herself drawn to the second son. As we have seen, her speculation on Edmund involves fantasies of remaking the future clergyman into a more fashionable professional and living half the year in London. David Selwyn notes, however, that it is more likely she would be "securing [the] knave at an exorbitant rate," sacrificing London society if she were to marry Edmund (*MP* 282; Selwyn 274). While she seems to be giving up the trump card of a baronet's eldest son, Tom's illness reveals that she has always had an eye for the main chance. Speculating on Tom's possible death, she writes to Fanny, "If he is to die, there will be *two* poor young men less in the world" (502). Playing on the word "poor," Mary makes it clear that she sees Tom's death as a blessing, one that will end Tom's pitiable suffering and will elevate Edmund to wealth and status as the heir of Mansfield Park. Her heartless selfishness at the expense of one brother is implicitly contrasted with Fanny's sacrifice of her own interests to benefit of another brother at Speculation. Mary makes her last play for Edmund after Henry runs off with Maria. After horrifying Edmund by recommending a speedy marriage for the illicit lovers, she attempts to regain his affections, calling to him with "a saucy playful smile, seeming to invite, in order to subdue



[him]” (530–31). As with her card game strategy, Mary “stake[s] her last like a woman of spirit,” but loses the game nonetheless.

Unlike Maria and Mary, Fanny Price has no social or financial capital to stake in the marriage market, raising the question: what is Fanny’s value? As her last name suggests, individuals can be weighed in financial terms even if they are without fortune and influence. Like any commodity in a financial market, Fanny’s price rises and falls throughout the novel. At first, she is undervalued. On her arrival at Mansfield Park, the young Miss Bertrams “hold her cheap” on learning that she is not as well-educated or well-clothed as they (15). As a poor relation, Fanny seems to have little worth. Once Maria and Julia leave Mansfield Park, however, Fanny’s “value increase[s]” (239), following the principle of supply and demand. As the supply of young women decreases, Fanny’s consequence rises at home and at the Parsonage. And by the end of the novel, with one cousin banished and the other out of favor, Fanny’s value reaches its pinnacle when she is prized as a substitute daughter.

Perhaps because she has so little capital to begin with, Fanny plays the marriage game conservatively. Her long-term investment in Edmund begins in childhood, and she is not swayed by the get-rich-quick scheme of marriage to Henry Crawford. Despite Henry’s attempts to reform, his investment history (a tendency to speculate on more than one woman at a time) indicates he and Fanny are not compatible; he is too focused on instant gratification or short-term profit. While Fanny’s strategy is not risk-free—she is in danger of losing Edmund when he falls in love with Mary—she is an adept player, able to assess others’ value and contemplate possible outcomes. She accurately evaluates Henry’s and Mary’s characters, while those focused on their own interests cannot. Moreover, she rightly values moral worth over monetary worth, and her prudence is rewarded.

Despite the economic and legal realities that restricted women at this time, Austen envisions them using blood ties, wealth, and even altruism as bargaining chips in the game of marriage. While Fanny’s self-effacing strategy, manifest in her attempt to help William win a game that would otherwise be hers, seems like it will be her undoing when faced with bolder players like Mary, her success ultimately is due to luck. In all gambling games, be they Speculation or marriage, chance may redistribute wealth. Chance events—Henry and Maria’s affair and Tom’s illness—bring Fanny’s intrinsic value to the fore and ensure her success in the marriage market.

In *Mansfield Park* Austen explores the multiple ways women speculate on the marriage market. They consider future partners, take chances, and wager their happiness on uncertain outcomes. Maria hopes that Henry will propose;

Mary hopes that Edmund will become the fashionable gentleman she wishes him to be; and Fanny hopes that Edmund will turn his attentions from Mary to her. In addition to highlighting the role of luck in finding happiness in marriage, Austen suggests that women must be able to discern true value in a prospective mate, rather than simply monetary value. By framing women's search for appropriate husbands in terms of Speculation, Austen highlights the risks involved in women's decisions and the uncertainty underlying many gentlewomen's lives at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

#### NOTES

1. See, for example, Miles and Showalter.
2. See *Jane Austen's Letters* (24–25 October 1808; 27–28 January 1809; 10–11 January 1809; and 17–18 January 1809).
3. These instructions are drawn from Beaver's *Victorian Parlour Games* (118) and *Hoyle's Games* (131).
4. Selwyn similarly argues that "the qualities of quick-wittedness and plausible self-assurance required by the game are a fundamental part of his character, motivated as it is by self-interest and a mercenary lack of principle" (273).
5. As Schneider notes in relation to *Pride and Prejudice*, card playing is an apt metaphor for courtship because both involve money and luck (6).

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