Tracing Austen’s Night Sky

The only reference to astronomy in Austen’s fiction occurs at the end of chapter 11 in *Mansfield Park* when Fanny and Edmund observe the evening sky. The novel’s explicit reference to time (mid-August after sunset) and location (Northamptonshire) allows us to chart what the sky must have looked like. The Big Dipper (“Great Bear”) appears in the southwest and Cassiopeia northeast. Arcturus, a very bright star, is prominent in the west. Fanny and Edmund can see the Big Dipper and Arcturus from their position in the drawing room, but they must go outside to spot Cassiopeia. This means that Mansfield Park’s drawing-room window faces due west (Zook 32).

The scene suggests that elementary astronomy was considered a suitable accomplishment for young women like Fanny and Jane Austen, although they would not have calculated the movement of celestial objects. Many wealthy Regency households owned celestial globes and astronomical works, among them Pierre-Simon Laplace’s *Celestial Mechanics* (1799).
Discussion Questions

Question 1
Read the passage in ch. 11, p. 105-6, beginning with “Fanny turned farther into the window” up to the end of the chapter.

According to literary scholar Anna Henchman, early 19th-century astronomers and literary writers pondered questions of one’s individual perspective and one’s relationship to society or the world at large. As such, the novel often performs a “telescoping” of a character’s perspective “from the cosmic to the personal, and from the personal to the cosmic” (2). Henchman further suggests that this shifting of perspective between the personal and the general (or “cosmic”) can change or at least unsettle a person’s view of his or her place in the world.

- Why is Fanny retreating into the window? What sort of interaction is she trying to avoid?
- How is the mood changing once Fanny and Edmund look at the stars by themselves?
- How does Austen shift Fanny’s perspective (and ours) here and why?
- Fanny seems to find relief when looking at the sky perhaps because it unsettles her place in the family. How does astronomy help her (if only temporarily)?
- Does Miss Crawford have any room in Fanny’s reverie? Or Edmund?

Question 2
Although Edmund suggests that they should catch a glimpse of Cassiopeia on the lawn, he implicitly retracts his offer to renew their old habit of stargazing.

- In light of Fanny and Edmund’s earlier history of companionship, what is the social role of stargazing here?
- What does it mean that they don’t ultimately look at Cassiopeia together?

Question 3
Major breakthroughs in astronomy were publicized widely in the late 18th and early 19th century, particularly those relating to changed conceptions of time and space. By the end of the 18th century, astronomers were already developing a notion of ‘deep space’ and understood that they were looking at a universe in which nothing was ever at rest (Henchman 3).
Further Reading

Jane Austen & Science

19th-Century Literature & Astronomy

19th-Century Astronomy

Women & Astronomy

Question 4

Olivia Murphy argues that the stargazing scene serves as Austen’s critique of traditional notions regarding the biblical Eve and her thirst for forbidden knowledge. In fact, Austen, according to Murphy, directly responds to Milton’s depiction of Eve in *Paradise Lost* when she shows that even knowledge of astronomy may be displayed with feminine reverence and timidity. This puts political pressure on earlier taboos regarding women’s access to scientific knowledge (114).

• How politically radical is this scene, in your opinion? Is Fanny challenging the status quo between the sexes here?

• In what ways is Austen updating the ideal type of womanhood, particularly when comparing Fanny’s interest in stargazing with Miss Crawford’s tendency to show off her musical skills?

Question 5

This question might be difficult, but bear with me. Scholars have long called *Mansfield Park* Austen’s most Victorian novel (the first critic to do so was probably Barbara Bail Collins in 1949). Victorian novels—i.e. from 1830s until ca. 1900—tend to “get outside the limits of individual perception” (Henchman 4); that is, they have complex plots, many points of view, and refuse to settle or decide things. Astronomy, in that regard, helped writers engage with such complexity because recent astronomical findings had challenged the notion of a stable universe. Before Herschel’s discoveries, of course, the night sky had been associated with rationality, objectivity, and permanence.

• How does the stargazing passage—and certain aspects of *Mansfield Park* at large—anticipate the nature (complex or multiple plots/many perspectives/unresolved) of the Victorian novel? It helps to remember that *Mansfield Park* is the only of Austen’s novels where the heroine is absent in some scenes.