

Fanny in Fairyland: *Mansfield Park* and the Cinderella Legend

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The question is, **which** Cinderella legend? The commonly received version is the French fairy story that Charles Perrault gave to Walt Disney, who gave it to us—the version with the modern Cinderella. A docile but inert sweet-heart who parleys her beauty and preternatural connections into instant wealth and fortune, she croons, “Someday, my prince will come,” without stirring a millimeter to seek his love. What has love to do with it? To be capable of love is to be a person, and this Cinderella is not expected to be that complicated any more than the soap opera heroine who is her glitzy or grubby successor.

According to some critics, this characterization is a picture-perfect description of Fanny Price, the passive Cinderella: the sanctimoniously colorless cipher who wins her equally drab prince, by hanging around, radiating orthodox piety until *Mansfield Park*’s miscreants self-destruct and only she is left, crouched among the ruins, for the survivors to cling to, a very untypical Jane Austen heroine.

But there is also the earlier and earthier Cinderella, whom the Brothers Grimm immortalized from a tradition centuries old and world-wide, the feisty and resourceful stepchild who, with or without preternatural aid, is offered her main chance and seizes the opportunity, a true princess claiming her prince. Now **this** sounds more like an Austenian protagonist, and in fact, other critics have found in this agreeably boisterous figure the folkloric prototype for Jane Austen’s more attractive and assertive heroines: Lizzy Bennet, who finally conquers the majestic Darcy, or Catherine Morland, whose Lochinvar-braving-the-tyrant’s-wrath comes to pluck her from the domestic hearth. Or Anne Elliot, whose swashbuckling swain returns to sweep her from her domestic misery to a new life of adventure. Or even Emma, who wins the aptly named Knightley, once she abdicates her role as fairy godmother. After all, we know the Jane Austen heroine **must** marry, or turn into a desiccated and discarded pumpkin by story’s end. So why should her creator not incorporate the well-known legend—muted or mutated by various degrees of irony—to provide cultural reinforcement for her narrative resolutions?

But Fanny—one objects—is not like her canonical sisters and that’s the whole problem. She is a Cinderella on the Perrault model and worse, a de facto orphan timid and dull and almost pathologically self-effacing, comfortable only in her lonely garret by a cold fireside, treated with genial condescension by her Prince Charming, for whom she nurses a love she cannot articulate even to herself. Nor is her prince, Edmund, whom Ernest Wright has dubbed “doubtless one of the dullest figures in the entire Austen canon,” much like Austen’s more forceful and personable husbands-in-

waiting. For Jane Austen to cobble together a conventional lovers' ending for two such un-Jane Austen lovers is to sacrifice credibility as a storyteller for credence as a conventional novelist/moralist. The ending of *Northanger Abbey* was as contrived, but at least in a noisily good-humored tone that underscored the narrative irony, rooted in the parody of the Gothic. Something, people feel, has gone seriously wrong here, with Jane Austen's story, or her characters, or both.

For those readers, the only way Fanny becomes tolerable and her world comprehensible is to read the entire novel as unremittingly ironic, not as a literary, but a social parody. Most recently, Claudia Johnson has argued convincingly that the novel is "no less a parody, though much less a comedy, than *Northanger Abbey* . . . a bitter parody" of the conservative fiction of Jane Austen's day (99), that exalted the passive female protagonist who achieves a modest contentment by subordinating her own wishes, and her own person, to older, wiser, and inevitably male heads. This, Johnson argues, is precisely what Fanny does, and the authority figures betray and traduce her repeatedly, finally turning her into a pariah when she takes a stand for what she, and the readers, know is right. The self-serving greed, hypocrisy, and cruelty of her mentors, and the moral bankruptcy of the system they perpetuate, Johnson argues, are mercilessly exposed—inadvertently by the narrator, deliberately by the author, until the former gives up in exasperation and patches together a conclusion that in substance violates every principle of plausibility and in tone is irascibly resigned to putting a happy varnish on an irreparably scarred and blemished world:

Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest. [*Then later*] . . . I only intreat every body to believe that exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier, Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford, and became as anxious to marry Fanny, as Fanny herself could desire. (461, 470)

I agree that the major impact of the novel is meant to be ironic; however, I argue that the social parody is reinforced by—I will go farther, contained in—an artistic parody of the **sweet** Cinderella legend, the one Jane Austen's readers would most likely have known. For virtually every character, theme, and situation in the expanded sweet Cinderella story is present, in distorted or perverted form, as if the fairy tale were violently wrenched into misshape by contact with the brutal realities of the world of *Mansfield Park* and beyond.

But there is more at work here, I contend, than literary satire. For Fanny, the central character in the story, is made to spurn her fairy tale role and opt for substance in a world where everyone else grasps at show. And ironically, by refusing to be the incarnation of the story Cinderella, Fanny wins even more than a **real** Cinderella could ever hope for.

To begin at the end, let us contrast fairy tale marriages and Jane Austen marriages by noting that the former, transported into the milieu of the latter, are inevitably a recipe for disaster. Whirlwind courtships, based on little more than infatuated physical attraction on one hand, or the hope for social

advancement on the other, inevitably wreak ruin, not only on the couple, but also on all around them. One thinks immediately of the elder Bennets and how this mismatch has soured the entire subsequent generation, leading to a similar calamitous mismatch for their daughter Lydia. Whenever one of Jane Austen's protagonists engages in an "instant romance," it quickly becomes clear that it is an inappropriate and untimely entanglement from which they will liberate themselves by their innate good sense, and which, in fact, often serve as red herrings for the disclosure of the heroine's real marital goals, as well as cautionary exemplar against infatuation. Thus Lizzy Bennet loses interest in Wickham as a potential lover long before she gives him up as a cause, Emma's involvement with Frank Churchill never enters the serious, marriage-making stage, and Anne Elliot, as she and the narrator both make clear, intuitively William Elliot's feet of clay, so to speak, long before Mrs. Smith's damning revelation. Of all the Cinderella infatuations, the longest-lasting and most traumatic is Marianne Dashwood's passion for Willoughby, which almost kills her and inflicts massive pain on those she loves. Whatever fundamental and pervasive deficiencies Col. Brandon may have in the Prince Charming Department, he is surely a better lifemate for Marianne than the charmingly dastardly Willoughby.

Moreover, there is a conspicuous lack of dash in the rest of Jane Austen's true princes, none of whom combine the fabled requisites of wealth and charm. Elinor Dashwood finds happiness with the shy Edward Ferrars, who is disinherited for his effrontery; Catherine Morland weds Henry, who for all of his appeal is a second son, and a clergyman to boot. As for Darcy and Knightley, they have the wealth and position of fairy tale heroes, but hardly the charm. Each in his own way is socially maladroit and will require the efforts of his more ebullient spouse to fulfill his public side. Frederick Wentworth would seem the exception, but, as the story makes clear, his real Prince Charming days occurred a decade before, when he and Anne almost perfectly fitted the roles of fairy tale lovers. It is only in their maturity, in the slow ripening of more lasting feelings, that they find in one another the complementary strength to escape into a new world where status and titles and even "home" have completely new meanings.

But, Edmund's character aside, the story of Fanny seems to violate Jane's customary pattern. With no connubial prospects in the offing, and without the spunk to exploit them even if there were, Fanny seems condemned to the role of dependent mendicant to which all the denizens of Mansfield Park have consigned her from the moment she arrives at the palace from her humble cottage, insuring that she has her cinders with her, psychologically speaking. Nor is there a fairy godmother in residence to help her attract and win her prince. In fact, in a bit of casting that underscores the irony, Mary Crawford, Fanny's nemesis, becomes her social mentor, even providing the necklace as surrogate for the glass slipper, as Fanny reluctantly nerves herself for her grand moment at the ball.

And it is at the ball that Fanny is offered her Cinderella payoff, remuneration for having obligingly played the Cinderella waif for all the Mansfield Park folk. Even Fanny seems timidly to acquiesce in the charade, hoping that

her prince will appear. Appear he does, everything a folklore prince should be: Henry Crawford is handsome and rich and accomplished and, we know, has a genuine affection for Fanny. But we also know, and so does Fanny, that he is the wrong prince, a more sophisticated Wickham, a wealthier Willoughby, a man who would be all wrong for Fanny, even if her heart were not set on her own frog-prince. As in the production of "Lovers' Vows," Fanny knows the script, the whole script, better than any of the active cast. If she would only accept the eminently eligible Henry Crawford, everything would be tickety-boo. Edmund could pursue his Princess Charming with a clear field and a clear conscience, Sir Thomas's conscience would be eased, Mrs. Norris's view of the way of the world would be triumphantly vindicated. Maria would be able, or forced, to make the best of it as Mrs. Rushworth. As Mrs. Crawford, Fanny would be able to ameliorate the domestic squalor at Portsmouth. And all would be tidily happy. Just like a fairy story, but not, of course, like a Jane Austen novel.

But, if—or rather, because—Fanny knows the script, she refuses to be one of the players, even if hers is the starring role. "How then was I to be," she demands, "in love with him the moment he said he was with me? How was I to have an attachment at his service, as soon as it was asked for?" (353). In short, in this scenario, Cinderella tells Prince Charming to take a hike.

She does not take this course of action with insouciance. As Johnson has observed, Fanny does not question either the wisdom or the motives of the major characters here, as the reader must. To us, Sir Thomas is playing the hypocritical tyrant, Mary the hypocritical ally, and Edmund the hypocritical elder brother, who is fighting, and winning a battle with his conscience. And, since we have been allowed to eavesdrop on the off-stage business between the Crawfords, we are aware that Henry, in his initial protestations of love, is playing the nastiest role of all. But Fanny has only her innate sense of what's really important to guide her, something no one else in the cast values at all. Indeed, from the outside, it is impossible to deny the overwhelming force of Sir Thomas's argument, "There is something in this," he declares reproachfully, "which my comprehension does not reach.

Here is a young man wishing to pay his addresses to you, with every thing to recommend him; not merely situation in life, fortune, and character, but with more than common agreeableness, with address and conversation pleasing to every body. And he is not an acquaintance of to-day, you have now known him some time. His sister, moreover, is your intimate friend, and he has been doing *that* for your brother, which I should suppose would have been almost sufficient recommendation to you, had there been no other.' (315-16)

These sentiments are echoed in essence by everyone at Mansfield Park; even Lady Bertram rouses herself sufficiently to remind Fanny that "it is every young woman's duty to accept such a very unexceptionable offer as this" (333).

Faced with her inexplicable obduracy, Sir Thomas decrees that she be banished from the palace, so to speak, and returned to the ashes. "A little abstinence from the elegancies and luxuries of Mansfield Park," he reasoned, "would bring her mind into a sober state, and incline her to a juster estimate

of the value of that home of greater permanence, and equal comfort, of which she had the offer" (369). At first, Fanny embraces the plan. Having concluded that her real prince is beyond her hopes, and with rosily inaccurate memories of home and hearth at Portsmouth together with a half-formed dream of living someday in isolated sibling contentment with her beloved brother William, Fanny imagines herself granted refuge from the attentions of the wrong prince, another huddling place where people would just leave her alone.

Of course it does not fall out that way: it cannot. Cinderella cannot permanently retreat to the chimney corner in her world, especially if the prince who persists in pursuing her there is the Prince of Darkness, while her true prince is hallooing off in the other direction after his own flawed but flossy princess. Nor can this dreary fadeaway be the ignominious end for an Austen heroine. Even Charlotte Lucas, at whatever spiritual cost, achieves more than this. Someday, Edmund will claim Fanny, with as much certitude, if not as much flair, as Darcy or Knightley or Henry Tilney claims the woman he was created to marry. In the meantime, Fanny must cope with the attentions of the wrong prince and endure the silent, well-bred ill-will of the Mansfield Parkers and the stridently vulgar indifference of her own blood kin. It is for Fanny/Cinderella the nadir of her fortunes.

But it is also the grand turning point. For it is a folkloric commonplace that she who sits by the kitchen fire is the guardian of the hearth, the keeper and nurturer of domestic order and happiness. This is the role Fanny quickly assumes at her birth home in Portsmouth and the one that in the fullness of time she will assume at her real home at Mansfield Park, and later, at Thornton Lacey. Spiritually, she no longer belongs at Portsmouth and though she does her considerable best to "exert" herself in her family's interest—"she had great pleasure in feeling her usefulness," we are told, "but could not conceive how they would have managed without her" (390)—she can never retrogress to being her mother's clone, any more than, to win Edmund, she can turn into a simulacrum of Mary Crawford. Henry still persists, but Henry, his moral failings aside, is a foreign prince, who would bear her away to parts remote, even unto London. And the Park feels her absence **now**, as her true prince will, when he finally comes back where he belongs. "Portsmouth was Portsmouth," Fanny realizes, "Mansfield was home. . . . Could she have been at home, she might have been of service to every creature in the house. She felt that she must have been of use to all" (431-32).

It is both necessary and proper, therefore, that she return not as the triumphant belle of another ball, but in the role of nurturer. Mansfield stands in dire need, not only of her ministrations, but of her sheer presence. The desperate illness of Tom, the dissolute Crown Prince, is only the first blow to fall on the beleaguered manse. The play world of "Lovers' Vows" has spilled over into reality with a vengeance. Both stepdaughters are in exiled disgrace, the elder brother at death's door, and Fanny's hitherto revered suitor has turned from Prince Charming into a reptile even lower than a frog. Sir Thomas, dazed amid the devastation, calls on Fanny to come back, and so she does, to an Edmund doubly chastened, by the scandalous behavior of his

sisters and the correspondingly reprehensible response of his Lady Fair. When Mary tries to poo-poo and paper over the whole affair of her brother and Maria, urging that the saving of appearances will eradicate the folly, that, in other words the play world could be sustained, reality finally comes calling on Edmund. "This is what the world does," he declares to Fanny. "But the charm is broken. My eyes are opened" (456). But it was, we are asked to believe, a close call. In a passage which has been vilified by many of the novel's critics, Jane Austen makes her narrator tell us:

Would he have deserved more, there can be no doubt that more would have been obtained; especially when that marriage had taken place, which would have given him the assistance of her conscience in subduing her first inclination, and brought them very often together. *Would he have persevered, and uprightly, Fanny must have been his reward*—and a reward very voluntarily bestowed—within a reasonable period from Edmund's marrying Mary.

(467) [Italics added]

A patently desperate ploy, we are told, as artistically indefensible as alternatively peevish and plaintive abdication of plausibility mentioned above; it is, they argue as though the narrator had violated the integrity of her story—and worse, her characters—to make a moral point.

But consider, "Would he have deserved more . . ." he doesn't. Because "Would he have persevered more . . ." he couldn't. Henry is a free agent, to be sure, like all of Jane Austen's characters, but he has chosen his world long since, the world he and Mary alike have chosen to inhabit, the world into which he proposes to transport Fanny. That is not her world, in terms of either the psychology, or, in the old sense of the word, of the fable either. For although its moral sordidness is real enough, and the consequences of its actions reverberate into the real world, it is still subjectively the world of make-believe, a game in which all the participants are defined, and trapped, by the roles they made themselves. But the extended play is over, and Maria and Henry, Julia and Yates, Mary and Mrs. Norris, and all who connived in keeping it alive are forcibly exited. The narrator's impatience "to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest" is directed in part at readers who don't want the play to end, just to transmute from melodrama to morality play. And Fanny as his *reward*? No Jane Austen heroine, however straitened by circumstance, is any man's *reward*, no matter how blessed by fortune. In a curious and anachronistic way, *Mansfield Park* does not parody the fantasy of "Cinderella" so much as Cinderella parodies the reality of *Mansfield Park*.

In the real world of this novel, where human limitations collide violently with superhuman expectations, "tolerable comfort" may be all that is attainable, and that in a shrunken, demoralized, and beleaguered enclave that is nevertheless the only alternative between the sordidness of Portsmouth and the venality of London or Bath.

This is not a "light, and bright, and sparkling" world; Fanny and Edmund Bertram will never be the Darcys or Knightleys, the Wentworths or Tilneys, and especially, whatever some critics say about insipidity, the Bingleys. However, whatever Marvin Mudrick may claim, Edmund and Fanny are not

emotional and spiritual clones, an eighteenth century Ken and Barbie whose marriage seems as indecently, as it will be decently, tedious. When she was growing up, Edmund had much to give Fanny; now, when Edmund needs a different kind of support, it is Fanny who is the provider. Now, "equally formed for domestic life, and attached to country pleasures," the narrator tells us, "the happiness of the married cousins must appear as secure as earthly happiness can be" (473). As with the others of Jane's couples, "happily ever after" is a dangerous chimera. But there is always a hereafter, for in Jane Austen novels, though not in fairy tales, marriage is a beginning, not an end.

Irony? Satire? It abounds, targeting both the dangerously delusive fantasies of the fabulous world and the brutal social realpolitik of the real one. Beneath all of this, however, is the fundamental folk-myth that Jane always tells. That of the young girl coming of age as a woman and claiming a woman's rights and responsibilities alike, not the Cinderella story mocked but, if one can put it so, humanized, and therefore made more wonderful. The adjective "gentle," so often applied to Fanny, has another, older denotation than "sweetly passive." It means well-born; its cognate is "gentility," an attribute which Fanny possesses as a natural endowment far more than either of Sir Thomas's high-born daughters. Substantially, she is the true princess of the tale, not either of them.

In the first chapter of the novel, before he has even met Fanny, Sir Thomas observes to Mrs. Norris:

'There will be some difficulty in our way . . . as to the distinction proper to be made between the girls as they grow up; how to preserve in the minds of my *daughters* the consciousness of what they are, without making them think too lowly of their cousin; and how, without depressing her spirits too far, to make her remember that she is not a *Miss Bertram*. I should wish to see them very good friends, and would, on no account, authorize in my girls the smallest degree of arrogance towards their relation; but still they cannot be equals. Their rank, fortune, rights and expectations, will always be different.' (10-11)

The fulfillment of this prognostication? Now, that's the greatest irony of all.

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