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Addressing Readerly Unease: Discovering the Gothic in *Mansfield Park*

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READERS ARE OFTEN UNCOMFORTABLE WITH *Mansfield Park* because Fanny Price is meek, self-deprecating, pious, sickly, and self-righteous. For Thomas Hoberg, Fanny Price is “the passive Cinderella” who “is not like her canonical sisters and that’s the whole problem” (137), while Amy J. Pawl speculates that Fanny’s affinity to the eighteenth-century sentimental heroine makes her a “problem,” because Austen “attempts to take some forms of sentimentalism seriously” (288). Many readers are uncomfortable with *Mansfield Park* since Jane Austen includes aspects of the sentimental novel and the fairy tale in a novel of manners, and because Fanny, who suffers and prospers, is an unusual heroine. This unease with *Mansfield Park* may come from the placement of gothic symbols and characters within the world of the English gentry. By understanding *Mansfield Park*’s affinity with the gothic novels of the eighteenth century, we might also understand our discomfort with Fanny Price.

Since many of the ingredients that one would expect in gothic fiction, the “barbarous, medieval, supernatural” (Varma 12), or the “spectres, monsters, demons, corpses, skeletons, evil aristocrats, monks and nuns, fainting heroines, and bandits” (Botting 2) are nowhere to be found in *Mansfield Park*, placing the novel within the genre is uncommon. Even so, central to *Mansfield Park* are several gothic elements. First, we can recognize character types: a fainting but virtuous heroine, a terrorizing father figure, troublesome aunts, and a duplicitous suitor. In addition, illicit sexuality and vice are important thematic issues in the novel. Finally, “an aesthetics based on feeling and emo-

tion and associated primarily with the sublime" (Botting 3) is treated with a seriousness in *Mansfield Park* although condemned or mocked in other Austen novels. The gothic elements of characterization, plot, and spatial tropes convey a level of terror—or at least unease—unfamiliar and uncomfortable to a reader expecting the comic sensibility and balanced moral structure of Austen's more popular novels.

Fanny Price's weaknesses are vital to a gothic reading of *Mansfield Park*. Our first encounter with the young Fanny shows her potential as a suffering heroine: "She was small of her age, with no glow of complexion, nor any other striking beauty; exceedingly timid and shy, and shrinking from notice; but her air, though awkward, was not vulgar, her voice was sweet, and when she spoke, her countenance was pretty" (12). When she arrives at Mansfield Park, she mirrors Ann Radcliffe's Emily St. Aubert and suffers in gothic form: "Afraid of every body, ashamed of herself, and longing for the home she had left, she knew not how to look up, and could scarcely speak to be heard, or without crying" (13). Even the mention of a horse gives her "'terrors'" (27).

Fanny's ability to think the "right" way about the landscape is a virtue shared with her gothic sisters. Devendra Varma writes, "The love of natural objects combined with a depth of religious feeling constitutes a part of the Gothic spirit" (20). Just as *Udolpho's* Emily has the "right" sensibility about the landscape she encounters, Fanny knows how to appreciate nature, even in the simple shrubbery of the parsonage, in a way that Mary Crawford cannot. Fanny comments, "Every time I come into this shrubbery I am more struck with its growth and beauty. . . . How wonderful, how very wonderful the operations of time, and the changes of the human mind!" (208). With nothing to say in response to Fanny's romantic interlude, Mary Crawford is incapable of appreciating the scenery. With too much "intercourse with the world," an exposure Radcliffe's St. Aubert considers so dangerous (*Udolpho* 49), Mary Crawford will never appreciate nature as Fanny does.

Fanny Price also has the gothic heroine's combination of morality and natural romantic sensibility. While Germaine Paulo Walsh interprets Fanny's prudence as "right reason" or the "moral virtue in regard to feeling as one should" (18), she argues that Fanny is not a romantic heroine in that she "does not govern herself in the way of the romantic, following the 'sincere emotions' of her 'true self,' but rather according to general principles of moral action that sometimes are, and sometimes are not in accord with particular societal conventions" (19). So many times, however, the "moral action" is not readily discernable to Fanny, and even her moral teacher, Edmund, succumbs to the "societal conventions"—as when he agrees to act in *Lovers' Vows*, or when he

encourages Fanny to marry Crawford. Fanny, however, has the natural sensibilities to ascertain the proper moral course. She is able to read the countenance of people, much as Radcliffe's Emily distinguishes the "good" from the "bad." She *reads* Mary Crawford's complicity in her letters (304), and she has *read* Henry Crawford's character "from the time of the play" (349). Therefore, Fanny must be following something other than "general principles," and her strong and seemingly natural romantic sensibilities argue for her inclusion among the romantic heroines. Linking Fanny Price's characterization with her gothic sisters, however, is only the first step to understanding readerly unease in encountering *Mansfield Park*.

A gothic heroine is often accompanied by a *duenna*, a female chaperone other than her mother. Fanny Price has two: Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris. Neither aunt has Fanny's best interest in mind. When Edmund is away from Mansfield for a few days, Fanny's health is compromised:

Fanny either sat at home the whole day with one aunt, or walked beyond her strength at the instigation of the other; Lady Bertram holding exercise to be as unnecessary for every body as it was unpleasant to herself; and Mrs. Norris, who was walking all day, thinking every body ought to walk as much. (36)

Lady Bertram proves a typically incompetent, selfish, but loving companion. Much like Antonia's Aunt Leonella in *The Monk*, Lady Bertram is more concerned about Fanny's being of use to her than she is in helping her poor niece. When Fanny cuts roses for her aunts, Lady Bertram says, "I sat three quarters of an hour in the flower garden, . . . and very pleasant it was I assure you, but very hot. It was shady enough in the alcove" (72)—shady enough, at least for Lady Bertram. Fanny, however, ends the day with a headache. But Fanny also finds solace and safety in regular seclusion with her aunt. Just as Antonia shields herself from suitors behind a veil, Fanny is veiled within Lady Bertram's house. Not quite as benign a *duenna* is Fanny's Aunt Norris, a representative of another kind of gothic female companion that Pawl describes as the "troublesome aunt or older female acquaintance, . . . a staple of sentimental and Gothic fiction" (296). Mrs. Norris is similar to Radcliffe's Madame Montoni, to whom Emily is entrusted by her dying father and who uses Emily in her pursuit of preeminence. Similarly, Mrs. Norris uses Fanny as a servant: dispatching her on errands that often send Fanny home "'knocked up'" (73) or with still another headache, reminding her regularly that she "'must be the lowest and last'" (221), and banishing her to the cold, isolated East room.

Another gothic character type is the tyrannical father figure, and because of his "coercive power," Fanny's substitute father, Sir Thomas, has

much in common with the gothic's "traditional villain" (Duane 406). Sir Thomas's presence alone is enough to send Fanny into terrors. Pawl interprets Sir Thomas's character as "the standard issue patriarch" who "partakes of paternal sublime" (290-91). For Claudia Johnson, "Everything from Sir Thomas's arched brow to his inflated diction marks him as a figurehead for the sublime" (97). Sir Thomas seems to be feared by all, as the entire Mansfield party is terrorized by his presence when he returns earlier than expected from Antigua: "How is the consternation of the party to be described? To the greater number it was a moment of absolute horror. Sir Thomas in the house!" (175). Fanny's reaction is even stronger:

Too soon did she find herself at the drawing-room door, and after pausing a moment for what she knew would not come, for a courage which the outside of no door had ever supplied to her, she turned the lock in desperation, and the lights of the drawing-room and all the collected family were before her. (177)

The return of Sir Thomas, as Anna Mae Duane explains, correlates to "the physical intensity one might assign to a spectral visitation" (406). Sir Thomas is able to create terror by merely appearing on the scene.

The true villain in *Mansfield Park*, however, is Henry Crawford, whose evil reflects another gothic staple. Fred Botting explains, "The disturbing and demonic villain . . . retains a darkly attractive, if ambivalent, allure as a defiant rebel against the constraints of social mores" (92). Fanny recognizes Crawford's evil as coming from "transgressions of conventional values" (Botting 93). Our first encounter with Crawford establishes him as the wandering rake: "To any thing like a permanence of abode, or limitation of society, Henry Crawford had, unluckily, a great dislike" (41). When the Bertram sisters first meet Henry Crawford, they describe him as "not handsome" and "absolutely plain, black and plain" (44). Early on, Fanny is "the only one of the party who found any thing to dislike" (115), and when she later "long[s]" to tell her uncle that she has "'reason . . . to think ill'" of Crawford's "'principles'" (317), the reader understands her scruples.

But Henry Crawford is also charming and alluring. He is playing two roles, and Fanny is the only one capable of recognizing that fact. As Botting explains, the gothic wandering rake creates a "double or shadow of himself" since he lacks "an adequate framework to sustain a sense of identity" (93). Thus Crawford's double arrives as he decides to court Fanny: "Mr. Crawford was no longer the Mr. Crawford who, as the clandestine, insidious, treacherous admirer of Maria Bertram, had been her abhorrence. . . . He was now the Mr. Crawford who was addressing herself with ardent, disinterested, love"

(327-28). But Crawford's changed attention is not the only indication of his double nature. He demonstrates several times that he is a proficient actor. The role he plays in the private theatricals seduces Maria. Crawford's ability to transform himself whenever it suits his ends reflects his gothic villainy. He attempts a similar alluring guise in his attentions toward Fanny as he reads from *Henry VIII*. In all areas of interaction, Crawford is able to wear multiple masks. When he is at Sotherton, he is a capital "improver" of the land; when he is with Fanny, however, he can appreciate natural beauty:

The loveliness of the day, and of the view, he felt like herself. They often stopt with the same sentiment and taste, leaning against the wall, some minutes, to look and admire; and considering he was not Edmund, Fanny could not but allow that he was sufficiently open to the charms of nature, and very well able to express his admiration. (409)

This "sentiment and taste," which for Crawford is a role and for Fanny is a form of truth, is merely more evidence showing the duality and villainy in his character. Crawford's duplicity—the fact that he remains an attractive and alluring villain—is an important and discomfiting aspect of *Mansfield Park*.

Mansfield Park, though disguised as a domestic courtship narrative, contains many gothic character types; its plot also has much in common with the traditional gothic novel. Fanny is endangered while in the care of her incompetent aunts, she feels terror in the presence of her father figure, she is banished from her home, and she is pressured to marry a man she cannot love.

In the traditional gothic plot, the *duenna* figures are usually disposed of, sometimes in particularly violent or gruesome ways. Aunt Bertram proves to be somewhat innocuous and does provide a means of shielding Fanny from harm, so she is not punished. But, as Claudia Johnson has written, Mrs. Norris can be considered as "the villain of the piece" as she is banished in the end, which Johnson sees as an "ominously problematic" flaunting of conservative fictional convention (114). Read in a gothic vein, however, banishing or killing off this inadequate female role model is necessary to the victory of the heroine. The imprisonment and starvation, for example, of Radcliffe's Madame Montoni serve as punishment for her complicity in Emily's suffering.

Just as Emily St. Aubert trembles at the sight of her uncle Montoni, Fanny sees Sir Thomas, especially as he pressures her to marry, as though he is another gothic tyrant. As the third volume opens, Sir Thomas's "heavy step" approaches Fanny in her attic room: "it was her uncle's [step]; she knew it as well as his voice; she had trembled at it as often, and began to tremble again, at the idea of his coming up to speak to her" (312). When Sir Thomas

returns in “a quarter of an hour,” Fanny is “almost ready to faint at the sight of him” (321). Sir Thomas is not completely insensitive to his niece’s needs or emotions: he leaves her to collect herself; he is appalled by the chill in her room and orders a fire. But his intent remains to coerce her into a marriage with Henry Crawford. His hope that “a little abstinence from the elegancies and luxuries of Mansfield Park, would bring her mind into a sober state” (369) leads to Fanny’s second exile. Radcliffe’s Montoni locks Emily in her room in the abandoned wing of his isolated castle. Sir Thomas’s similar isolation and forced exile of Fanny Price, the innocent heroine, place her in a classic gothic plot. Just as Montoni manipulates Emily and makes her available to the advances of various suitors and ravishers, Sir Thomas facilitates Henry Crawford’s entrapment of Fanny.

Henry Crawford’s cunning ability to inspire a “tumult of . . . feelings” (193), to have “destroyed [the] happiness” (202) of the women he captivates, provides another link to the gothic. While gothic heroines are often trapped or imprisoned within their rooms or beneath castles or abbeys, Henry Crawford traps his women within an emotional net. First, Maria is caught in Crawford’s trap—she does not want to marry Mr. Rushworth, but Crawford’s presence presses her to Rushworth as an ironic escape. Fanny finds a similar trap constructed for her when Crawford shows his attentions: “he wanted, she supposed, to cheat her of her tranquillity as he had cheated [her cousins]” (260). Her discomfort when she learns of the part he has taken in her brother’s promotion is understandable. His subsequent proposal of marriage, however, produces a terrorizing effect on Fanny: “she was exceedingly distressed, and for some moments unable to speak” (301). Like a heroine in a gothic plot, Fanny is frozen when trapped, but once she has collected herself, she is able to keep her resolve. Where practiced readers of Austen might expect something like Elizabeth Bennet’s change of heart after Mr. Darcy’s proposal, readers of the gothic can understand Fanny’s unwavering perception and moral tenacity.

Henry Crawford’s presence is torture to the suffering gothic heroine. Just as Emily St. Aubert is unable to lock her room in the castle of Udolpho, Fanny is unable to lock out Crawford’s unwelcome presence. The hyperbole of Fanny’s reaction to her “grievous imprisonment of body and mind” near Crawford, as well as her “relief” from the arrival of tea (344), indicates the seriousness of Fanny’s perceived danger. Austen reframes the gothic rescue here in domestic, even mundane terms. But Fanny’s distress is real, and Crawford, we will learn, is a true rake capable of ruining women. A similar terrifying moment illustrating Fanny’s inability to lock Crawford out of her life

occurs later in Portsmouth: "Mr. Crawford walked into the room. . . . Having introduced him, however, and being all re-seated, the terrors that occurred of what this visit might lead to, were overpowering, and she fancied herself on the point of fainting away" (399). Fanny might faint because of Crawford's presence. Like her gothic sisters, she cannot escape the pursuit of the gothic villain.

Gothic tyrants and villains control physical space in order to terrorize and contain their victims. Austen creates the space of emotional entrapment, and the physical spaces within Mansfield Park carry gothic overtones. While Fanny Price finds invigoration and solace in the natural landscape, she is trapped within the confines of physical and moral structures she cannot breach. As Duane explains, "Fanny's role as an unprotected charity case evokes the plight of the classic gothic heroine who must negotiate her role as an outsider in a house full of secret designs" (405). Read in this manner, *Mansfield Park* represents the *female gothic*, which Diane Long Hoeveler defines as "functioning as a coded and veiled critique of all of those public institutions that have been erected to displace, contain, or commodify women" (xiii). If "the female gothic novel constitutes a genre . . . designed to dramatize the horrors of English patriarchal life safely displaced onto a remote setting" (Hoeveler xiv), readers of *Mansfield Park* may be uncomfortable because those horrors are dramatized within the very confines of Austen's England. Without the remote setting, the gothic characters are no longer stereotypes, and the horrible situations are consequently more alarming.

The power within natural and architectural space is an important gothic trope in *Mansfield Park*. Varma refers to the gothic castle as "the passive agent of terror" (19), a description which can also apply to the manor house in *Mansfield Park*. When Fanny first arrives at Mansfield, "The grandeur of the house astonished, but could not console her. The rooms were too large for her to move in with ease; whatever she touched she expected to injure" (14-15). The power of Mansfield is manifest in Fanny through a sense of fear or awe, especially when she is young: "she crept about in constant terror of something or other; often retreating towards her own chamber to cry" (15). Varma explains, "no Gothic castle is complete without its 'deserted wing'" (79); Fanny's "own chamber," (15) the "white attic," and the "East room" (151) are at once places of exile and repose. Since Mrs. Norris has ordered no fire, Fanny learns to tolerate a level of discomfort in her independence, but she also enjoys a measure of privacy. Fanny is not, however, able to lock out unwelcome intruders—either Edmund and Mary practicing their roles, or her uncle importuning her to marry Henry Crawford.

Mansfield, then, is a space of terror and repose, fear and comfort. Like

the castles and abbeys in gothic novels, it is also a place for illicit relations. Fanny finds discomfort in the lack of power she has over what happens within the space. Her objection to the performance of *Lovers' Vows* is not just to the play itself, but she is also concerned that it will be practiced and performed in the private space of Mansfield Park. She *knows* that performing this play within the house is *wrong*, but she cannot prevent her own complicity in that wrong. Fanny's response to Crawford's fond memories of the theatricals, however, shows the resolute nature of her morality: "With silent indignation, Fanny repeated to herself, 'Never happier!—never happier than when doing what you must know was not justifiable!—never happier than when behaving so dishonourably and unfeelingly!—Oh! what a corrupted mind!'" (225). Finally, the space of Sir Thomas's private study retains the memory of the former illicit actions of the characters just as the house provides a place for illicit relations even while it represents a paternalistic morality that Fanny is unable and unwilling to relinquish.

The discomfort Fanny feels within the confines of the great house is similar to the unease many readers of Jane Austen's novels feel when reading *Mansfield Park*. Readers are often uncomfortable with the quick airing of Maria's dirty laundry, the banishment of Mrs. Norris, and Edmund's final return to Mansfield to be Fanny's husband. Hoberg reads this ending as similar to the end of *Northanger Abbey*, and he concludes that the only "tolerable" way to read the novel is as "unremittingly ironic" (138). Johnson argues that Austen's denouement must be ironic, "where a dubious surplus of conventionalized material and a 'tell-tale compression' of pages . . . hurrying characters to tidy destinies lurches the novel into fantasies we are not permitted to credit" (114). Hoeveler's explanation of Radcliffe's gothic ending, however, suggests that *Mansfield Park* has more in common with the gothic novel: "The gothic feminist always manages to dispose of her enemies without dirtying her dainty little hands" (7). Through this passive-aggressive strategy, Hoeveler argues, "the gothic feminist actually positions herself for the assault, shielded, of course, from the charge or even the impression that she is the aggressor" (14). Thus, when Fanny has the chance to voice her love for Edmund to her uncle, thereby explaining her reason for resisting Crawford, she does not express her views. Instead, in the passive-aggressive gothic feminist form, she insists that Sir Thomas must believe her sincerity without an overt explanation. The denouement, then, is more gothic than ironic. The villains are banished, the horrors are dissipated or explained, and Edmund is united with Fanny in an unassuming home in the country. Unlike the other Austen heroines, Fanny wins not by fixing a flaw or realizing her own errors;

she wins by doing nothing. She does not change, which is the reason she does win. Like a true gothic heroine, she remains resolute in her natural virtue, waiting patiently until the tyrants and the villains are brought to justice.

Mansfield Park's difference from Austen's other novels causes unease. Departing from the more routine concerns of her earlier heroines, in *Mansfield Park* Austen writes about terror that can be found in mundane circumstances. Unlike Marianne Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet, or Emma Woodhouse, Fanny Price does not need to recognize a flaw in herself or adjust her perception of the world. In *Mansfield Park*, it is the world around the heroine that needs to change. Fanny seems to be the only character with a moral compass, and her would-be role models are actually more likely to lead her to harm. She has no Colonel Brandon, Mr. Darcy, or Mr. Knightley to come to her rescue. Perhaps there is not so much a "problem" with *Mansfield Park* or Fanny Price as there is a "problem" with a world that would treat a girl in such a way. Perhaps Austen intended her readers to be a little uneasy about the character and plight of a girl like Fanny Price, reminding us that there might be villains and tyrants lurking within the confines of the polite country manor. At the same time, like her gothic-novelist predecessors, Austen resolves her story by rewarding the virtuous. Fanny is different, and she makes us uneasy, but perhaps that uneasiness is just the point.

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