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Christopher Flynn

**‘No Other Island in the
World’: *Mansfield Park*, North
America and Post-Imperial
Malaise**

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Christopher Flynn

‘No Other Island in the World’: *Mansfield Park*, North America and Post-Imperial Malaise

Fanny Price’s poor knowledge of geography attracts her cousins’ scorn in the early pages of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*. Fanny’s crime is not knowing her islands, and the accusation comes very soon after her Uncle Sir Thomas Bertram’s holdings in Antigua are mentioned for the first time. ‘She thinks of nothing but the Isle of Wight, and she calls it the Island, as if there were no other island in the world,’ one of her cousins complains.¹ By this point in the novel, we already understand that Fanny isn’t the only one with an insular view of the world, and that in many senses, her crime is a virtue. The ‘island’ might as easily be Britain, for this novel points to an isolationism that is political, physical and social. I would argue that it stems from a post-imperial malaise brought on by the loss of England’s North American colonies. Fanny’s belief that there is ‘no other island in the world’ could reflect a wish for English isolation in the aftermath of an emphatic rejection by the American colonists. Recent criticism of *Mansfield Park* has focused on the text as complicit in an imperial world in the early stages of the vast expansion that would soon place most of the East under the power of a few countries in Western Europe. Slavery has been virtually the exclusive topic of post-colonial analyses of the novel.² But a careful look at the text’s repeated gestures west to the Americas, rather than east to India, or the Middle East, present a possibility, and a collective psychic phenomenon which needs exploration. While *Mansfield Park* is undeniably a novel about slavery, it is also about England’s loss of North America, which prescribes isolationist remedies to prevent future losses.

Post-imperial malaise stems from a recognition of loss and diminishment occasioned by colonial dispossession. We can find it throughout colonial histories: in the United States after the end of the Vietnam War— although a U.S. colony was

¹ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park: Authoritative Text, Context, Criticisms*. Ed. Claudia L. Johnson. (New York: Norton, 1998) 15.

² Moira Ferguson’s ‘*Mansfield Park*: Slavery, Colonialism and Gender,’ in *The Oxford Literary Review* 13 (1991), 118–139, and Joseph Lew’s “‘That Abominable Traffic’: *Mansfield Park* and the Dynamics of Slavery’, in *Mansfield Park*, ed. Johnson, (New York: Norton, 1998), are excellent examples of recent articles treating the role of slavery in the novel. A notoriously weak one is Edward Said’s chapter on *Mansfield Park* in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994).