

## Lady Bertram, Mrs. Norris and Mrs. Price: Place and Moral Identity in *Mansfield Park*

JACQUELINE M. ERWIN

Culver, Indiana

*Mansfield Park* has generated a remarkably intense critical controversy. Fanny Price, the long-suffering heroine, represents the flash point since many readers find her irksome if not intolerable by the second half of the novel, while others rush to her defense. Critics also argue with vehemence over how the Crawfords are to be evaluated: Do their charm and vitality outweigh their moral transgressions? There remain two points, however, on which critics generally agree: *Mansfield Park* is a novel of an unmistakably grim tone, and place or locale has a profound effect on the characters. It is, in fact, the only novel published during Jane Austen's life that she titled with a place name.

The effect of place on characters and the reciprocal influence of characters on place are tied in this problematic novel to both the grim tone noted by critics and Austen's central concern in all her novels, the development and enactment of moral character. *Mansfield Park* reflects with particular poignancy how moral character relates to a key social transition of Austen's era, the transition of houses into homes. Houses, especially great houses such as Mansfield and Sotherton, publicly defined occupants in terms of social rank and degree of financial worth, derived usually from the man who owned the property. But from the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth, increasing value was ascribed to the house as a home, a place of domestic privacy and personal comfort, a place centered less on overt financial or social rank and more on the moral character of the domestic woman. Through her private moral character, the domestic woman, exemplified in the idealized good mother, could transform her husband's house into the spiritualized home.<sup>1</sup> Her private identity as a moral person, rather than the public persona granted her through her father's or husband's rank or money, became the source and grounding of the physical and more importantly the psychological comfort of those around her in the domestic sphere.

For Jane Austen, the ability to develop this moral identity and to transform a house into a home is not automatic for any woman, including mothers. Fanny Price, heroine of this dark novel, enacts the story of such a woman, the "angel in the house." She transforms Mansfield and the parsonage into homes at the end because she has a private moral identity, one derived from the service-oriented roles allotted her in these houses. But her story represents the fortunate result of one woman's relationship to the house she lives in; it is laid in a context of negative, even tragic, possibilities in terms of the effects of place on a woman and on her potential for a private, moral sense of identity. The real threat to the development of the domestic angel, the ideal mother, is implicit in the stories of the three Ward sisters, Fanny's mother Mrs. Price, and her two aunts, Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris, whose narratives frame the opening of the novel. Austen exaggerates in each sister a

different feminine trait associated with moral nature and which in conjunction with a specific type of house leads to moral erosion. Not one of these sisters attains a private moral identity that is grounded in respect for or service to the psychological needs of others, the benchmark of Austenian morality.

In *Lady Bertram*, Austen exaggerates the passivity in women urged and valued by conduct book writers. *Lady Bertram*, the former *Miss Maria Ward*, lovely and lucky enough to captivate *Sir Thomas* despite being “at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim” to such a match, epitomizes the wife who submits her judgment to her husband’s. With “very tranquil feelings, and a temper remarkably easy and indolent,” her passivity is physical, mental, emotional, and ultimately moral. The house she is raised to, *Mansfield*, encourages this passivity. The wealth and rank *Mansfield* brings her spares her domestic activity. Surrounded by competent servants, a controlling husband, and a less wealthy sister who seeks her favor by performing her duties, she can avoid the exertions of household and family management. Austen emphasizes this passivity by rendering her nearly motionless: *Lady Bertram* gives up the London house and remains fixed in the country and indeed largely fixed within *Mansfield Park* itself. Only twice does Austen mention *Lady Bertram*’s venturing outside her house or garden: once to pay a necessary visit to *Mrs. Rushworth* and once to dine at the parsonage. She spends her time instead “sitting nicely dressed on a sofa, doing some long piece of needlework, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children . . . guided in every thing important by *Sir Thomas*, and in smaller concerns by her sister” (*MP* 19-20).

Her lack of physical motion reflects an emotional and intellectual passivity. *Lady Bertram* is devoid of thought and imagination; she cannot conceive of danger or discomfort to her husband on his journey to *Antigua*. She is so completely passive that *Sir Thomas* can fill “her whole comprehension . . . by his narratives” (*MP* 179) because she is too static to generate her own stories and cannot perceive those happening around her in her emotionally turbulent family. Unable to discern or interpret events within her family without him, she cannot respond to them. *Mansfield* itself encourages this trait in her. It provides her no danger or difficulty or fatigue. It does not function for her as the stage of anxiety, difficulty, or dilemma that it represents to others. It offers her the comfort of not having to encounter problems and respond to them. The temporary financial worries associated with *Mansfield* occur on the estates in *Antigua*, which are an ocean away and hence not real to her. The house and her role within it remain unchanged.<sup>2</sup> Just as *Mansfield* exacerbates her passivity, making her static, so she can only experience *Mansfield* as unchanging.

Tended to and maintained by others, like the house itself, the static *Lady Bertram* and her identity merge with that of *Mansfield*. Having fulfilled her patrilineal requirement of physically giving birth to a “fine family, the sons very well-looking, the daughters decidedly handsome,” the passive *Lady Bertram* exists to proclaim her husband’s public status just as *Mansfield* itself does. She becomes simply a decorative element within the great house

her husband provides her. Unable to discern the needs of others, equally unable to act even if she could, her moral beliefs (such as they are) are merely faint transplants of her husband's thinking. She has no moral identity of her own; passive as she is, she lacks moral agency and can never transform Mansfield into a home.

If Austen challenges the importance of passivity in women through Lady Bertram, she also cautions that active economic management of the household provides no guarantee of a woman's moral nature. Many conduct books of her day assumed that prudent economic regulation reflected a woman's capacity for moral behavior (Armstrong 86). In *Mrs. Norris*, Austen exaggerates the economic activities that were associated with fostering the psychological and physical well-being of the family. Although Mrs. Norris takes over her indolent sister's responsibilities in this regard, she does not exemplify a moral potency. Her economic measures and efforts as a maternal substitute reveal a psychology quite different from the moral household angel.

Critics consistently decry Mrs. Norris as an unmitigated villain, the evil stepmother in a retelling of the Cinderella story. Exiled at the conclusion



*In vain were the well-meant  
condescensions of Sir Thomas.*

CHAPTER II

with the fallen Maria, whose vice redounds to her aunt as fully as it does to her father and herself, Mrs. Norris represents in most respects the antithesis of the static Lady Bertram. She never stays still, walking to and from her house and Mansfield, and within the drawing rooms bustling even when there is no occasion to be active. She imports noise and commotion, thrusting herself busily into the family as she endeavors to manage it economically and narratively.

For all the evils and irritations she represents, however, her story at the outset is tinged with a poignant desperation like Charlotte Lucas's in *Pride and Prejudice*. Unlike her sister whose passivity and luck engage the affections of Sir Thomas, Mrs. Norris's equal beauty results in no such connection. Active as she is, her marital choice scarcely merits the word: she is "obliged to be attached" to Mr. Norris because "there certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world, as there are pretty women to deserve them" (*MP* 3). The house she gains in marrying him, the Mansfield parsonage, she experiences as a contrast to her wealthy sister's house. The proximity of the parsonage (and later the little white cottage) to Mansfield enforces such a comparison. The difference profoundly affect Mrs. Norris's identity.

Because Mr. Norris and the parsonage bring her less of an income than she expected to have in married life, Mrs. Norris experiences her house as economic deprivation. Mansfield with its greater financial resources situated across the park from her functions as a constant reminder of what she lacks rather than what she has economically. The two juxtaposed establishments encourage her to try to compensate for this perceived lack. She "fancied a very strict line of economy necessary; and what was begun as a matter of prudence, soon grew into a matter of choice" (*MP* 8). Because her household represents lack, she shapes her behavior and finally her individual identity according to the practice of frugality.

With Mrs. Norris, Austen exaggerates this activity as fully as she does Lady Bertram's passivity. Domestic economy becomes an "infatuating principle," and without children, "there was nothing to impede her frugality, or lessen the comfort of making a yearly addition to an income which they had never lived up to" (*MP* 8). Remaining childless, she substitutes money and the activity of economy as the objects of "that needful solicitude" which, as Austen carefully states, children would have supplied (*MP* 8). The deprivation Mrs. Norris experiences because of her house (lacking the desired income) and her household (which lacks children of her own) becomes a love of money and of her ability to accumulate it.

This economic activity as an answer to and solace for an unassuageable sense of deprivation which permeates and underlies all aspects of her behavior. It ultimately forms her identity. It determines the way she shapes her activities as a mother substitute for her sisters' children. The solicitude Mrs. Norris feels for them is in reality a manifestation of her personal economic value. With the possible exception of Maria, Mrs. Norris does not care for any of her sisters' children except insofar as they provide her an opportunity to be recognized and affirmed as frugal or to enjoy spending the

Bertram's money rather than her own. She conceives the expensive charity (to Sir Thomas) of raising Fanny without ever caring about the child's feelings. She promotes Maria's economically attractive alliance with Sotherton to display her own value as the astute arranger of her niece's economic and social future. She fails, however, to see Maria's eventual dissatisfaction with Rushworth or the angry competition between the sisters for Crawford's attention. Blind to their feelings and too busy taking home pieces of the green baize curtain or an egg, a cheese and a heath from Sotherton, she never reveals a concern for her nieces' emotional problems and needs.

Mrs. Norris's frugality, particularly when enacted with respect to her three nieces, gives to her and to Sir Thomas the appearance of generosity, disinterestedness, and charity—of a service intended to be of genuine utility and a source of improvement to others. She enjoys “the happy belief of being the most liberal-minded sister and aunt in the world” (*MP* 9). But without any cost to herself, Mrs. Norris fails to understand her motives or to see how enacting the feminine virtue of economy can be devoid of virtue. The domestic economy she practices—the feminine virtue by which she defines herself consisting of the management skills, frugality, and regularity which conduct book writers associated with domestic contentment (Armstrong 86)—undermines the feminine morality it is supposed to express. Mrs. Norris fails consistently at making those around her content and comfortable as she strives to be useful. Her usefulness or service to the Bertram family is finally a matter of self-interest. She wrests for her own use the resources of another household in a futile effort to fill the voids in her life. In fact, rather than addressing the needs for comfort of her sisters and their families, Mrs. Norris wages war against them all.

Mrs. Norris's hostile attitudes affect her houses, which she endows with forbidding and excluding characteristics. She prevents Fanny's coming to her at the little “White house” on Mr. Norris's death by claiming that she must always have a room for a friend and hence has no room for Fanny in such a small house. But there are no friends and the spare room remains empty. Within her own domestic sphere, she wants no company to have to make comfortable. Mrs. Norris's frugality does not contribute to her own material comfort; she will not make her house a refuge of comfort for others despite her claims. Mrs. Norris ends living in seclusion with the disgraced Maria. “Their tempers became their mutual punishment” (*MP* 465) because Maria, without affection for Mrs. Norris, has no interest in contributing to her aunt's comfort, and the aunt, damaged by too many years of a sense of deprivation, cannot see how to provide it. They have neither the inclination nor the ability to extend psychological comfort since both have shaped their lives according to the external values prompted by their houses. Together they transform their final house into a veritable version of hell.

Austen takes up the importance of psychological comfort as a key aspect of the home and the mother's role in providing it in the character of Mrs. Price, the third Ward sister and Fanny's biological mother. Mrs. Price, who marries “to disoblige her family,” does so ostensibly for love since Mr. Price has nothing else to offer her. Since mothers were often portrayed as feeling

equal and undiminished love for each child and children were considered to be emotional resources for mothers (Lewis 58), Mrs. Price's high fertility seems to promise that her capacity to love has grown since her marriage. Such a number of children (ten born, nine living) would seem to ensure that she is a loving, disinterested, and self-sacrificing mother.

Such, at least, are Fanny's expectations. When Fanny is offered the opportunity to reconnect with and visit her mother and family in Portsmouth after her rejection of Henry Crawford, she expects to find herself going to a real home. She expects the Portsmouth house to provide "love" or unlimited psychological comfort, even though she realizes it cannot offer the physical comforts of Mansfield. Mrs. Price's response to Fanny's visit seems to confirm this expectation. Her letter,

though short, was so kind, a few simple lines expressed so natural and motherly a joy in the prospect of seeing her child again, as to confirm all the daughter's views of happiness in being with her. . . . [T]here would be leisure and inclination for every comfort, and they should soon be what mother and daughter ought to be to each other. (MP 371)

Fanny's hopes for an ideal mother are almost immediately deflated upon her arrival in Portsmouth. Although her mother does display a natural interest in her daughter's welfare, it is an instinct soon satisfied and then ignored like Fanny herself. Mrs. Price, who resembles her sister Lady Bertram both in looks and in natural indolence, remains in large measure shaped by her environment, particularly her house. She may fulfill a feminine ideal of fertility by having ten children, but there is no automatic or natural capacity for equal love to give to all her children. She prefers her sons, ignores her daughters, and, in one of Austen's harshest descriptive passages, demonstrates what can happen to a woman of her attributes in a straitened domestic situation:

She was fond of her sons. . . . These shared her heart; her time was given chiefly to her house and servants. Her days were spent in a kind of slow bustle; always busy without getting on, always behindhand and lamenting it, without altering her ways; wishing to be an economist, without contrivance or regularity; dissatisfied with her servants, without skill to make them better. . . . [Fanny's] mother was a partial, ill-judging parent, a dawdle, a slattern, who neither taught nor restrained her children, whose house was the scene of mismanagement and discomfort from beginning to end. (MP 389-90)

The Price's small house and restricted finances coupled with the large family do not lead to the compensating attention to emotional comfort Fanny expected. Mrs. Price's household—a superfluity of children, cramped quarters, and a barebones income—pushes her into activities she is too indolent to perform. She is overwhelmed by the size of her family and distracted by her duties and problems she cannot solve. She lacks the time, inclination, and ability to identify and act on the need for psychological comfort in her family. Given the combination of personality traits, probable educational deficiencies, and a household offering her no assistance (as Mansfield does to Lady Bertram), Mrs. Price can achieve no private identity. She develops no moral character as a mother beyond "the instinct of nature [which] was

soon satisfied" (*MP* 389). She cannot be the mother Fanny expects, willing to bond psychologically with her and so comfort her. She cannot transform her house into a home.

Fanny makes one particularly insightful observation in Portsmouth: She realizes that "Mrs. Norris would have been a more respectable mother of nine children, on a small income" (*MP* 390). The poignancy of this insight arises not just from Fanny's disappointed hopes in her mother and the privations she faces in the Portsmouth wilderness. It springs as much from the sense that both Mrs. Price and Mrs. Norris are misplaced in life, that in reversed circumstances they would have been happier, better women. Mrs. Price "might have made just as good a woman of consequence as Lady Bertram" had she married into a "situation of similar affluence and do-nothing-ness" (*MP* 390). With her own children supplying her "that needful solicitude" and in a household benefiting from her talents and energy, Mrs. Norris would have been less focused on herself and her social position. In identifying and supplying the needs of others, Mrs. Norris could have led a life not shaped by the unending sense of deprivation she feels at Mansfield. Her value would have been confirmed by the matching of her talents with her situation, and in being less centered on herself, a private moral identity would then have been possible. Mrs. Norris is a villain, but her status as such is underpinned with a tragic element: the sense that chance as much as choice placed her in a situation encouraging her in the evil stepmother role she assumes. And this raises a serious reflection: In the wrong house, how in fact would Fanny have developed morally? This consideration, not Henry Crawford's attentions, are the real danger she has by luck avoided.

In *Mansfield Park* the specific houses Fanny, her two aunts, and her mother live in shape their moral character, and they in turn affect those houses for good or ill. But this relationship between character and locale is tinged by the chilling notion of luck. For all the social and moral order Austen analyzes in this novel, she also acknowledges a randomness in human life not to be controlled by ambition or endeavor, education or talent—and that can lastingly affect the identity and moral stature of any one, even the domestic woman. In her moral universe, she does not exonerate any character because of this. As Mary Evans writes in her summation of Austen's achievement, "Human beings are not, therefore, what they are born: they are creatures who have at their command the power to make, or break, their fates" (85). Those who try however imperfectly to live according to such principles are finally rewarded. However, Evans continues, for Austen we are not just "what we make of ourselves," but "what the world makes of us" (86). It is the random element of this world—made evident in the stories of Lady Bertram, Mrs. Price and Mrs. Norris—that poses the real moral danger to Fanny and contributes to the novel's grim tone.<sup>3</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Although both “house” and “home” connote dwelling place, and Austen herself uses them interchangeably, for the purposes of this paper I shall maintain this distinction when using these specific words. “House” will imply a masculine-oriented dwelling with an associated source of income designed to reflect the externals of social position and wealth; “home” will imply the feminine domain associated with physical and emotional comfort.
- <sup>2</sup> Barbara Hardy argues that Mansfield Park is “not a static habitat, and its adopted child changes its shape and its atmosphere.” She speaks, however, of “the spirit of the place,” and it should be noted that the physical structure, except during the play interlude, is not subject to improvements as is Sotherton which she argues is actually more inert (pp. 96-97). Fanny has little or no effect on Lady Bertram’s role. Other critics argue that Fanny fails to change Mansfield to any extent.
- <sup>3</sup> Critics account for this grim tone in a variety of ways, many of which deal with problems of certainty and its relation to morality. Margaret Drabble argues that the tone of the novel arises from the tension between its appearance of clarity and quietude and the unremitting “anxious flux” and “terrible restlessness” that permeate it (Introduction, *Mansfield Park*, p. xvii). Lionel Trilling also notes “a species of anxiety” in the novel. He attributes it to the “militant categorical certitude” that characterizes Austen’s presentation of right and wrong in this work (*Sincerity* p. 79). For Michael Williams, the problem lies in the fact that “the novel allows us to conceive other resolutions” that are probably preferable. He also claims that the novel focuses more on the “nature and function of principle in general, and the dangerous difficulties of practical application” rather than one rigid code (p. 116). Jane Nardin similarly argues against Austen’s endorsing any infallible norm or ideal that Fanny might be said to represent (*Those Elegant*, p. 106).

## WORKS CITED

- Armstrong, Nancy. *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. 1987. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park*. Ed. by R. W. Chapman. Vol. 3. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933.
- Drabble, Margaret. Introduction. *Mansfield Park*. By Jane Austen. London: Virago, 1989.
- Evans, Mary. *Jane Austen and the State*. London: Tavistock, 1987.
- Hardy, Barbara. “Properties and Possessions in Jane Austen’s Novels.” In *Jane Austen’s Achievement: Papers Delivered at the Jane Austen Bicentennial Conference at the University of Alberta*. Juliet McMaster, ed. London: Macmillan, 1976, 79-105.
- Lewis, Judith. *In the Family Way: Childbearing in the British Aristocracy 1760-1860*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986.
- Nardin, Jane. *Those Elegant Decorums: The Concept of Propriety in Jane Austen’s Novels*. Albany: State U of NY, 1973.
- Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971, 1972.
- Williams, Michael. *Jane Austen: Six Novels and Their Methods*. New York: St. Martin’s, 1986.

† The color image has replaced the original black and white image for the on-line edition of this essay. – C. Moss, JASNA Web Site Manager