

Pray, is she out, or is she not?—I am puzzled:
Decoding Fanny's Position at Mansfield Park

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DECODING FANNY

In conduct book literature relatively little attention is paid to adolescent young women who have not entered society, rather the focus rests on those who are about to enter formally into “the world.” Heightening the contrast, the language moralists use to depict the “before” and “after” context of a young woman’s life is sometimes extreme. For example, the Rev. Thomas Gisborne in his *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1796) contrasts the two states in such a way that he appears to be describing a caged beast rather than a young lady: “Emancipated from the shackles of instruction, the young woman is now to be brought forward to act her part on the public stage of life” (92). Gisborne worries that the degree of difference may cause problems for while in the early years the girl is “mewed up from every prying gaze,” when she enters society she “plunge[s] at once into a flood of vanity and dissipation” (93). Other authors of advice literature employ a more moderate tone in describing how the oppositional situations may create a similarly stark opposition in behaviour, but express the same concern. For example in *Correspondence Between a Mother and her Daughter at School* (1818) by Mrs. Taylor and Jane Taylor the imaginary subject of the letter (Laura) is contrasted with other young women in a similar position:

But you, my dear Laura, have been trained from your childhood in habits of proper subordination, and I should deem such observations altogether superfluous, were it not sometimes seen, that young persons at this period undergo a sudden revolution; and from the engaging, meek, and tractable child, start, all at once, into the pert, self-willed young lady. (141-42)

The Taylors’s advice may be seen as a gloss on Mary Crawford’s shrewd description and commentary vol. 1, ch. 5 of *Mansfield Park* about “the faulty part of the present system” of “coming out” whereby the young ladies “sometimes pass in such a very little time from reserve to quite the opposite—to confidence. . . . One does not like to see a girl of eighteen or nineteen so immediately up to every thing—and perhaps when one has seen her hardly able to speak the year before . . .” (49). Notably, the Taylors’s stipulation of a well brought-up young woman being trained in proper subordination aptly describes Fanny’s upbringing, while at the same time providing a clue to how she will successfully negotiate the system. The diction is revealing, especially the term “revolution” with its political overtones, and the suggestion that the attractive girl is transformed into the direct opposite—a monster. Sir Thomas accuses Fanny of being “self-willed” when she resists his pressure to accept Henry Crawford, while what appears to be his hyperbolic tone is indeed in accord with the moralists’ of the day: “I had thought you peculiarly free from wilfulness of temper, self-conceit, and every tendency to that independence of spirit, which prevails so much in

modern days, even in young women, and which in young women is offensive and disgusting beyond all common offence" (*MP* 318).

Paralleling the dearth of information in conduct books, novels of the period tend to omit the depiction of the early years of a young woman's life. *Mansfield Park*, in the early chapters, then, provides important information on a relatively blank phase of a girl's life in Regency England. Prior to Fanny's formal "coming out" ball we have seen her occupying consecutive spheres of importance, stemming from Sir Thomas's approval of her moral position regarding theatricals and his equally significant observation of her improved looks on his return from Antigua. First, her "consequence increased" on her cousins' departure, because she becomes "the only young woman in the drawing-room, the only occupier of that interesting division of a family in which she hitherto held so humble a third" (*MP* 205). Next, similarly due to her cousins' absence, Fanny becomes valuable as a dinner guest at the Grants's (vol. II, chs. 4-5). Thereby, we observe how Fanny is gradually introduced into society through appearing important in gradually larger circles. In this way her pre-entrance training differs from the norm of absolute contrast that befalls young ladies who were deemed socially superior. The successive stages of Fanny gaining some measure of consequence show how the Bertrams, ironically, are providing Fanny with a better social education than they gave their own daughters who always had too strong a sense of their own consequence, thanks partly to Mrs. Norris's blindly preferential treatment.

In the passage under discussion, Mary Crawford, a shrewd observer of people, and adept in society's customs, is observing Fanny, when no one else besides Edmund has taken such notice. Mary's intention may simply be to categorize Fanny regarding her status in the "marriage-market" but nevertheless her inability to label Fanny easily proves to be a harbinger of upcoming action. Similarly, Edmund's inability or refusal to categorize Fanny is also significant for it suggests his depth of understanding, his unworldliness, and, most importantly, demonstrates his close connection with Fanny. Only Edmund possesses the ability to "read" or interpret Fanny's gestures and understand her specific needs. In the early half of the book, he intervenes on her behalf on small and large issues such as indirectly obtaining a horse for her to ride for exercise and insisting she be included in the dinner party at the Grants and later in the outing to Sotherton. Edmund, until his besottment with Mary, acts as Fanny's protector, in almost a chivalric sense.

Ultimately, the difficulty Mary has in labelling Fanny may also be interpreted as forecasting Fanny's later unconventional behaviour. Fanny's position at Mansfield Park is complex: For although a relation of Sir Thomas, and therefore reflecting his importance, she is a poor relation, brought up in a way which continually impressed on her her peripheral or marginal status respecting the other members of the household. Her creature comforts are few, the absence of the fire in the attic room, symbolizing her position. Developing a stoic's outlook, Fanny is allowed to learn what the Miss Bertrams learn on the fringes of their school-room society, and her insignifi-

cance lends her relative mental freedom to think in her own way. Her moral education is under Edmund's tutelage, and despite his youth he is an excellent tutor according to the ideals of John Locke in his "Essay concerning Human Understanding" (1693)—a friend and companion who instructs through the power of mutual affection, not fear (Locke 127). Fanny's moral and spiritual development is emphasized over her surface development, so what she lacks in feminine accomplishments she more than compensates for in depth.

Fanny thereby genuinely acquires the conduct book ideals of modesty, prudence, and self-control, rather than simply gaining surface mannerisms which are unsupported by underlying principles, as do the Miss Bertrams. This depth of education and character enables Fanny to escape the fate of well-born young women who are trapped in the conventional model of growth, for her development cannot be described by the oppositional pairs of qualifiers associated with the status of "not out" or "out" namely: quiet/talkative; timid/confident; staying home/going out to dinners and balls and so on.¹ By not fitting into these patterns Fanny challenges the tidy, rigid structure describing female development, in an unobtrusive albeit revolutionary way. Fanny's threat to Sir Thomas lies in her refusal to conform to these categories. Accordingly, she is more disruptive to the social scheme than the aggressive young women envisioned by either Mrs. Taylor or Mary Crawford!

FANNY AND THE CODE OF FASHION, MANNERS AND MORALITY

In addition to providing "clues" into Fanny's character development, this passage also provides insight into the link between "Dress and Morality" (Ribeiro) of the Regency period respecting young women, for being fashionable was a requisite "model of conduct" for middle-class women (Thompson 28).² When such a close observer and shrewd commentator of society as Mary Crawford is puzzled about Fanny's status, it would do well to investigate further. By examining Mary's description of how a conventional young woman dresses and acts before entering society, I will tease out the implications in her statements regarding the underlying code of behaviour embedded in these characteristics. Mary remarks,

'And yet in general, nothing can be more easily ascertained. The distinction is so broad. Manners as well as appearance are, generally speaking, so totally different. Till now, I could not have supposed it possible to be mistaken as to a girl's being out or not. A girl not out, has always the same sort of dress; a close bonnet for instance, looks very demure, and never says a word. You may smile—but it is so I assure you—and except that it is sometimes carried a little too far, it is all very proper. Girls should be quiet and modest . . .' (MP 49)

These details of clothing and manner are revealing, because they economically evoke images of two opposing kinds of femininity that suggest a "code" of feminine conduct that is bifurcated, albeit within an overall system of propriety. Moreover, the "signals" (or "signifiers") of this code, such as items of dress, hat and manner are visible from a distance, so one knows how to behave to these young women on first sight. Significantly, later in this

passage Tom Bertram tells an anecdote of his inappropriate behaviour to two Miss Sneyds because they are not dressed differently. His response is interesting because it indicates a category of behaviour based on responding to signals almost in a Pavlovian sense. Tom Bertram is blatantly one type of young man that moralists and parents warn about, although his predatoriness is circumscribed by his stupidity, thereby making him less dangerous than the “reformable” rake, Henry Crawford! Tom agrees that “the close bonnet and demure air you describe so well, (and nothing was ever juster,) tell one what is expected.” But he blames his misbehaviour “from the want of them,” i.e. demure clothes: “It leads one astray; one does not know what to do. . . . They looked just the same; both well dressed, with veils and parasols like other girls” (51). Tom reads the fashionable dress as signals that the girls are available on the marriage market, as indicators of their adult status (Thompson 27). Tom Bertram further criticizes their behaviour because they acted as if they were “out,” being “easy” in their manner and talking as well as listening (51).

In discussing Jane Austen’s narrative methods, R. W. Chapman observes how she reveals only a portion of the circumstantial detail regarding her creations; significantly for my purposes Chapman seizes twice on items of attire:

Miss Austen knows all the details, and gives us very few of them. We cannot doubt that she knew every room at Longbourn, and just what Jane and Elizabeth wore at the Netherfield Ball; but she never troubles us with more than it is necessary we should know. She is as firm as Mr. Bennet against any description of the “lace on Mrs. Hurst’s gown” and you cannot make a map of Highbury. But such details as escape her are almost always right.

(“Jane Austen’s Methods” *TLS* 9 Feb. 1922, 81-82)

Applying Chapman’s observation, Thompson notes that items of clothing are mentioned rarely in Jane Austen’s fiction, and never irrelevantly (20). Because Fanny is a poor relation we assume that her clothes are not as fine as those of her cousins—her pelisse is not grand enough to excite speculation at Portsmouth (*MP* 395). Yet that Fanny was poor and had to depend on clothes from others, does not mean that she was uninterested in clothes—to the contrary. In *A Frivolous Distinction* (1979) Penelope Byrde, a costume curator, remarks that of the heroines only Catherine Morland and Fanny Price appear absorbed with details of dress: Byrde ties this to Fanny’s youth, inexperience, and lack of confidence (2). Indeed Fanny turns to Edmund for sartorial advice on their way to the Grants for her first entry into society, an occasion marked by the use of the carriage. Edmund assures her that white is always right when she is worried about appearing too “fine” for the dinner party at the Grants, “nothing but what is perfectly proper” (222), although his sudden perceptiveness of dress fabric with its “glossy spots” is somewhat undercut by his asking if Mary Crawford does not have one the same!

Significantly when clothes are mentioned, predominantly moral language is used, Mary Crawford and Tom Bertram use terms such as modesty, demure, reserve, to describe the clothes and behaviour of girls who are “in” (49-51). The height of approbation for a woman was “elegance” which

appears to be less a quality in itself than referring to the “high polish” of all the virtues, “the perfection of taste in life and manners” (Gregory 44-45). It would appear then that dress was perceived to be the outmost sign or signal of a woman’s manners, which in turn were only a reflection of her morals or “first principles” (Hemlow 733). Indeed, in *The Mirror of the Graces or, the English Lady’s Costume* (1813) we are told by the anonymous author who is “a Lady of distinction” that “Fine taste in apparel I have ever seen the companion of pure morals; while a licentious style of dress is as certainly the token of the like laxity in manners and conduct” (11). Since Fanny knows she is to undergo this type of scrutiny and logic about the exact correlation between her dress and her morality, the passages in which Fanny worries about her clothing being correct become more understandable.

Based on further research into the clothing of the period I have been struck not by the difference between the dress of girls and women but by their similarity. For example, both wore white, high-waisted muslin gowns, slippers, flattering bonnets outside and so on. Indeed, historians of fashion suggest that Regency fashion infantilized women, was impractical, and put them at risk health-wise because of the thinness of the fabrics, short sleeves and low necks (Lurie 63, 91). Considering the fashion then, the details of the absence or presence of a fire in Fanny’s attic become more potent, as does her fragile health. At the same time this style of women’s clothing was also considered potentially sexually provocative. Dr. Gregory worries that low-cut ballgowns may send inappropriate signals to onlookers, saying “A fine woman shows her charms to most advantage, when she seems most to conceal them. The finest bosom in nature is not so fine as what imagination forms” (55-56). Similarly, in *The Mirror of the Graces*, in addition to worrying about low necklines, the writer is concerned that fashions possessing only one layer of material may be misread by men as a sexual invitation (82-83). Thereby the clothing by its mixture of childishness and sexuality was perhaps sending out a complex mixture of messages resembling the figure of “shy coquette” of the contemporary novels (Spencer 153).

The degree of subtlety in the systems of morals and dress of the period are intriguing. Within a system of values that stressed propriety for all women, there were finely drawn differentiations between the behaviour of young women who were not “out” and women who were. Similarly, the code of women’s fashion while being primarily of one style encompassed pairs of small but distinguishing features denoting the differences between young women who had entered society and those who had not. All this information was a matter of finely graded knowledge possessed by the discriminating onlookers who formed a select community of insiders. To the eyes of the uninitiated however, such as some modern readers of Austen, the differences may appear negligible. Consequently, both Fanny’s emphasis and the moral significance given to clothing in *Mansfield Park* may seem to be extraneous or frivolous. On the contrary, applying the insights of cultural studies analyst Angela McRobbie to the past, studying the “frivolous” and apparently trivial, can often reveal profound insights into the culture and assumptions of a society.

NOTES

- ¹ In his "Glossary of Semiotic Terminology" concluding *Semiotics and Interpretation* (1982) Robert Scholes explains that all "intelligibility" hinges on us possessing a system of thought or code that allows us to do so (143). "Signs," according to Saussurian linguistics, have two dimensions: a "signifier" or sound-image and the "signified" or concept. While Saussure considered these two aspects to be fixed, later semiologists have rejected the idea of any fixed connection existing between the two (147-48). In their glossary, Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore in *The Feminist Reader* (1989) define a binary opposition as "two terms which are classified hierarchically so that the second term is assumed to be derivative from and exterior to the first. For example, nature/culture; logos/pathos; man/woman" (243). They consider that "deconstruction" "undoes" the hierarchic binary oppositions (243). Mary Poovey in "Feminism and Deconstruction" (1988) describes the idea of "inbetween" which results from the dismantling of binary oppositions, and thereby revealing the constructed nature of the two oppositional terms which allows us to question their meaning as taken for granted (59). I consider that Fanny embodies the "inbetween," which fractures the tidy hierarchical division of young women being either "in" or "out." She thereby reveals the artificiality of the construction of social conventions themselves.
- ² I wish to thank Mrs. Jacqueline Beaudoin-Ross, the costume curator of the McCord Museum (McGill University) in Montreal, for discussing Regency dress with me. We looked at portraits contemporary to the period of *Mansfield Park* and she suggested many reference books on period dress and accessories. An excellent history is *Dress and Society 1560-1970* by Geoffrey Squire, New York: Viking, 1974; another is *The Language of Clothes* by Alison Lurie, London: Bloomsbury, 1992 (rev.). There are excellent compendiums of period illustrations and photographs. Two focussing on women's dress are *A Visual History of the Costume of the Nineteenth Century* by Vanda Foster, London: Batsford, 1984 and *The Fashionable Lady in the 19th Century* by Charles H. Gibbs-Smith, London: HRM Stationery Office, 1960. Two focussing on children's dress are *English Children's Costume since 1775* by Iris Brooke, London: Black, 1950 and *History of Children's Costume* by Elizabeth Ewing, London: Batsford, 1977.

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