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Jane Austen’s Sailors

Mr Midshipman Price

William Price, the brother of Fanny, the heroine of Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, is a remarkable young man.¹ A midshipman in the navy, he has, at nineteen, ‘an open pleasant countenance, and frank, unstudied, but feeling and respectful manners’ (p. 19). Everyone at Mansfield Park, even the novel’s villain, Henry Crawford, is struck by ‘the warm hearted, blunt fondness of the young sailor’ (p. 196). To some extent, William is being set up as a foil to Henry, the honesty of the sailor being played off against the deviousness of the gentleman. Austen’s enthusiasm for William, however, goes well beyond the basic requirements of the plot. Every word he speaks offers ‘proof of good principles, professional knowledge, energy, courage and cheerfulness – every thing that could deserve or promise well’ (p. 196). And when a direct comparison is made with Henry, the narrator runs to excess in representing William’s sterling qualities:

> a lad who, before he was twenty, had gone through such bodily hardships, and given such proofs of mind. The glory of heroism, of usefulness, of exertion, of endurance, made [Henry’s] habits of selfish indulgence appear in shameful contrast; and he wished he had been born a William Price, distinguishing himself and working his way to fortune and consequence with so much self-respect and happy ardour, instead of what he was! (p. 197)

We might feel that Austen has made her point sufficiently, but on the same page more praise is lavished on William, who has ‘spirits, courage and curiosity up to anything’ (p. 197).
This approval of William seems inseparable from his profession: he has the personal qualities that equip him for a career in the navy, but his experiences as a sailor enhance these personal qualities. Soldiers do not impress Austen in the same way. While William can be held up as a rebuke to the decadence of early nineteenth-century England, the army seems to share in the moral laxity of the age. The militia regiment in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813; the first version was completed in 1797) is given to ‘wining, dining, dancing and general merry-making’, and the attraction of the army for Lydia Bennet seems to have more to do with the dazzle of scarlet uniforms than with the moral worth of the men wearing them.² Captain Frederick Tilney, a character in *Northanger Abbey* (1818; originally accepted for publication in 1803), is another frivolous soldier, making ‘good use of his leave in Bath to turn the heads of the girls there’.³ Set against such foolishness, life in the navy seems overwhelmingly wholesome. Fanny comments on the ‘great kindness’ (p. 93) William has met with from the chaplain of his ship, and various details about the young man’s life suggest a disciplined and sober existence: he is, for example, a regular correspondent, never forgetting to send a letter (p. 51). Ever the considerate brother, he has bought his sister ‘a very pretty amber cross’ (p. 210). The small gift combines good taste and due respect for religion. William, it seems, can do no wrong.

His gift to Fanny echoes a biographical detail: Austen’s sailor brother Charles bought his sisters gold chains and crosses from prize money he received in 1801. It is widely accepted that Charles’s experiences as a midshipman provided the raw material for the picture of William Price.⁴ Against this background, it is tempting to suggest that Austen’s praise for the navy in *Mansfield Park* is a matter of family loyalty. Indeed, her ‘thinly veiled half-disdain for the Army, not unnatural in an essentially naval family’ is a perfectly reasonable point to note.⁵ If we reduce the issue to personal considerations, however, we are likely to overlook a cluster of important issues at the heart of *Mansfield Park*, issues that begin with the country’s attitude towards the navy at the time of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, but which then extend into what the public’s view of the navy can tell us about currents of change – and, consequently, sources of tension – within British society at this time. It is obvious that, unlike Smollett, Austen is determined to present a positive sense of the navy. This is, in part, a deeply felt need: at a time when the very existence of the country was threatened, it was essential to maintain a belief in the main force that could preserve the country. Yet, at the same time,