Marriage as a Dubious Goal

Jane Austen’s 1814 novel *Mansfield Park* begins and ends with the topic of marriage. In this regard it seems to fit into the genre of the courtship novel, a form popular in the eighteenth century in which the plot is driven by the heroine’s difficulties in attracting an offer from the proper suitor. According to Katherine Sobba Green, the courtship novel “detailed a young woman’s entrance into society, the problems arising from that situation, her courtship, and finally her choice (almost always fortunate) among suitors” (21). Often the heroine and her eventual husband are kept apart initially by misunderstanding, by the hero’s misguided attraction to another, by financial obstacles, or by family objections. The overcoming of these problems, with the marriage of the newly united couple, forms the happy ending anticipated by readers.

Sometimes, as in a Shakespearean comedy, there are multiple marriages happily celebrated; this is the case, for example, in Austen’s own *Pride and Prejudice*.

Despite the fact that *Mansfield Park* ends with the marriage of the heroine, the novel expresses a strong degree of ambivalence toward the pursuit and achievement of marriage, especially for women (Johnson 47). For Fanny, marriage may be a matter of the heart, but for other characters in the novel, marriage—or the desire for marriage—is “precipitated by… vanity, financial considerations, [boredom], the desire to ‘disoblige’ one’s family or simply to escape from it, and social and parental pressure… to form a suitable match” (“Mansfield Park”).

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