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FANNY AND MRS. NORRIS:
POOR RELATIONS IN *MANSFIELD PARK*

Most readers of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* observe the differences between Fanny Price and her Aunt Norris. Fanny is quiet, timid, and obliging, while Mrs. Norris is loud and bossy. Yet Fanny and Mrs. Norris share a crucial circumstance. Both are poor relations to Sir Thomas Bertram. In *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen explores the way marriages create poor relations. She also shows the less prosperous members of the family reacting to their comparative powerlessness and the wealthy members reacting to their authority with its concomitant duties. Critics have overlooked an essential irony in the structure of *Mansfield Park*.¹ Jane Austen ends the novel when Edmund Bertram marries Fanny Price raising her from her lowly status; the novelist does not show whether he exercises his authority over his dependents more wisely than his father, Sir Thomas, has done.

As poor relations to Sir Thomas, both Fanny and Mrs. Norris are dependent, and in order to insure their continued livelihood, both must make themselves indispensable. Both are at Lady Bertram's beck and call to entertain her and to save her from her inability to amuse herself. The two different personalities, Fanny's timidity and Mrs. Norris' manipulateness, result from the age and way each becomes aware of being a poor relation. Fanny is made to feel the burden of her situation when she arrives at Mansfield as a displaced ten-year-old. Mrs. Norris, on the other hand, took on the lowly status only when she could not marry as well as her sister: "...at the end of half a dozen years, [she] found herself obliged to be attached to the Rev. Mr. Norris, a friend of her brother-in-law, with scarcely any private fortune. ..." ² Mrs. Norris is comic because she refuses to admit that her marriage has made her dependent, and she attempts to manipulate others without having any

real power. She relies on the authority society gives her as an "Aunt", an older relative, to make Fanny submit to her as well as to the wealthy relatives. Having Fanny as a subordinate helps Aunt Norris deny that she too is a poor relation.

Mansfield Park begins with the situation resulting from the marriages of three sisters: "About thirty years ago, Miss Maria Ward of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet's lady, with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income" (3). A second sister is made a dependent when she is forced to marry Rev. Norris whom Sir Thomas gives a small living until his death. Miss Frances disrupts the social order and family harmony by marrying a lowly lieutenant named Price. Mrs. Norris solidifies the disruption by writing an angry letter to Mrs. Price before Sir Thomas can exert influence to promote the young man to an acceptable rank. The breach in the family is repaired only when Mrs. Price's daughter, also named Fanny, marries the second Bertram son and is installed in the Mansfield parsonage, replacing Mrs. Norris, who finally receives her due—exile from Mansfield Park. Aunt Norris is exiled because of her niece Maria's flirtation outside of marriage. This catastrophe results because Sir Thomas has believed Mrs. Norris' pretense of authority and has trusted her to watch over his children during his absence.

Fanny Price is Jane Austen's early Cinderella and "few people can stomach her."³ The Cinderella theme is related to a mechanism which works to maintain class distinctions: "...some class societies manage to maintain in the members of the oppressed class, despite all the evidence to the contrary, the illusory hope that they individually can rise into the ruling class and partake in power.... Still more clear was this participation by magical sharing in the power of the mighty when nobility was conferred by a tap of the sword; the power substance was conveyed to those thus distinguished through contagious magic."⁴ In Jane Austen's world, marriage functions as the magic tap of the sword conferring nobility and income far above the woman's rightful expectations, as happened in Maria Ward's transformation into Lady Bertram. Thus a daughter may triumph by marrying a man who outranks her father socially, in effect, usurping the father's power. But marriage can also cause a magic degradation of a woman's hopes and a

displacement from her position by birth, as happened to Fanny's mother. A bad marriage such as Mrs. Price's makes a woman and her family poor relations. Mrs. Norris' marriage to Rev. Norris gives her an illusion of independence which she does not relinquish even when her husband dies and Sir Thomas must give the living to someone else.

After her arrival at Mansfield, Fanny must accept criticism of her behavior, her appearance, her background, and her place in the family, even from the servants. A later threat is another removal from what has become her home when Reverend Norris dies. According to the original arrangements, Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram expect that Fanny will now become Mrs. Norris' primary companion. Edmund tries to reconcile her to the situation by saying, " 'you *must* be important to her' " (26). Fanny's reaction shows that she has internalized all of Mrs. Norris and the others' criticisms. She says:

"I can never be important to any one."

"What is to prevent you?"

"Every thing—my situation—my foolishness and awkwardness." (26)

Although she can follow Edmund's advice in everything else, she cannot internalize his good opinion of her. He says, " 'As to your foolishness and awkwardness, my dear Fanny, believe me, you never have a shadow of either, but in using the words so improperly. There is no reason in the world why you should not be important where you are known. You have good sense, and a sweet temper, and I am sure you have a grateful heart, that could never receive kindness without wishing to return it. I do not know any better qualifications for a friend and companion' " (26). Even in his effort to comfort Fanny, Edmund cannot deny that "her situation" prevents her from being important to anyone except in subservient ways.

Fanny's situation requires that she put others' comfort and others' demands before even her own deepest feelings. When the young people decide to perform a play while Sir Thomas is away, they try to convince Fanny to participate, despite her sense that the play is wrong because Sir Thomas would disapprove. She wonders, "Was she *right* in refusing what was so warmly asked, so strongly wished for? what might be so essential to a scheme on which some of those to whom she owed the greatest complaisance, had set their hearts?" (153). Fanny's situation demands that she follow the wishes of those temporarily

replacing Sir Thomas as the head of the household, although she is momentarily spared when Mrs. Grant agrees to take the part.

When the young people plan an excursion to Mr. Rushworth's estate, which Fanny is anxious to see, Mrs. Norris makes arrangements which require Fanny to stay home with Lady Bertram who cannot tolerate being alone. As the wife of Sir Thomas, she must be entertained by those he supports. Fortunately Rev. Grant's wife, who is a dependent because of the living Sir Thomas has given her husband, offers to stay with Lady Bertram for the day. Mrs. Norris is foiled. Fanny is allowed the pleasure of the excursion.

Fanny comes to Mansfield, ingratiates herself, and finally becomes not just a part of the society, but the vital savior of Mansfield's way of life. A family member exiled from affluence and destined thereby for poverty might wish to rob from the rich what he felt was his due. Instead of robbing Sir Thomas' family of some object or of a limited quantity of money or goods, Fanny, the poor cousin, marries Edmund, thereby gaining a second son's share of the wealth. She is rewarded for having accepted her dependence, while Mrs. Norris is punished for denying her dependence.

For years, Mrs. Norris is surprisingly successful in pretending she is not a dependent, because her intelligence allows her to determine where her advantage lies in each situation. She continually reminds others that she is economical and interested in their good, rather than her own. Sir Thomas is convinced that Mrs. Norris will look after his children while he is away for two years. A dependent, Mrs. Norris is, however, the spirit of activity in the service of self-interest.

Where others' money is concerned, Mrs. Norris spares no expense. She suggests that Mansfield support one of poor Sister Price's children. She makes the arrangements and even goes off to meet the little girl, but she is only interested in the power that making the arrangements appears to give her: "...Mrs. Norris had not the least intention of being at any expense whatever in her maintenance. As far as walking, talking, and contriving reached, she was thoroughly benevolent, and nobody knew better how to dictate liberality to others: but her love of money was equal to her love of directing, and she knew quite as well how to save her own as to spend that of her friends" (8). Mrs. Norris also advises Mr. Rushworth to spare no expense in improving his estate.

Fanny expects Mrs. Norris to object to the production of the play, but "She started no difficulties that were not talked down in five minutes by her eldest nephew and niece, who were all-powerful with her..." (129). Tom and Maria are powerful, because Aunt Norris loves them and feels herself aggrandized by their achievements. Furthermore, in their father's absence, they hold power over their dependent aunt, because she may be dependent on them in the future. Again Mrs. Norris turns the situation to her advantage, never admitting that she is subservient to the Bertram children. She moves to the big house to help them with the play, saving her own living expenses. Sir Thomas does not realize that her comparative poverty makes saving money an obsession. She is so busy saving that she does not "have leisure for watching the behaviour, or guarding the happiness of his daughters" (163).

Mrs. Norris is, however, careful to see that Fanny's behavior suits *her* dependent position. Mrs. Norris tells everyone that Fanny is ungrateful to her cousins if she refuses to participate in the play. She will only allow Fanny to use the unwanted schoolroom with no fire. When Fanny receives the Grants' dinner invitation, Mrs. Norris says it is extraordinary and is meant merely as a compliment to " 'your uncle and aunt, and me' " (220). She criticizes Dr. and Mrs. Grant for pretensions to elegance beyond their proper rank, because they do not run the house at the parsonage as she and her husband did. She further ruins Fanny's pleasure in the invitation by saying: " 'The nonsense and folly of people's stepping out of their rank and trying to appear above themselves, makes me think it right to give *you* a hint, Fanny, now that you are going into company without any of us; and I do beseech and intreat you not to be putting yourself forward, and talking and giving your opinion as if you were one of your cousins—as if you were dear Mrs. Rushworth or Julia. *That* will never do, believe me. Remember, wherever you are, you must be the lowest and the last...' " (221). Fanny's invitation threatens Mrs. Norris' sense of superiority over her impoverished niece. Aunt Norris must stay home and keep Lady Bertram company, the dullest task of a poor relation.

Only after returning from a two-year absence does Sir Thomas begin to realize that Mrs. Norris is not a benevolent influence. He is appalled that she allowed the play. When he suggests her error, "Mrs. Norris was a little confounded, and as nearly being silenced as ever she had been in

her life; for she was ashamed to confess having never seen any of the impropriety which was so glaring to Sir Thomas, and would not have admitted that her influence was insufficient, that she might have talked in vain. Her only resource was to get out of the subject as fast as possible..." (188). To escape the reproach, Mrs. Norris claims credit for Maria's forthcoming marriage to Mr. Rushworth and avoids admitting to herself and to others that as a poor relation she had no power over the children.

The right marriage insures the continuing stability of the society and of the family fortune into the next generation. Sir Thomas embodies the best of the older generation, and he overlooked money to marry for love. Sir Thomas has fulfilled with Lady Bertram the pattern Mary Crawford expects her brother Henry will fulfill with Fanny: "...I know that a wife you *loved* would be the happiest of women, and that even when you ceased to love, she would yet find in you the liberality and good breeding of a gentleman' " (296). Because of his own experience, Sir Thomas devalues love as a guarantee for happiness and now supports society's emphasis on money, encouraging Maria's disastrous marriage and trying to force Fanny to marry Henry.

Sir Thomas gives Fanny a coming out ball largely because he believes Henry loves her. Sir Thomas wants to distinguish her and to recommend her connections to the suitor. He also demonstrates Fanny's docility by sending her to bed, perhaps "to recommend her as a wife by shewing her persuadableness" (281). Persuadableness is the trait most desired in a child, particularly a daughter, or in a wife, or in any other dependent.

Sir Thomas at first remains calm when Fanny refuses to marry Henry, because he cannot believe that she will thwart his intentions. Probably because of the cousins' childhood need to stand together against so powerful an authority figure, Fanny cannot be disloyal to Maria and Julia and tell their father about their flirtations with Henry. Therefore, Sir Thomas accuses Fanny of arbitrary willfulness. He now sounds like Mrs. Norris, although he thinks Mrs. Norris' similar accusations are unjust. Fanny should think of the rest of her family who can be helped by her marriage, and she should be grateful for the advantages she has received without herself giving any return. Her years of service to his wife and sister-in-law are forgotten. Janet Burroway rightly defines Fanny's refusal as violence.⁵ In spite of Fanny's education in

subservience administered by Mrs. Norris, she confronts the external authority and finds it faulty compared with her internalized authority—her conscience. Her act is destructive, because her society cannot tolerate an independently thinking, poor, female relation. Events vindicate Fanny's decision to follow her conscience and prove Sir Thomas wrong, just as events punish Mrs. Norris for trying to follow her own advantage rather than her conscience.

Sir Thomas cannot rectify the damage to his family caused by his absence and by his poor judgment in accepting Mrs. Norris' outward show of authority. Furthermore, Sir Thomas is delighted with Maria's engagement to the wealthy Rushworth and does not inquire about his personality or abilities. Sir Thomas' disappointment in marriage may also intensify his natural reserve, while his powerful position forces those around him to repress their exuberance and confidences. By cutting himself off both emotionally and then physically from those he should influence, he misjudges and loses control over the children.

The ideal father, Jane Austen implies, would retain emotional perception in order to consolidate his influence and make acceptable decisions. Lionel Trilling says: "Of all the fathers of Jane Austen's novels, Sir Thomas is the only one to whom admiration is given. Fanny's real father, Lieutenant Price of the Marines, is shallow and vulgar. The fathers of the heroines of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*, all lack principle and fortitude; they are corrupted by their belief in their delicate vulnerability—they lack *apatheia*. Yet Sir Thomas is a father, and a father is as little safe from Jane Austen's judgment as he is from Shelley's. Jane Austen's masculine ideal is exemplified by husbands, by Darcy, Knightley, and Wentworth, in whom principle and duty consort with a ready and tender understanding."⁶ The fathers' mistakes disrupt families, because the boundaries for conduct become unclear, as in Maria's case.

But Jane Austen does not take the story beyond the glossy ending which strengthens the little society by giving it a loving, rather than a punitive king. We do not see a husband becoming a father or adapting to a situation which gives him extensive power over the lives of dependents. This omission is particularly suspicious when combined with the Cinderella theme. Not only his wife and his children, but also members of his wife's family become the husband's dependents, as in Sir Thomas' case. Nothing but "love" mitigates his power, and Jane

Austen shows love's outcome in the uninspiring marriage between Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram. Herein lies the irony of *Mansfield Park*.

FOOTNOTES

1. For a summary of the positions of critics who have found no irony in *Mansfield Park*, see Janet Burroway, "The Irony of the Insufferable Prig. *Mansfield Park*," *CritQ*, 9 (1967), 127-138. Her article points out the irony that although Fanny respects Sir Thomas' authority, she refuses to give in to his insistence that she marry Henry Crawford.
2. Jane Austen, *The Novels*, III, ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), p.3. Subsequent citations in the text by page are to this edition.
3. D.W. Harding, "Introduction," Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (Baltimore: Penquin, 1965), p. 8.
4. Otto Fenichel, *The Collected Papers: Second Series* (New York: Norton, 1954), p. 154.
5. Janet Burroway, "The Irony of the Insufferable Prig. *Mansfield Park*," *CritQ*, 9 (1967), 138.
6. Lionel Trilling, "Mansfield Park," *Partisan Review*, 21 (1954), 507.