



“Hearty Fow Children”: The Penrhyns, Pugs, and *Mansfield Park*

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ALTHOUGH OTHER CHARACTERS IN Jane Austen’s novels own dogs, Lady Bertram’s pug is unique among his canine counterparts in the amount of attention he receives both from Austen and her characters. Pug’s omnipresence, coupled with the naturally striking and comic appearance of his breed, has made him something of a gift to illustrators and filmmakers attempting to bring *Mansfield Park* to life. Benjamin Britten had cast one of the Christie family’s pugs in the role even before he had begun working on his short-lived project to write an operatic adaptation of the novel (Fairman).

Pug’s unusual position both within *Mansfield Park* and Austen’s body of works naturally attracts the reader’s attention. E. M. Forster analyzed Lady Bertram and Pug, and John Sutherland included the mystery of Pug’s gender in one of his books of literary puzzles. Sally B. Palmer considered the role Pug plays in the novel and what he communicated to nineteenth-century readers about the occupants of Mansfield Park, noting how Pug, as a “useless” and redundant lapdog, signals and highlights his mistress’s flaws. Toy dogs had been associated with black slaves and servants since the late seventeenth century and so were linked to Sir Thomas’s business—sugar plantations in Antigua—and therefore connected to the profits through which Lady Bertram could support an animal with no apparent use.

Lady Bertram’s grandest gesture is her promise to give Fanny one of her beloved Pug’s puppies were she to marry Henry Crawford: “And I will tell you what, Fanny—which is more than I did for Maria—the next time pug has a

litter you shall have a puppy” (385).¹ Fanny is promoted above Lady Bertram’s own daughters through Pug: if she marries Henry Crawford, she will be able to afford a “lifestyle” pet such as a lapdog. Lady Bertram’s offer comes a short time after the reader is informed that “beauty and wealth were all that excited her respect” (383). Given that a pug dog would not usually be considered beautiful, the reader must infer that Pug’s ascribed value (both the initial purchase price and the cost of his upkeep) is what attracts Lady Bertram to her dog.

Lady Bertram and her appearances within the novel are centered on Pug; she is frequently with or talking about him. We are introduced to Pug when we first meet his mistress; he is never far from her person and, apart from his brief foray onto the flower-beds (86), is static, much like his languid owner. When Fanny first moves to Mansfield, she is made to sit on the sofa with Lady Bertram and Pug (14); he is to be found “in his mistress’s arms” (94); and when Sir Thomas arrives home from Antigua, Pug is by “her side” on the sofa before being moved to make way for his mistress’s husband (210). Austen defines Lady Bertram’s character in relation to her dog, describing her as “a woman who spent her days in sitting nicely dressed on a sofa, doing some long piece of needle-work, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children” (22). “[O]f little use and no beauty” serves excellently as a description of pugs as they were considered at the time Austen was writing. Uselessness was a particularly common criticism of pugs and, indeed, of all lapdogs. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft complained, “I have been desired to observe the pretty tricks of a lap-dog, that my perverse fate forced me to travel with. Is it surprising that such a tasteless being should rather caress this dog than her children? Or, that she should prefer the rant of flattery to the simple accents of sincerity?” (261). Like Wollstonecraft’s target, Lady Bertram ignores her sons and daughters, favoring her expensive and ornamental lapdog. By the end of the eighteenth century, the toy dog was a heavily politicized animal, evidence of women’s over-consumption and idleness for both misogynists and early feminists like Wollstonecraft.



Although the pug embodied what critics disliked most about little dogs (and by extension the interests and behavior of their mistresses), pugs had not been culturally relevant for some time. Unlike other lapdogs, the pug had been out of fashion for half a century when Austen wrote *Mansfield Park*. There were certainly other “useless” toy dogs that were far more popular in

the early nineteenth century, so why did Austen specifically choose a pug for Lady Bertram?

Indeed, it was so unusual to see a pug in England that Samuel Johnson's biographer, Hester Lynch Piozzi, remarked upon her surprise at coming across the dogs while travelling around Italy in 1785:

A transplanted Hollander, carried thither originally from China, seems to thrive particularly well in this part of the world; the little pug dog, or Dutch mastiff, which our English ladies were once so fond of, that poor Garrick thought it worth his while to ridicule them for it in the famous dramatic satire called *Lethe*, has quitted London for Padua, I perceive; where he is restored happily to his former honours, and every carriage I meet here has a pug in it. (*Observations* 148)

Austen was a great admirer of Piozzi's work, referring to her as "my dear M^{rs} Piozzi" in a letter to her sister Cassandra (9 December 1808) and alluding to her work on other occasions in their correspondence (11 June 1799 and 26–27 May 1801). When Austen quotes from Piozzi's own *Letters*, she chooses a sentence that ends with Piozzi mentioning her husband's intention to visit Europe for half a year—the trip that served as the basis for the travelogue *Observations and Reflections Made in the Course of a Journey through France, Italy and Germany*, in which Piozzi notes the popularity of pugs in Northern Italy.²

Piozzi, however, does recall one British pug-owner: "That breed of dogs is now so near extirpated among us, that I recollect only Lord Penryn [sic] who possesses such an animal (*Observations* 148). Austen would have recognized Hester Piozzi's sole pug-fancier of note, Lord Penrhyn, from Thomas Clarkson's *History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade by the British Parliament*, a book many Austen scholars believe she was familiar with.³ Penrhyn makes several appearances in Clarkson's history, including a speech to the House of Commons in which he "predicted the ruin and the misery, that would inevitably follow the abolition of the trade" (358).

Created first Baron Penrhyn in 1783, Richard Pennant (c. 1737–1808) was the son of a merchant. Both his parents had inherited property in Jamaica, which later passed to him. Like his counterpart in *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas Bertram, Lord Penrhyn's fortune came from the profits of slave labor on Caribbean plantations. In 1765 he married heiress Anne Susannah Warburton (1745–1816), later inheriting most of her family's assets and purchasing the remainder of their property from one of her distant cousins. Penrhyn served

as a Whig MP from 1761 to 1790 (aside from a four-year hiatus), first for Petersfield, Hampshire, and then for Liverpool. He was a recognizable public figure due to his speeches against abolition in parliament. One of the staunchest proponents of slavery and the slave trade, in the six years before his retirement, he spoke over thirty times on the matter in the House of Commons. His single-minded obsession with Caribbean affairs earned him the nickname “Chairman of the West Indian merchants.” Like his fictional counterpart, Penrhyn was able, despite holding honors, to engage in the political activities for which he was so well-known: although both Lord Penrhyn (with an *Irish* peerage) and Sir Thomas (a baronet) were titled, as members of the minor aristocracy they could sit in the House of Commons rather than the House of Lords.

In his domestic political career, Penrhyn’s interests in his Jamaican assets ran concurrent with those of his constituents. Liverpool was one of Britain’s principal ports for the Atlantic slave trade, and the fruits of Caribbean slave labor came through Liverpool before being transported throughout the country. The city also plays a part in the Bertram family’s economic involvement in the West Indies: when Sir Thomas returns from Antigua to Mansfield Park, he “came directly from Liverpool” (209).

The Bertram family, then, owns an exceptionally rare breed of dog implicitly associated with an extremely prominent plantation-owner and MP. The parallels between the Bertams and the Penrhyns are too significant to be discounted as coincidence. Given Austen’s well documented use of allusion to the history of the slave trade and debates about the legitimacy of slavery in *Mansfield Park*, it would seem the Penrhyns and their pets to some degree inspired Austen to include a pug in particular.

These allusions to slavery are often rooted in Austen’s reading of Clarkson’s *History of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade*. Even the name she chose for the eponymous primary setting of the novel was inextricably linked to the fortunes of Afro-Caribbean people living in Great Britain. William Murray, the first Earl of Mansfield, attracted censure for his famous ruling in the 1772 case that enabled James Somerset, an escaped slave, to remain free in Britain rather than being returned to bondage on the other side of the Atlantic, as Clarkson recalls in his *History*. As Christine Kenyon Jones notes, Mansfield was also criticized for housing his mixed-race great-niece, Dido Belle, the daughter of his nephew and a slave.

Others, such as Moira Ferguson, have identified Mrs. Norris’s name as a reference to John Norris, a Liverpoolian ex-slave-captain who defends the slave trade to Clarkson. It is unclear whether this Norris was related to the

main branch of the Norris family from Liverpool, who owned a substantial number of Caribbean plantations and who were heavily involved in the city's local politics. Through her mother, Lady Penrhyn was part of this extended Norris family, and she used these connections to aid her husband when he ran for MP for Liverpool. In addition to these references, Pug further links the Bertrams to slavery in the West Indies.

Although there is nothing in the Austen family letters to suggest that Jane Austen ever visited the Penrhyn estate near Bangor, we do know that she travelled to Wales, most likely visiting the coastal resort of Barmouth, only fifty miles from Penrhyn Castle. Austen might have heard of the unusual lifestyle of the Penrhyn pugs during her trips to the Midlands, where Lady Penrhyn's family came from and where Lord and Lady Penrhyn sometimes lived at Winnington Hall, Cheshire. Most probably, however, Austen would have known of Lady Penrhyn and her pugs from her numerous visits to London.⁴ Lord and Lady Penrhyn were listed in the *Morning Post* as "distinguished personages" at the Marchioness of Headfort's grand concert in 1805 alongside the Prince of Wales ("Marchioness" 3). Given Piozzi's immediate connection between Lord Penrhyn and pugs, it seems likely that Lady Penrhyn would have been a prominent figure in society gossip.

For it was Lady Penrhyn who really owned the pugs that Piozzi mentioned, rather than her husband, and it was she who attracted censure. For decades after her death, Lady Penrhyn and her pugs continued to be described in books and newspapers, indicating how unusual her behavior had been considered during her life and suggesting that such stories would have been often repeated. Lady Penrhyn died two years after *Mansfield Park* was published, leaving her three surviving pugs an annuity of £40 a year. Her will was printed and reported on in several national newspapers (see, for an example, "Lady Penrhyn's Will"). Over a decade later, an article in an 1829 issue of the *Morning Post* described her indulgent treatment of her pugs:

She generally had half a dozen dogs of what is called the *pug* breed, each decorated with a silver collar trimmed of red morocco leather, and each having its own livery servant to attend on the pet's wants; no servant was admitted into her ladyship's service under six feet high. The dogs slept upon crimson cushions, and were taken (if wet, carried) out to air themselves twice a day. ("Epitaph" 3)

One can quite easily imagine Lady Bertram asking her niece to carry Pug outside in bad weather as Lady Penrhyn did of her servants. When Fanny comes down with heatstroke while trimming the roses and walking twice back and

forth across the breadth of the Park on the orders of her aunts, Lady Bertram is too preoccupied with Pug to pay any notice: “the heat was enough to kill any body. . . . Sitting and calling to Pug, and trying to keep him from the flower-beds, was almost too much for me” (86).⁵

Like Lady Penrhyn, Lady Bertram places special priority on what she perceives to be Pug’s needs. There is, however, a significant difference between Lady Penrhyn and her fictional counterpart: while both treated their pugs as if they were their own progeny, unlike Lady Bertram, Lady Penrhyn was childless. To her contemporaries, Lady Penrhyn’s overly indulgent treatment of her animals is seen as a direct consequence of her childlessness. The *Morning Post* journalist remarks that “having no children, [Lady Penrhyn] was remarkable for her attachment to the canine race” (“Epitaph” 3). Lady Bertram’s pampering of Pug—“thinking more of her pug than her children”—is a far greater social transgression as he receives her attention at the expense of her four children and niece.

Although there was much anxiety during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that toy dogs usurped the role of children, Lady Penrhyn took this “trend” to the extreme. Maria Hare, a relative of Lady Penrhyn, used to visit her as a child and recounted her experience in a set of memoirs completed by her adopted son, Augustus J. C. Hare, after her death. Unsurprisingly, the Penrhyn pugs make a memorable appearance:

Lady Penrhyn had three pugs, very ugly, and always dressed in little scarlet bonnets and cloaks. When she was in London, in her house in Grosvenor Square, they used to be taken out thus attired to walk in the square, with a footman to attend them. She left them each an annuity when she died, and they lived an immense time. Once, in Lord Penrhyn’s time, when she and Lord P. were driving in their coach and six, through the streets of Northwich [near Winnington Hall, the Warburton family’s country house], the pugs were looking out of the windows, and the by-standers, mistaking their species, exclaimed, “Eh! milord and milady are mighty fine, but their children are hearty fow [a Cheshire expression meaning ugly or foul].” (Hare, *Memorials* 10)

Other contemporaries of Lady Penrhyn describe the same unusual behavior; in the fourth volume of his autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, Augustus Hare reports meeting the Dowager Duchess of Cleveland (1792–1883) in 1876. Her recollection of Lady Penrhyn is the same as his mother’s: “The Duchess said she remembered old Lady Penrhyn and her pugs, and their being dressed like

children, and keeping a footman, and having a key of Grosvenor Square” (417). To many, such conduct would have been considered immoral and deviant. Clothing the pugs in silver collars trimmed with “red morocco leather” or “scarlet bonnets and cloaks” (such items also required valuable dyes) meant that the dogs—useless luxuries themselves—were being given useless luxuries.

The natural history writer Edward Jesse (1780–1868) in his *Gleanings in Natural History* related another incident involving the entitled behavior of the pugs as well as Lady Penrhyn’s comparative lack of concern for her human visitors:

The passion of the late Lady Penrhyn for pugs was well known. Two of these, a mother and a daughter, were in the eating-room of Penrhyn Castle during the morning call of a lady who partook of luncheon. On bonnets and shawls being ordered for the purpose of taking a walk in the grounds, the oldest dog jumped on a chair and looked first at a cold fowl, and then at her daughter. The lady remarked to Lady Penrhyn that they certainly had a design on the tray. The bell was therefore rung, and a servant ordered to take it away. The instant the tray disappeared, the elder pug, who had previously played the agreeable with all her might to the visitor, snarled and flew at her, and during the whole walk, followed her growling and snapping at her heels whenever opportunity served. The dog certainly went through two or three links of inference, from the disappearance of the coveted spoil, to Lady Penrhyn’s order, and from Lady Penrhyn’s order to the remark made by her visitor. (31–32)

It is clear from such recollections that an encounter with the Penrhyn pugs made a great impression on visitors to the household. That two of these four accounts are from people who had never met Lady Penrhyn gives a clue as to how often and widely such anecdotes were recounted. Jesse’s belief that Lady Penrhyn’s doting on her pugs was “well known,” like Piozzi’s immediate association of the dog with Lord Penrhyn, indicates how familiar well-connected Britons would have been with the couple and their brood of pug dogs.

Since the 1990s both post-colonial scholars and Austen specialists have explored the undercurrent of references to the slave trade debate within *Mansfield Park*. After Edward Said’s rather unfavorable interpretation of the influence (or rather, lack of influence) of colonialism on the novel, other articles have focused on the many allusions to slavery. While Said believed that Austen “seems only vaguely aware of the details of these activities,” research has shown not only that Austen and her family were most likely pro-abolition

but that Austen introduced these sentiments in her novels, most notably in *Mansfield Park*. Through exploring these small and subtle nods to slavery and the slave trade, we come to understand the novel as its first readers might have and to appreciate how grounded it is in the history of slavery legislation in Britain and its empire. Austen's expectations for the contemporary reception of Pug and his human family are illuminated by the knowledge that Pug is most likely a means of associating the Bertrams not only with the excesses of colonialism but specifically with a man who attempted to halt the progress of the abolition movement in order to preserve his own interests as well as with a woman who used those profits gained from holding men in bondage to lavish luxury upon her spoilt pugs.

NOTES

1. It is unclear whether Austen made a simple mistake regarding Pug's gender as earlier in the novel Pug is referred to as a "he." (Austen's capitalization of "Pug" is also inconsistent.) Lady Bertram may have owned a string of pug dogs all named Pug. Most likely, the litter is one that Pug would sire rather than whelp.
2. 9 December 1808; Piozzi writes, "Well! now all this is nonsense, and fancy, and flight, you know, for my master has his great casks to mind, and I have my little children, but he has really half a mind to cross the water for half a year's frisk to Italy, or France" (*Letters* 1:270).
3. Moreland Perkins, for example, argues that the influence of Clarkson's work on Austen can clearly be seen and felt in *Mansfield Park*.
4. Laurie Kaplan explores another connection between *Mansfield Park* and the West Indian contingent in London society.
5. Apparently the pug dog remained rare in Britain throughout Austen's lifetime and was as much an unusual sight in 1829 as in Piozzi's day: the same *Morning Post* article also mentions that "the peculiar pug breed that obtained so much of her Ladyship's notice, is now nearly extinct" (3).

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