

The Family Profile



All the faces are turned towards the young boy. He is being passed to one of the two fashionably dressed women with powdered hair who are sitting at the table playing chess. The surrounding drapery makes the portrait resemble a theatrical scene. In the manner of actors well versed in the art of gesture, the figures are talking with their hands: the father's fingers rest on his son's shoulders, while the boy has his arms outstretched in supplication towards his new mother. Her hand remains on a chess piece, as if she has won a pawn. The master of the house leans on the back of the chair of the other woman, who is his sister. His relaxed pose bespeaks the casual assurance of proprietorship. The sister is pointing her finger at the boy, as if to say 'so this is the child who is coming to our great house'. The boy's birth-mother is absent.

The silhouette, dated 1783, is by William Wellings, one of the leading practitioners of this highly fashionable form of miniaturized portraiture. A plain black profile cut on card could be taken in a few minutes and cost as little as a shilling. Though sometimes known as 'poor men's miniatures', profiles were renowned for the accuracy of representation that they could achieve. 'No art approaches a well-made silhouette in truth,' wrote the influential physiognomist Johann Caspar Lavater. Jane Austen's nephew James Edward would become renowned within the family for his skill at the art. He could execute silhouettes without preliminary drawing, cutting them out directly with a special pair of scissors, 'the points ... an inch long, and the curved handles about three inches'.¹

Silhouettes were known as ‘shadows’ or ‘shades’ or ‘profiles’. Hence Austen’s imagining of the ‘collection of family profiles’ in Fanny Price’s sitting room in *Mansfield Park*. This one tells a story. To modern eyes, the starkly shaded medium seems particularly fitting because of the solemn nature of the subject: the handing over of a child from one family to another. It was commissioned by Thomas Knight, a wealthy but childless gentleman from the county of Kent, to commemorate his formal adoption of his nephew, Edward Austen, one of the elder brothers of the future novelist. It was not only the Wellings silhouette that commemorated the adoption. The Knights also had an oil painting commissioned. This painting hangs now in Chawton Cottage and shows a very handsome child with golden hair and bright hazel eyes. He is wearing a blue velvet suit.

In the family profile the father, to the left of the scene, is George Austen. The adoptive mother, receiving Edward, is Catherine Knight, who many years later became Jane Austen’s only literary patron. Thomas Knight himself is to the right, standing over his sister Jane. In 1783, the boy Edward reached his sixteenth birthday, whereas the child in the silhouette appears to be rather younger. This suggests that Knight may have requested the artist to evoke the scene two or three years earlier when the boy first went to stay with the childless couple in the great house.

Little Neddy first met his wealthy uncle and aunt when he was twelve. In 1779 the newly married Knights visited their relatives at Steventon and took such a fancy to the golden-haired boy that they decided to bring him along with them on their honeymoon. It was quite common to do such a thing: George and Cassandra Austen took a boy called George Hastings with them on their own honeymoon tour. Genteel children generally had more freedom and independence than we might expect by today’s standards: as a young girl, Jane Austen’s sister Cassandra often visited her aunt and uncle Cooper in Bath.

In 1781 Thomas Knight inherited two large estates in Hampshire and Kent. By then, it was a matter of concern that he and his wife Catherine showed no sign of having children of their own. They needed a suitable boy to adopt and make their heir. Again, the practice was not unusual in the Georgian era, when the preservation of large estates was the key to wealth and status. So it was that young Edward Austen was taken away to Kent, first for extended visits during the summer months and eventually as a permanent arrangement. According to perhaps over-dramatic family

tradition, George Austen hesitated, only for his wife to say, 'I think, my Dear, you had better oblige your cousins and let the Child go.' Mr Knight's coachman, who had come on horseback, had led a pony all the way from Godmersham in Kent. The boy rode it all the way back, about a hundred miles. Among the brothers and sisters he said goodbye to when he left home was Jane Austen, aged about five and a half.

It wasn't just boys who were transferred into wealthy families. Jane Austen knew at least two childless couples who adopted young girls and made them their heirs. There was Lord Mansfield, the great abolitionist judge, who adopted his niece Lady Elizabeth Murray. She became a neighbour of Edward Austen, and met Jane Austen on several occasions. And then there was a family called the Chutes in a big house near by, who adopted a girl called Caroline Wigget when she was three years old. So it should not come as a surprise that Jane Austen's novels show more than a passing interest in adoption. In *Mansfield Park* Fanny Price, considered a burden on her family, is sent to live with her wealthy cousins, the Bertrams. In *Emma*, Frank Churchill is adopted into the family of a rich but childless couple, and Jane Fairfax, an orphan, is brought up with the Dixons.

The case of Emma Watson in Jane Austen's incomplete novel *The Watsons* offers a striking reversal of the convention, whereby she has lived away from her birth family but is sent back to live with them. In *Emma*, Isabella Knightley exclaims against adoption, suggesting that it is unnatural: 'there is something so shocking in a child's being taken away from his parents and natural home! ... To give up one's child! I really never could think well of any body who proposed such a thing to any body else.'² But Jane Austen believed that the good fortune of one family member was the good fortune of all.

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On a fine summer's day in 1782 a six-year-old girl was excitedly awaiting the return of her father in a hack chaise, the equivalent of a taxi cab, from the main stage-coach post in Andover, Hampshire. Her father was returning home with his elder daughter, who had been visiting relatives in Bath. Unable to contain her excitement at seeing her beloved sister, and with the promise of a ride home in the chaise, the six-year-old dragged her three-year-old brother Charles by the hand and they walked alone as far as New Down, a hamlet near Micheldever – some six miles away – to meet the chaise.³



The entrance hall of the big house at Godmersham, where Edward Austen lived on being adopted by his wealthy uncle

Jane Austen, the seventh child of the Reverend George Austen and his wife Cassandra, née Leigh, was born in the Steventon village rectory on Saturday 16 December 1775, and baptized privately by her father on the morrow to ensure that her soul would be saved should she die in her first few days. He said that she looked very like her brother Henry, who was four, and would be ‘a plaything’ for her sister Cassandra, who was nearly three.⁴ Jane was publicly christened the following April, on Good Friday. She had three godparents: her great-aunt, also called Jane Austen, wife of Francis Austen of Sevenoaks in Kent, a well-to-do relative; Samuel Cooke, a vicar from Surrey who had graduated from Oxford and was related to a maternal cousin; and a Mrs Musgrave from Oxfordshire, wife of another maternal cousin.

These are the bare facts of her birth, but the walk to meet the hack chaise is the first glimpse we have of her as a child. The vignette may suggest that she was bold and unafraid to take the lead. What it certainly indicates is how much she loved and missed her elder sister. It sets a pattern for the rest of her days. For most of her life, Jane Austen was under the same roof as Cassandra. When they were parted, with one of them visiting friends or relations, they wrote to each other almost daily. Infuriatingly, Cassandra's letters to Jane are lost and, to our eyes unforgivably, Cassandra destroyed far more of Jane's than she kept. But those which survive provide the best record we have of her inner life.

Jane Austen was brought up in a large and loving family, consisting mainly of boys. She was one of two girls in a family of eight, sandwiched between Frank, who was born in 1774, and the youngest, Charles, born 1779. These two would grow up to become her 'sailor brothers'. Frank was just twenty months older than Jane. Charles she described, quoting one of her favourite writers, Fanny Burney, as 'our own particular little brother'.⁵ Her brothers were of immense importance to her throughout her life. The loss of nearly all her letters to them leaves the biggest gap in our knowledge of her. She wrote to Cassandra only when they were apart; she wrote to her brothers away on service almost all the time.

All the Austen children were nursed with a neighbouring family, the Littleworths, returning home when they were toddlers. One of them gave the family particular anxiety: George, the second son, born in 1766, was mentally incapacitated. He was epileptic and possibly deaf. In July 1770, his father wrote that the little boy was suffering from fits and showed no sign of improvement: 'God knows only how far it will come to pass, but for the best judgment I can form at present, we must not be too sanguine on this Head; be it as it may, we have this comfort, he cannot be a bad or a wicked child.'⁶

By December of that year George, now four, was living with foster parents. His mother wrote that he was still having fits. 'My poor little George is come to see me today. He seems pretty well, tho' he had a fit lately; it was near a twelve-month since he had one before, so [I] was in hopes they had left him, but must not flatter myself so now.'⁷ The severity of his condition is apparent from a letter in which his godfather Tysoe Saul Hancock, Mr Austen's brother-in-law, mentions 'the case of my godson who must be provided for without the least hopes of his being able to assist himself'.⁸

Around the time this letter was written, Mrs Cassandra Austen told a relative that she could not visit Kent because of her domestic situation.⁹ She was seven months pregnant and had four young boys all living at home: seven-year-old James, George six and with special needs, Edward just turned five, Henry seventeen months and recently back from being nursed in the village. There were servants to help, but it was necessary to manage both the household and its small plot of land, which had chickens and a cow. The Reverend George Austen was busy with his parish duties and business affairs. The following year he obtained the living of a second parish. In these circumstances, it was hardly surprising that a home was found for young George where he could be given more attention and assistance.¹⁰

Mrs Austen was no stranger to mental infirmity. Her younger ‘imbecile brother’ Tom had been placed under the care of a parish clerk, Francis Culham, at Monk Sherborne near Basingstoke. George was sent to join him there when it became clear that he was not improving. He lived with his uncle Tom and the Culhams for the rest of his life, surviving into his seventies. He died of dropsy (accumulation of bodily fluid, often caused by kidney failure) early in the reign of Queen Victoria, just over twenty years after his sister Jane’s death. On his death certificate he was described as a ‘gentleman’.

On Mrs Austen’s death in 1827, some stocks that she owned were sold and the proceeds divided among her surviving children. Edward Knight, adopted into wealth, made his portion over to George to pay for his care. Some biographers have taken a censorious attitude towards the Austens for their treatment of George. Several have assumed that the family was ashamed and ill-prepared when it came to mental illness, exiling George for the sake of the other children. Others have argued to the contrary that a reference in Jane Austen’s letters to ‘talking with fingers’ suggests that she might have been adept at sign language as a result of conversing with her allegedly deaf ‘idiot’ brother. We will never know whether or not she visited him at the Culhams’.

There were many private madhouses in the Georgian era, some of which had dark reputations for their inhumane treatment of the insane, Bedlam Hospital in London being the most infamous. The majority of the mentally ill were confined to workhouses, poorhouses and prison. By boarding out George with a family, the Austens saved him from this fate.

Jane Austen's life coincided with a period of new enlightenment in relation to madness and mental incapacity. King George III went mad and was treated, in a firm and well-publicized manner, by Dr Francis Willis at his asylum in Lincolnshire. The search for a cure for the King led to a shift in public attitudes towards the mentally infirm. By the end of the century, the Quaker William Tuke had founded The Retreat, an asylum in York that pioneered the humane treatment of the mentally ill. It provided a model for other institutions.¹¹

Thanks to the madness of King George, which was witnessed at first hand by the novelist Fanny Burney, mental illness ceased to be an unmentionable topic of conversation in polite society. Jane Austen frequently joked about madness in her earliest writings. As an adult she made fun of her family's history of madness in relation to her niece Anna, who was hoping to marry, against her family's wishes: 'My dear Mrs Harrison, I shall say, I am afraid the young Man has some of your Family Madness – and though there often appears to be something of Madness in Anna too, I think she inherits more of it from her Mother's family than from ours.'¹² This is not entirely a joke: Jane Austen's mother's family, the Leighs of Stoneleigh, had a spectacular history of madness, and her attitude towards madness and mental illness shows a lack of embarrassment and sentiment perhaps because of her proximity to those affected by it. In addition to those in the immediate Austen family circle, her uncle Tom and her brother, Jane's cousin Eliza de Feuillide had a son called Hastings who had 'fits' and did not develop like other children.

The story of George Austen remains shadowy. As a little girl, Jane was especially close to two other brothers Frank and Charles. Frank, nicknamed 'Fly', was a small, burly boy, 'fearless of danger, braving pain'. He often got into trouble. Jane gives a lovely retrospective glimpse of his childhood self in a poem she wrote to celebrate the birth of his son:

My dearest Frank, I wish you joy
Of Mary's safety with a Boy ...
In him, in all his ways, may we
Another Francis William see! –
Thy infant days may he inherit,
Thy warmth, nay insolence of spirit.¹³

Warmth, insolence, spirit: these were qualities that Jane Austen had herself and that she valued in Frank. At the same time, she had a soft spot for Charles, the baby of the family, who was sweet-tempered and affectionate, without the fiery nature of Fly. It is easy to see him being dragged along by Jane to meet Cassandra's coach. The affection in which she held her siblings is clear from the way that her novels are full of private jokes – a phenomenon that is common among large families, who so often have their own secret language.

It was not only because of the brothers that Steventon parsonage, the family home, was a household of boys. Jane Austen's father George took in scholars to supplement his rector's stipend, effectively running his own little boarding school. Over the years there were probably more than fifteen boys, who provided a network of contacts among prosperous local families. Many of them remained devoted to the Austens and among them were some potential suitors for the two girls. Jane's mother Cassandra seems to have been very popular with the schoolboys. She composed comic verses for them. She wrote a funny poem urging one reluctant schoolboy to return to school and his studies, rather than wasting his time dancing. Another boy complained to Mrs Austen that he felt left out because she hadn't written a special poem to him.

The first schoolboy to be taken on at Steventon, in 1773, was a five-year-old aristocrat, John Charles Wallop, Lord Lymington. He was the 'backward' and eccentric eldest son of Lord Portsmouth, who lived just ten miles away at Hurstbourne Park. A boy called William Vanderstegen was taken on later that same year. By 1779, the year that Jane Austen's mother Cassandra gave birth to her last child, there were four boys living at Steventon – Fulwar Craven Fowle, Frank Stuart, Gilbert East and a boy named Deane (either George or Henry). By 1781, the pupils included George Nibbs and Fulwar's brother Tom and possibly his brothers William and Charles. In later years, John Warren, Charles Fowle, Richard Buller, William Goodenough, Deacon Morrell and Francis Newnham attended the school. At least ten of the boys stayed four years or more. The Reverend George Austen only stopped teaching in 1795 when Jane was in her twentieth year.¹⁴

Lord Lymington stayed just a few months at Steventon. Mrs Austen found him 'good-tempered and orderly',¹⁵ but his mother took him away on account of his very bad stammer, which grew worse as his behaviour

became more erratic with the passage of years. Tales abounded of his eccentricities, including his habit of pinching servants, throwing them into hedges and playing other practical jokes. He once tried to hang a young boy from the bell tower of the village church. The young Lord Byron objected strongly to being pinched by Lord Portsmouth, threw a large shell at his head in retaliation (breaking a mirror) and, many years later in 1814, exacted cruel revenge by taking part in a devious plot to marry him off to a vicious woman who tortured him and beat him with a horsewhip. Jane Austen commented on this marriage to her sister Cassandra: ‘And here is Lord Portsmouth married too to Miss Hanson!’¹⁶ Whether or not she knew that Lord Byron gave away the bride is not known. Byron recorded in his journal that he ‘tried not to laugh in the face of the supplicants’ and ‘rammed their left hands, by mistake, into one another’.¹⁷

Later, John Wallop became known as the Vampyre Earl for his supposed addiction to drinking the blood of his servants. He was eventually certified a lunatic. Despite all his tribulations, he never forgot the Austens and invited them to his annual ball at Hurstbourne Park. In 1800, just after his first marriage, Jane attended his ball and wrote a long vivid account to her sister. Cassandra had clearly made a favourable impression on the Earl over the years. Jane seems surprised by his interest: ‘Lord Portsmouth surpassed the rest in his attentive recollection of you, enquired more into the length of your absence, and concluded by desiring to be “remembered to you when I wrote next”’.¹⁸ Our customary image of Jane Austen’s family home does not usually make room for her fond memories of the lunatic Earl.

The other boys opened up a range of worldly contacts for the Austen family. William Vanderstegen was an only child, born almost twenty years after his parents married. His father was one of the first Commissioners of the Thames, deeply involved in a campaign to make the river more navigable. George Nibbs’s father owned a plantation in the West Indies: we will meet him in a later chapter. Richard Buller, who stayed for five years, became a clergyman in Devon before dying at a sadly young age. His closeness to the Austens is apparent from a letter written by Jane to Cassandra in 1800, in which she gives the news that he has recently married: ‘I have had a most affectionate letter from Buller; I was afraid he would oppress me by his felicity and his love for his Wife, but this is not the case; he calls her simply Anna without any angelic embellishments, for which I respect and wish him happy – and throughout the whole of his letter indeed he



Rear view of Steventon rectory: Jane Austen's
childhood home

seems more engrossed by his feelings towards our family, than towards her.¹⁹ The following year, they visited him in his Tudor vicarage in the little stone-built town of Colyton on the Devon coast.

Cassandra made an especially strong impression on another of her father's boarders, Tom Fowle. They became engaged and were due to be married before he died of yellow fever in the West Indies. This loss was a decisive factor in the development of Jane Austen's own life. George Austen clearly had no compunction about bringing up his daughters alongside a variety of unfamiliar young men, though no record survives of any romantic interest on Jane's part. The uproariously funny tales that she wrote as a young girl, full of violence, drunkenness, madness and suicide, suggest that she played more of a tomboyish role at Steventon than that of a young ingénue looking for love. She was more of a Catherine Morland – playing baseball,²⁰ rolling down the green slope at the back of the house, preferring cricket to dolls – than a boy-mad Isabella Thorpe chasing unsuspecting young men along the streets of Bath. There was indeed a green slope at the back of Steventon rectory, perfect for rolling.

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Perhaps in part due to the need to house an ever-increasing number of boarders, George and Cassandra Austen decided to send their daughters away to school. At the age of seven, Jane Austen, together with her ten-year-old sister, was taken to Oxford by their cousin Jane Cooper. They were to be taught by a Mrs Cawley, a Cooper relation. Seven seems to us an early age for a young girl to be living away from her family, especially from such a warm, loving home, full of life and animation. It must have been a wrench to leave the safety and security of the family home for school in Oxford, though elder brother James Austen was studying there and showed the girls the sights of the city. The arrangement was similar to that in Steventon: it was a case of a family taking in pupils, not a formal school environment. Presumably George Austen had made the financial calculation that the income gained from sending his girls away and creating more space for boy boarders in the rectory would exceed the outlay required to keep them in Oxford.

According to family lore, Jane insisted on accompanying her sister to Oxford. Mrs Austen claimed that if 'Cassandra were going to have her head cut off, Jane would insist on sharing her fate'.²¹ Hampshire to Oxford is about fifty miles, which the two young girls would have travelled in a stage-coach.

In September, Mrs Cawley moved her 'school' to Southampton, only for it to be struck by a typhus outbreak. The three girls fell ill, but Mrs Cawley failed to alert the family. It was Jane Cooper who wrote to her mother and told her the news. Mrs Austen and Mrs Cooper came immediately to take the girls home. Jane Austen was very ill and nearly died. They all made a full recovery, but Mrs Cooper caught the fever and died in October. One can only imagine the shock and distress of the family. Dr Cooper was heartbroken and devoted the rest of his years to bringing up his children Jane and Edward. To commemorate his beloved wife he sent Cassandra a 'ring representing a sprig of diamonds, with one emerald' and Jane was given a headband, which she wore to balls.²²

The Southampton experience did not deter the Reverend and Mrs Austen from the idea of boarding school. Within a year, Jane and Cassandra, together with their now motherless cousin Jane Cooper, found themselves at a more formal establishment, this time in Reading, a prosperous trading town just over twenty miles from Steventon, on the main coaching routes from London to Oxford and the west country.

It was called the Abbey School and was run by Sarah Hackitt, who went by the name of Madame Latournelle, no doubt because female French teachers were the height of fashion. The school adjoined the remains of the ancient Abbey of Reading: 'the greater part of the house was encompassed by a beautiful old-fashioned garden, where the young ladies were allowed to wander under tall trees in hot summer evenings'.²³ The school was connected to an antique gateway, which looked out on the green and a marketplace beyond. Inside, new girls were received by the headmistress in a wainscoted parlour in which chenille tapestries depicting tombs and weeping willows were hung round the walls.

According to a family member, the school was a 'free and easy one ... In Cassandra and Jane's days the girls do not seem to have been kept very strictly, as they and their cousin, Jane Cooper, were allowed to accept an invitation to dine at an inn with their respective brothers, Edward Austen and Edward Cooper.'²⁴ As the family descendants noted, it all sounds rather like Mrs Goddard's school in *Emma*, which 'had an ample house and garden, gave the children plenty of wholesome food, let them run about a great deal in the summer, and in winter [she] dressed their chilblains with her own hands'.²⁵ Madame Latournelle always dressed in the same way and had a cork leg. She encouraged the arts, dancing and theatre in particular. It seems to have been a happy place, full of girlish glee. 'I could die of laughter at it, as they used to say at school,' Jane Austen remarked in one of her letters to Cassandra.²⁶

After twenty months spent in the Abbey School she returned home for good in December 1786, just approaching her eleventh birthday. Her formal education was over. But the home to which she returned was one from which her brother Edward was now permanently absent.

As has been suggested, the transference of children from one home to another by formal adoption, as with Edward Austen Knight, or by a more informal arrangement, as with the fictional Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*, was by no means uncommon. If the Knights, like Lord Mansfield and the Chutes, had wanted a girl rather than a boy, then Jane Austen would have been separated from her beloved Cassandra.

Jane Austen reworked the theme of adopted children several times in her novels and uses it to suggest her ideas about nature and nurture, good parents and bad parents, the importance of childhood in relation to the adult. 'Give me the child until he is seven and I will give you the man,' as the old Jesuit saying had it.

Jane Austen was close to her father, who supported her ambition to become a published writer. Her feelings towards her mother were far more complicated. There are few examples of effective parenting in the novels. This is partly a plot device: the heroine must make her own choices, judgments and mistakes before reaching maturity and finding an equal mate worthy of her. The exception to this rule of the flawed heroine is Jane Austen's most disliked (or least well-understood) heroine, Fanny Price. The fictional Fanny is almost the same age that the real Edward Knight was when he was first taken from his home. *Mansfield Park* is perhaps the first novel in history to depict the life of a little girl from within.²⁷

Jane Austen enters intuitively into the feelings and consciousness of the child as she is uprooted from her family and transferred to Mansfield Park. Fanny's fear and anxiety, exacerbated by the vicious bullying of Mrs Norris, are brilliantly executed. Told that she must be a good grateful girl and given the treat of a gooseberry tart to comfort her, Fanny dissolves into tears. It is the careless neglect that affects her sensitive spirit: 'Nobody meant to be unkind, but nobody put themselves out of their way to secure her comfort.'²⁸

One of the main themes of the novel is the importance of home. The word is repeated over 140 times in the course of the narrative. What does 'home' mean? Is it a place or is it a family? What happens when a home is left unprotected or badly governed? When Fanny returns home to Portsmouth she has an epiphany that shakes her to the core:

Her eagerness, her impatience, her longing to be with them, were such as to bring a line or two of Cowper's *Tirocinium* for ever before her. 'With what intense desire she wants her home,' was continually on her tongue, as the truest description of a yearning which she could not suppose any school-boy's bosom to feel more keenly.

When she had been coming to Portsmouth, she had loved to call it her home, had been fond of saying that she was going home; the word had been very dear to her; and so it still was, but it must be applied to Mansfield. *That* was now the home. Portsmouth was Portsmouth; Mansfield was home.²⁹

The literary reference is crucial. William Cowper was Jane Austen's favourite poet. The poem to which she refers here, *Tirocinium*, was extremely well known. It bids a father not to send his son away to school, but to educate

him at home so that the natural ties of affection are not damaged and so that the father's spiritual and moral guidance will be uppermost.

Why hire a lodging in a house unknown
 For one whose tenderest thoughts all hover round your own?
 This second weaning, needless as it is,
 How does it lacerate both your heart and his!
 The indented stick, that loses day by day,
 Notch after notch, till all are smoothed away,
 Bears witness, long ere his dismissal come,
 With what intense desire he wants his home.³⁰

Indeed, *Mansfield Park* shares many of the concerns of *Tirocinium*. It is a profound exploration of the duty of parents to shape their children's moral and spiritual development. It includes a father who is emotionally distant, his children 'chill'd into respect'. It reflects on the importance of home, the nature of good education, the alienation of sons from their father, the importance of conscience: 'In early days the conscience has in most/A quickness, which in later life is lost.' At the centre of the book is a timid, shy displaced child with an unshakeable sense of conscience.

Fanny is a heroine who is deeply sensitive, and loves nature, poetry and biography, especially Shakespeare, Crabbe and Cowper. She is religious and her spirits are easily depressed. As well as quoting from *Tirocinium* she also loves Cowper's *The Task*, a poem inspired by his muse, Lady Austen (a distant relative of Jane's), an elegant and attractive widow who set him 'a task' to write a poem about a 'sofa'. This extraordinary poem in six books is the eighteenth century's great celebration of the retired and religious life. 'God made the country, and man made the Town' is among its most famous lines. Cowper undertakes a fierce assault on contemporary society, condemning the slave trade, French despotism, fashionable manners and lukewarm clergymen. 'England, with all thy faults, I love thee still -/My country!' writes Cowper, and the sentiments could have been Austen's own.

It was Henry Austen, Jane's brother, who revealed that Cowper was her favourite poet. But one could have guessed as much from her portrayal of Fanny Price and of Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*. As much admired by the Romantic poets Coleridge and Wordsworth as by Jane Austen, Cowper was a brilliant but deeply troubled man, a depressive who tried to kill himself

at least three times and was for a time confined to a lunatic asylum before finding refuge from his despair in a profound Christian faith. He was a friend of slave trader turned Evangelical preacher John Newton, the author of 'Amazing Grace'. Cowper's poetry was pioneering because he wrote about everyday life and scenes of the English countryside. For Jane Austen, his work embodied love of the country as Dr Johnson's embodied the energetic life of the town.³¹ He transformed English poetry rather in the way that Jane Austen herself would transform English fiction.

Though Jane Austen was to return to the theme of the adopted child in *Emma*, there she does not enter the mind of the child as she does in *Mansfield Park*. In that novel, Fanny's transference into the great house is a blessing and a final redemption, especially to Sir Thomas: 'Fanny was indeed the daughter that he wanted. His charitable kindness had been rearing a prime comfort for himself. His liberality had a rich repayment.'³² The child of the impoverished branch of the family redeems the materially more prosperous but morally bankrupt household. By accepting Fanny, the Bertrams become more human.

Mansfield Park is not a retelling of the story of Jane Austen's wealthy relatives, the Knights of Godmersham Park. Her brother Edward Austen, who became Edward Knight, is not the 'original' of Fanny Price. But the theme of the bond between branches of a family with very different prospects came close to Austen's own experience. The liberality of the Knights eventually made it possible for her to become a novelist. Mrs Knight, her only patron, was described by her as 'gentle and kind and friendly'.³³ And, crucially, it was through the Knights that Edward was to give his mother and sisters a home. Had he not been adopted, he would not have grown up to inherit the great house at Chawton, from where he was able to give his poor relations the modest property near by in which Jane lived the last eight years of her life and wrote her novels.