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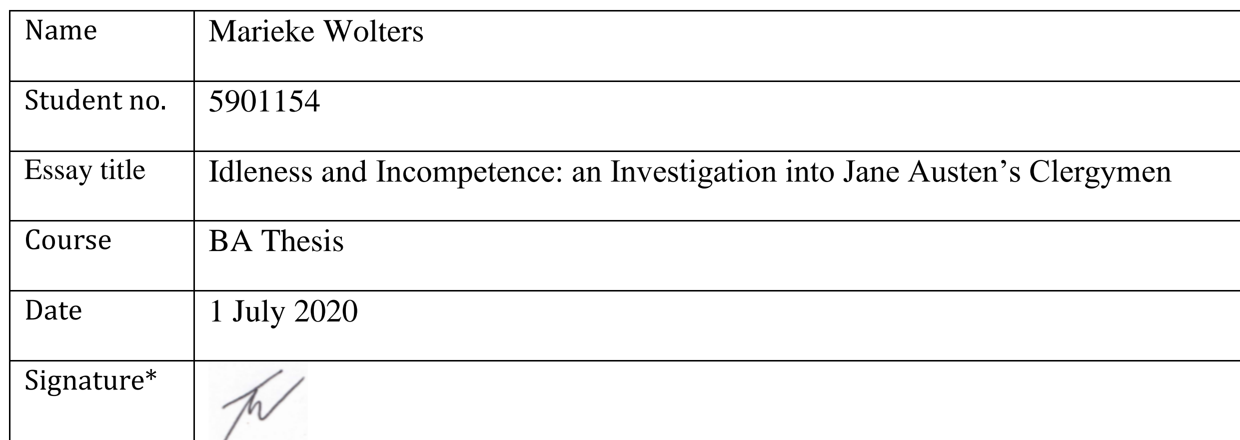

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Abstract

The Church of England is represented in all of Jane Austen's novels through the presence of clergymen. These clergymen are not without faults, and their flaws are not unintendedly written. This thesis explores four of Austen's clergymen, and argues that she used these characters to point out shortcomings of the religious leadership of her time. It starts with a contextualization to support the argument. After this it draws attention to the major flaws of Mr. Collins, Mr. Elton, Edward Ferrars, and Edmund Bertram. Mr. Collins is preoccupied by the relationship with his patroness. Mr. Elton wrongly prioritises the increasing of his financial means. Edward Ferrars is not concerned with being a clergyman, he just wants a quiet life, and Edmund does not seem to have the moral strength to follow his own principles. The consistency of writing flawed clergymen indicates that Austen used these characters as a form of judgement on the state of religious and moral leadership. These characters are clear examples of what could go wrong within the clergy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

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Idleness and Incompetence

An Investigation into Jane Austen's Clergymen

1. Introduction

Every Jane Austen novel features at least one clergyman. Most of them have prominent roles, and three of them are even the male protagonist of the book. Austen was surrounded by clergymen in her life. She was the daughter of a clergyman, and many other family members and acquaintances were members of the clergy (Collins, *JA a/t Clergy*, 4). It is therefore unsurprising that her novels are filled with clergymen, but their significance is often undervalued. For example, in "Displeasing Pictures of Clergymen," Irene Collins states: "the plot of *Emma* demanded a male character whose social status was sufficiently fluid to arouse mixed hopes regarding his marital designs (115)." This implies that Austen made Mr. Elton a clergyman only so he would have a social status that was "sufficiently fluid". However, this is not the only function Austen's clergymen serve. This thesis argues that Jane Austen did not use clergymen mainly to enhance romantic tension in her plot, but as a way to comment on the clergy in general. To illustrate this, it examines the main characters belonging to the clergy in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Mansfield Park*. All main clergymen in these novels are presented as incompetent to perform their duties. The first part of the thesis outlines the context of the political situation of the Regency period, and the social and financial position of clergymen during that time. The second part focuses on the characters from *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*; Mr. Collins and Mr. Elton. The third and final part examines the characters from *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park*; Edward Ferrars and Edmund Bertram.

2. Historical Context

It is sometimes argued that Jane Austen simply wrote variations of the same plot. Mary Watts summarises all of Austen's novels as follows: "A young woman of marriageable age has two suitors, a good and a bad. She rejects the bad and chooses the good (22)." However true, boiling down the plots to their most basic elements like this brings with it the risk of missing the most important notions that Austen wanted to convey with her novels. This is exactly what Helena Kelly argues in *Jane Austen, the Secret Radical.* According to her, the 'marriage plot' was a useful and successful vehicle to address other subjects, for example money and heritage in *Sense and Sensibility*, or the behaviour of the aristocracy in *Pride and Prejudice* (Kelly ch.1). To understand the full scope of these subjects, it is important to contextualise Austen's novels. A good way to do this would be to take a closer look at her life, but this has been made difficult by her first biographers.

The first biographical note, written by Jane's brother Henry Austen, and the memoir written by her nephew, James Austen-Leigh, illustrate the picture of a woman who was modest, kind, always looking for the good in people, and who wrote only for her own and her family's enjoyment (Sales, 3). Even though it has become clear and generally accepted that these representations of Jane Austen are inaccurate, they were held as true for a long time, or at least no strong questions were asked about the accounts. Roger Sales argues in *Jane Austen and the Representation of Regency England* that Austen-Leigh's motivation came from a desire to distance his aunt from the Regency period, but he also argues that it is important to not follow this lead (27). A suggestion Kelly gives for Henry Austen writing misleading information in the *Biographical Note* is that he wanted to "protect himself and his siblings from the damaging idea that their sister may have wanted – or even needed – to write for money" (ch. 1). Furthermore, Kelly explains that fear of possible damage to the name of Austen was not unfounded: "We have to remember, too, that the Austen family lived in a country in which any criticism of the status quo was seen as disloyal and dangerous (ch. 1).

She elaborates on this by stating that in the context of the Napoleonic Wars and the Regency Crisis, the definition of treason was broadened to include critical thinking, writing, printing, and reading (ch. 1). In the last decade of the eighteenth century, the British government published multiple acts with regard to treason and conspiracy. The broadening of definition that Kelly describes refers probably to the "Treasonable and Seditious Practices Act" from 1795, which states that: "if any Person or Persons whatsoever, (…) shall, within the realm or without, compass, imagine, invent, devise or intend Death or Destruction (…) shall be deemed, declared, and adjudged to be a Traitor and Traitors, and shall suffer Pains of Death (Dickinson 27-8)." Austen's first biographers feared for post-mortem character assassination, and therefore tried to tell the public that she was not the kind of person to write social or political criticism. Hence, every instance of radical thought must be accidental. These portrayals were easily accepted by the public, even though Austen's novels are too full of radical thoughts to all be accidental. The same care not to discuss these subjects of rebelling opinions was taken with the reviews her novels received. *Mansfield Park* can be considered Austen's most overt critical novel; it is noticeably less light-hearted than *Pride and Prejudice*, and it did not receive any reviews. When *Emma* was published, and Sir Walter Scott reviewed it, he mentions *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, too. *Mansfield Park* is eerily absent, which Austen commented on in her reply to the review: "I cannot but be sorry that so clever a Man as the reviewer of *Emma*, should consider [*Mansfield Park*] unworthy of being noticed (Kelly, ch. 5)." The unspoken message that arises from the omission is loud and clear: *Mansfield Park* contains too much sensitive material, and too little to distract from it. This understanding of Austen's time is needed to appreciate how subtly she had to process her views on society into her work.

To recognise how this relates to the topic of clergymen, it is important to know some things about their social and economic position. Viviane Barrie-Curien discusses the

distribution of social classes in the clergy in "The Clergy in the Diocese of London in the Eighteenth Century," and concludes that the clergy is roughly made up out of three groups: sons of the gentry, sons of clergymen, and sons of what she calls 'plebeians,' by which she refers to "shopkeepers, traders, freeholders, husbandmen, yeomen and small farmers (87)." In her statistics, the sons of the gentry and the sons of clergymen make up around 75 percent of the group. Edward Copeland calls the resulting group "pseudo-gentry," grouping them together with, for example, barristers and officers in the army and navy (128). As her father was a clergyman, this is the class that Austen herself belonged to; being able to observe the gentry, without fully belonging. This means that for the gentry sons, a career in the clergy was a small step down with regard to social class, and for the son of a shopkeeper a small step upwards.

With regard to economic position and income, this varied greatly per living. For example, the living that Colonel Brandon offers to Edward Ferrars has a small income attached to it, while the living of Mansfield Park is expected to support Edmund and Fanny when their family grows. David Selwyn gives a clear account of how the income of a living worked: "The value of a country living depended on the agricultural yield of the land in the parish; although some few parsons in the late eighteenth century still collected their tithes in kind, most agreed with the farmers a sum of money in lieu (150)." Tithes were a form of tax, payed to the Church, through which the clergy were supported (through their patron). Keeping track of tithes was much additional work for the clergyman in question (Kelly, ch. 6). In his introductory letter, Mr. Collins refers to an 'agreement' he has with his patroness, with regard to his income; this refers to a settled sum instead of receiving tithes. The income could be supplemented with "produce of the glebe, the farmland which belonged to the rectory (Selwyn, 150)." Yet another way of improving the clergyman's income, was by obtaining multiple livings. This is referred to as 'pluralism,' which caused 'non-residence,' because a

clergyman could not live at all his livings at the same time. According to Barrie-Curien, historians see this as a major cause of the pastoral negligence that is associated with the eighteenth century (90-1). The following investigation considers how these financial and social aspects interfere with the social care that clergymen were supposed to provide for their parishioners.

3. Mr. Collins and Mr. Elton

Mr. Collins is perhaps the most ridiculous of all Austen's clergymen. Mr. Elton is considered to be not much better than Mr. Collins. They are often mentioned together. An acquaintance of Austen, a Mrs. Wroughton, stated that she "thought the authoress wrong, in such times as these, to draw such clergymen as Mr. Collins and Mr. Elton (qtd. in Collins, "Displeasing Pictures" 109)." In this part of this thesis, these two characters are examined to see and explain why they are considered to be such deficient clergymen. Mr. Collins has many faults, but his inadequacy as a clergyman manifests in three ways: the lack of awareness about his own social position, the relationship with his patroness, and his attempt at pastoral leadership, exemplified by the letter he sends after Lydia has run away with Wickham. The first of these is illustrated in various scenes of Mr. Collins' stay at Longbourn. From the letter Mr. Collins sends to Mr. Bennet to invite himself to Longbourn, Mr. Bennet concludes that there is "a mixture of servility and self-importance" in it (I, xiii). This is later confirmed by the narrator, when in chapter 15 a brief account of Mr. Collins' background is given. This informs the reader that Mr. Collins was "not a sensible man," that he is without "any useful acquaintance," and that the unusual mixture of humility and self-importance noticed by Mr. Bennet is the result of his humble upbringing combined with suddenly having a 'good situation in life (I, xv).' This also explains why he talks much, and in a formal manner, while not saying much. These aspects bring, in addition to amusement, second-hand embarrassment to the Bennet family. A small example of this social clumsiness is how Mr. Collins asks,

during his first dinner at Longbourn, which of the girls was responsible for the food. While he meant to compliment the food, he insulted Mrs. Bennet by assuming they did not have a cook. After being corrected by Mrs. Bennet, Mr. Collins apologises for "about a quarter of an hour (I, xiii)." A more important example is found during the Netherfield ball. Mr. Collins attempts to introduce himself to Mr. Darcy, on account of the latter being a relative of his patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Elizabeth endeavours to stop him, trying to explain that Mr. Darcy will not understand it as a compliment to his aunt, but as impertinence. To the modern reader this can seem quite trivial. In Austen's time, however, introductions were tied to strict social rules. In her chapter about *Pride and Prejudice*, Kelly explains that introductions are an important theme in the novel. To engage in conversation with someone, it was necessary to have been introduced to one another, by a mutual acquaintance. This is why Mrs. Bennet becomes so upset when Mr. Bennet refuses to go and see Mr. Bingley, at the beginning of the book. The form of 'visiting' discussed between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet in chapter 1 is an exception, where it was acceptable to introduce oneself to a stranger (Kelly, ch. 5). The fact that Mr. Collins thinks he can, without the help of a mutual acquaintance, introduce himself to Mr. Darcy, shows that he is unaware of the social norm. Lacking the knowledge of social rules is unfortunate for someone who has to interact with people from all social classes.

The second aspect of Mr. Collins that relates to his (in)competence as a clergyman, is his relationship with his patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. The way in which Mr. Collins talks about his patroness borders on idolatry. A great percentage of Mr. Collins' speech is devoted to letting people know about the fact that his patroness is Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and when people already know, he devotes his speech to her praise. Pleasing his patroness is on the top of his priority list. When he attempts to make a proposal of marriage to Elizabeth, he states his reasons for wanting to marry:

> "First, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances (like myself) to set the example of matrimony in his parish. Secondly, that I am convinced it will add very greatly to my happiness; and thirdly – which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier, that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honour of calling patroness." (I, xix)

Mr. Collins' need to correct himself, and state that Lady Catherine's advice is more important than the previous reasons, make clear how important her wishes and views are to him. From everything he mentions about his patroness, it becomes clear that she is an enormous influence on him, and that he gives her the power to decide everything in his life. It is natural for a parson to want to be on good terms with their patron, but the relationship between Mr. Collins and Lady Catherine de Bourgh seems to be quite unhealthy. This is also evident from the time spent at Rosings Park during Elizabeth's visit to Hunsford. It seems like Mr. Collins has little more to do than wait for invitations to Rosings Park, go to Rosings Park, agree with Lady Catherine, and repeat this the following day. Nothing is said about other duties he has to perform, or other parishioners he has to visit.

A final manifestation of Mr. Collins' incompetence as a clergyman is found in the letter he writes to the Bennet family when Lydia is missing. Letters that Austen has decided to write in full are always important. There are several letters that are only summarised by the characters that read them. This letter is not merely meant to signify that Mr. Collins means to inform Mr. Bennet of his feelings about the matter, but also to inform the reader in what manner he does so. The letter is clearly meant well, and comes from a sense of duty. It starts off with sympathetic language, but it soon turns into a message of severity and blame. As a result, the focus on the letter lies more on the severity of Lydia's behaviour, than on any sympathy with which the letter had started. Mr. Collins goes as far as to say that the death of Lydia would have been preferable to the situation she has caused. He also elaborates on how

unfortunate this must be for all of Lydia's sisters, and how no one will want to connect themselves with them (III, vi). This letter is not helpful in the slightest. On top of Mr. Collins' extreme unhelpfulness, the Bennet family is not part of his parish, and therefore he carries no duty to provide them with pastoral care in a situation such as this. In contrast to his first letter, the letter receives no reaction from Elizabeth or Jane. The letter does not add to the plot nor influences the feelings of other characters, and must therefore serve only to show Mr. Collins' lack of tact when trying to perform his duties. To summarise, Mr. Collins has the wrong priorities and too little tact to be a good clergyman. To see a man with more tact, but arguably still wrong priorities, the character of Mr. Elton is addressed in the following part.

It has been stated before that Mr. Elton is often mentioned together with Mr. Collins. While Mr. Collins' incompetence is obvious, Mr. Elton's faults are a bit harder to discern. A part of this difficulty has to do with the narrative of *Emma*. The narrative is intertwined with Emma's thoughts and considerations to such an extent, that the portrayals of some characters are hard to separate from Emma's opinion of them. For example, there is no fault in Mrs. Weston, because Emma sees no fault in Mrs. Weston. Mrs. Elton, on the other hand, can do no good, because Emma hates her. Her opinion of Mr. Elton changes from good to horrible throughout the novel, and this causes some confusion sometimes. When Mr. Elton is filtered through these confusions, however, it becomes clear that he, like Mr. Collins, is a clergyman without the right priorities. This is found in his behaviour towards Emma and Harriet up until his proposal, his choice of wife, and in his lack of attention towards the Bates family.

Both of the Mr. Knightleys mention at different times to Emma that Mr. Elton behaves different around women than around man. Mr. Knightley says this in the argument he has with Emma about the suitability of Mr. Elton as a husband for Harriet Smith. "He knows that he is a very handsome young man, and a great favourite wherever he goes; and from his general way of talking in unreserved moments, when there are only men present, I am

convinced that he does not mean to throw himself away (I, viii).” Mr. John Knightley states to Emma that “I never in my life saw a man more intent on being agreeable than Mr. Elton. It is downright labour to him where ladies are concerned. With men he can be rational and unaffected, but when he has ladies to please, every feature works (I, xiii).” The important elements in these statements are ‘talking in unreserved moments’ and ‘downright labour.’ It is good to be able to adapt social behaviour to fit the current social circumstance, but the things that are pointed out in these statements sound a little more manipulative and deceiving. In other words, the behaviour that Emma observes from Mr. Elton is, according to Mr. Knightley and his brother, a well-constructed act. Another important detail is how ‘he knows he is a very handsome young man,’ which offers the interpretation that Mr. Elton might be quite full of himself. The makers of the 2009 BBC TV adaptation thought so too, when they made Mr. Knightley say: “That man is so full of himself, I’m surprised he can stay on that horse! (*Emma*, ep. 1)” When the misunderstanding that exists between Emma and Mr. Elton with regard to the object of his affections comes to a conclusion in chapter 15, it becomes clear that Mr. Elton is mainly interested in improving his situation in life. This applies to both his social and his financial position. “[N]o doubt, there are men who might not object to – Every body has their level: but as for myself, I am not, I think, quite so much at a loss. I need not so totally despair of an equal alliance, as to be addressing myself to Miss Smith! (I, xv)” This defence shows that Mr. Elton thinks of Harriet as too far beneath him to see as a possible wife, and that he thinks it offensive that Emma would think otherwise. Apparently, matrimony is for Mr. Elton something that is concerned with class and money, rather than about finding a suitable life-partner; an opinion that signifies that he is more interested in his own material well-being than that of his parishioners.

According to Selwyn, Jane Austen made Mr. Elton a vicar (rather than a rector), so he would have an economic motive for marrying (151). A vicar had fewer opportunities to

improve his income, such as the ones described in the first part of this thesis. However, it is also mentioned that, although the income from the Highbury living is not large, Mr. Elton has independent property that generates money (I, iv). Evidently, whatever this sums up to is not enough for Mr. Elton, so shortly after the rejection he receives from Emma, he removes himself to Bath. Soon after this, the news travels to Highbury that Mr. Elton is going to be married to Miss Augusta Hawkins. From this moment on, the most that can be learned about Mr. Elton must be learned through his wife. According to Thomas Dabbs, Mr. and Mrs. Elton serve the following purpose in teaching Emma: "Mr. Elton teaches her about the economic considerations of marriage, and Mrs. Elton teaches her what a marriage founded on those concerns yields (103)." Emma makes up her mind about Mrs. Elton soon:

> "[T]he quarter of an hour had convinced her that Mrs. Elton was a vain woman, extremely well satisfied with herself, and thinking much of her own importance; that she meant to shine and be very superior, but with manners which had been formed in a bad school, pert and familiar; that all her notions were drawn from one set of people, and one style of living; that if not foolish she was ignorant, and that her society would certainly do Mr. Elton no good." (II, xiv)

These 'familiar manners' are found in how Mrs. Elton treats Emma like her equal, and how she calls Mr. Knightley "Knightley." That she means to be superior is evident from how she dominates most social gatherings, for example the strawberry-picking at Donwell, or the organisation of the outing to Box Hill. Her actions are generally presented as well-intentioned. However, as has been demonstrated with Mr. Collins, intentions do not matter much; execution is everything.

An example of Mrs. Elton's good-will is her attempt to find Jane Fairfax a position as governess. Although this is unwanted by Jane, and done out of a superior position, it is a more appropriate attitude towards the Bates family than her husband has. Throughout the novel,

Austen makes clear to her readers that Mrs. and Miss Bates' situation in life is pitiful. They are the widow and maiden daughter of the previous vicar of Highbury, and their situation became so when Mr. Bates died. Apparently, Mr. Bates had not been able (or had failed) to arrange a financial safety net for the women would live behind. This is a recurring theme in Austen's novels. Mr. Bennet, although still alive, has also failed to save up money for his daughters. It is the same predicament in which Mr. Dashwood leaves his family. Furthermore, it is a biographical theme, as it was the situation Austen and her mother and sister found themselves in after Mr. Austen had died. Mrs. and Miss Bates are luckily well cared for, socially speaking. For example, their old friends make sure that they are invited for tea often enough and that they receive food, such as pork and apples. It is evident that the social community of Highbury is doing their best to compensate for the loss of Mr. Bates. Despite her dislike and impatience, Emma does her duty towards them, and is reprimanded severely by Mr. Knightley when she insults Miss Bates on Box Hill. Even Isabella remembers to give the Bates' a social call when she visits Highbury. Mr. Elton, however, is never mentioned giving the family any attention. As the textual evidence of other people's kindness towards them is so overwhelming, it is remarkable that the vicar, who has the responsibility to pay attention to everyone, is never mentioned to do so. John Wiltshire, points out that the Eltons fail to bring Miss Bates and Jane to the ball, and even though Emma thinks of this as a small mistake, "it is not one that any other genteel family in Highbury would be likely to make (133)." This negligence is an indication for how well Mr. Elton performs his other pastoral tasks.

4. Edward Ferrars and Edmund Bertram

Both the clergymen discussed above come from lower classes. Some critics have suggested that Austen wanted to convey that "clergymen are better when they are born gentlemen (qtd. in Smith, 284)," or that "[Austen's] complaint against the likes of Mr. Collins

and Mr. Elton was not that they were undereducated but that they were underbred (Collins, *JA a/t Clergy*, 37).” These statements imply, however, that the clergymen with gentry origins are more capable than those that come from lower connections. While this might be true with regard to social aspects (a gentleman’s son might be less impressed with Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s manner), there are still many faults to find with Austen’s other clergymen. In the following part, Edward Ferrars’ idleness and Edmund’s lack of assertiveness are discussed. Although both characters are not yet clergymen for the major parts of their respective novels, they both have the ambition of taking orders. Another similarity between Edmund and Edward is their successful relationships with the novels’ heroines. This might obscure an objective reading, similar to Emma’s opinion of Mr. Elton, but in the opposite direction.

Sense and Sensibility is a novel in which many things are left unsaid. There are many (misguided) assumptions about engagements, and there is much less dialogue compared to *Emma*. Edward’s faults are found in a lack of action, rather than in obvious improper behaviour. He is passive, absent, and deceitful. Edward Ferrars is introduced to the reader with mixed terms. He is “not handsome,” and his shyness has to be overcome before one can call his manners “pleasing.” Apparently there is “an open affectionate heart,” and “his understanding is good (I, iii).” Yet the thing Edward lacks, is ambition. His mother and sister compensate for this shortage, and wish to see him well established. A career within the Church is not what they would like to see, but Edward wants a quiet and private life, and in his opinion, taking orders is the best way to achieve this. Not because of religious passion, but because of the quiet life he thinks results from this. From these descriptions Edward sounds quite sympathetic, and it is understandable that someone like Elinor would consider him suitable as a husband. She has not much to lose financially, so the profession of clergyman (with its possibly small income) would not be an objection to her. The possible match between Edward and Elinor is introduced in chapter three, but Edward is notably absent for

the major part of the novel. This absence, in combination with his deceit about his engagement, is an alarming aspect of his nature. Two weeks after their move to Barton Park, Marianne concludes that Edward "is not well," because he has not come to visit them yet (I, viii). To Marianne, there is no doubt that Edward wants to marry her sister. She is therefore confused about his delay in visiting them. It seems that every time that Edward does visit, it is with certain reluctance. When he visits Barton for the first time, Marianne notices that with Edward, "there was a deficiency of all that a lover ought to look and say on such an occasion. He was confused, seemed scarcely sensible of pleasure in seeing them." He finally visits, but his mind seems still absent (I, xvi). In addition, it becomes clear that he has been in the neighbourhood for quite some time, which begs the question why he did not come to visit sooner. Even though Elinor is of the opinion that Marianne has high standards for people's passions, Marianne is correct in her observation of Edward. The difference in his behaviour towards Elinor is suspicious. With the knowledge about Edward's situation it becomes more understandable, but not less inexcusable.

Edward has been engaged to another woman for about five years. This is a secret, because Lucy Steele is not someone his mother would approve of. The approval of his mother is necessary, because he is dependent on her money. When Lucy suddenly marries Robert instead, Edward feels free to offer Elinor a proposal of marriage. It becomes evident from his confession, that Edward soon regretted his engagement to Lucy (III, xiii). However, he has never attempted to break the engagement. Even though this seems honourable, it also indicates a certain passiveness. The only action he undertook in his engagement, is starting it. And as there is no account for this event, so it is even possible that Lucy simply encouraged him excessively. Lucy is the active person for their whole history. She informs Elinor of the engagement; she reveals herself as Edward's fiancée to Mrs. Ferrars; and she is the one who ends the engagement by marrying Edwards brother. It is clear that Edward was uncomfortable

with the whole situation, but he fails to try and change something about it. Instead, he pretends to still be in love with Lucy, through the letters they send each other. He is dishonest about this towards the Dashwood family, while he is obviously interested in Elinor. As he is described as being shy, the assumptions of Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood can only be explained by concluding that his behaviour must have clearly indicated this. He behaves in this manner, indicating he is in love with Elinor, makes him dishonest, because he still has the seemingly honourable intention of marrying Lucy. Since it was a secret, it would not have publicly shameful to either Lucy or Edward to end the engagement. Therefore Edward guides himself by passiveness rather than honourability. His intentions might be honourable but his behaviour is deceitful. Despite the fact that Elinor easily forgives him, Edward’s conduct indicate no good for his qualities as a clergyman.

Edmund Bertram’s flaws are comparable to Edward’s shortcomings. Edmund fails to take action and to stand up for what he wants, and his behaviour is inconsistent with his principles. *Mansfield Park* is, perhaps, Austen’s least popular novel. It offers a completely different experience from her previous novels. The shy and modest Fanny Price is quite a contrast to the witty and confident Elizabeth Bennet. Many of *Mansfield Park*’s characters are unkind to Fanny and have no patience with her personality. (Aunt Norris especially is abusive to Fanny, for reasons that deserve a separate investigation of their own.) Except for Edmund, who endeavours to know her, and helps her overcome many of her fears. Edmund’s characterization makes him seem quite promising to become a good clergymen. He must, in contrast to the other clergymen here discussed, defend his choice to the woman he wishes to marry. The first conversation on this topic that is outlined between Edmund and Mary Crawford, display Edmund’s ideology with regard to the influence of the Church:

> “The manners I speak of might rather be called conduct, perhaps, the result of good principles; the effect, in short, of those doctrines which it is their duty to teach and

recommend; and it will, I believe, be everywhere found, that as the clergy are, or are not what they ought to be, so are the rest of the nation." (I, ix)

This indicates that Edmund is of the opinion that one of the most important tasks of the clergy is to offer moral guidance. This idea is also found in his opinion on the play that is planned, and in his objections to marrying Miss Crawford. The play and (not) marrying Miss Crawford, however, are also exactly the situations that illustrate that Edmund is unsuitable to offer this moral guidance.

When Sir Thomas Bertram leaves for Antigua, and the idea arises that a play should be performed, Fanny and Edmund are immediately against it. Edmund attempts to prevent the play from happening with different strategies. He tries to reason with Tom. After this fails, he takes a step back and concludes that the play will not happen, as the company will be unable to agree on which play they wish to perform. When they settle on *Lovers' Vows*, he tries to reason again, attempting to show how unfit the play is. His final strategy is to join the cast, as a form of damage control. When he consults Fanny about this, he states: "No man can like being driven into the *appearance* of such inconsistency (Vol. I, ch. XVI, emphasis original)." Although all his other attempts of stopping the play have failed, this seems an illogical solution. Fanny thinks so, too: "it will be such a triumph to the others!" Nevertheless, as she is unable to give Edmund a better alternative, he goes on to prepare to be a part of the play. With this, he fails to understand that it is exactly the appearance of inconsistency that matters when it comes to moral guidance. With this, he is incapable of setting the example he wishes to set when he will be a clergyman.

The same inconsistency, or indecisiveness is illustrated in the manner in which he handles his wish to marry Miss Crawford. It is obvious that she is not suitable to be his wife, especially with the negative attitude she possesses towards the clergy. Her main objection to the profession seems to be that clergymen are unable to distinguish themselves in society. For

her, marrying a clergyman has as a consequence that she must alter her life style in a way that she is unwilling to. This is, in the end, also one of the major objections Edmund has against her. In the long letter he writes to Fanny while she is in Portsmouth, his indecisiveness is well illustrated. It seems clear to him that he cannot, with his good conscience, marry Mary Crawford. At the same time, he is unable to let go of the hope that he might be mistaken about this. He feels like Mary is corrupted by her London friends, and believes her to be a different person than the one he encountered when he visited her. His letter is a stream of consciousness, jumping back and forth between his wish to marry Mary, his fear of being rejected, and the conclusion that he cannot marry her.

> "Her ideas are not higher than her own fortune may warrant, but they are beyond what our incomes united could authorise. (…) I could better bear to lose her because not rich enough, than because of my profession. That would only prove her affection not equal to sacrifices, (…) if I am refused, that, I think, will be the honest motive. Her prejudices, I trust, are not so strong as they were. You have my thoughts exactly as they arise, my dear Fanny; perhaps they are sometimes contradictory, but it will not be a less faithful picture of my mind." (III, xiii)

From Mary's side of the conversations about Edmund's choice of profession, however, it can be concluded that her affection is not equal to the sacrifices she would have to make. Edmund's indecisiveness is interrupted by the scandal created by his sister Maria together with Mr. Crawford. This scandal is comparable with Lydia and Wickham's situation, but it is even worse because Maria is a married woman. This forces Edmund to choose against Mary, and prevents him from being rejected. His inconsistency and contradictive thinking will make it difficult for Edmund to provide the moral guidance he wishes to provide when he will be a clergyman. His marriage to Fanny, however, offers an optimistic perspective. Her steady

character and strong principles may help him to be a source of leadership. Although he has to improve in his listening to what advice she has to offer him.

5. Conclusion

Jane Austen wrote in a difficult time, where free speech was restricted by law. She was also a genius authoress, who did her best to write what she wanted within the framework that was presented to her. Her novels are filled with references to contemporary texts and circumstances. It is therefore out of the question that she would write about clergymen merely to complete her plot. Instead, she used the characters belonging to the clergy to show the numerous ways in which they were incapable of performing the tasks bestowed upon them. None of the characters discussed can be considered competent clergymen. Mr. Collins tries his best, but has misplaced priorities and is too much ruled by his patroness. Mr. Elton is preoccupied with status, and neglects his parishioners. Edward Ferrars does not even seem concerned with his duties, he simply wants a quiet life. Edmund Bertram is the most promising of these characters, but only by his choice of wife. Mrs. Wroughton thought it 'unwise' in 'times as these' to draw such 'displeasing' clergymen; apparently Austen thought otherwise.

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