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# "Perfect in her Eyes"

## Domestic Retrenchment and Panoptical Resistance in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*

Holden O. d'Evegnée

Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* has been the subject of much criticism because of its unusual heroine. As opposed to witty Elizabeth Bennet, optimistic Catherine Morland, or sensible Elinor Dashwood, Fanny Price is unusually quiet, somber, and inactive. At times almost more a spectator to her own story than a central actor, Fanny resists normal expectations for an Austen character yet finds herself in as happy a situation as any of her sister characters. What is most stunning about Fanny's development throughout the text is how quickly she goes from being invisible, to becoming the pariah of the family, and finally to transforming into the family's saint. Examining the ending of the novel may help expose what makes *Mansfield Park* unusual and rich for critical examination.

Finally happy and securely wed to her beloved Edmund, Fanny Price returns to Mansfield Park to take up the parsonage left by the late Dr. Grant. In this moment of return, the parsonage, which previously gave Fanny a "painful sensation of restraint and alarm," "soon grew as dear to her heart, and as thoroughly perfect in her eyes, as everything else within the view and patronage of Mansfield Park had long been" (Austen 372). In this final paragraph, two elements of the novel's power dynamics fuse together. First, it is in Fanny's eyes that the parsonage is evaluated as "perfect." Her gaze qualifies the object of perception by making an evaluative judgment about it. Her normative gaze,

or evaluative perception, places the object within a spectrum of acceptability or virtue. Second, Fanny's gaze emanates from the view of Mansfield Park itself. It is the estate that justifies or grounds Fanny's evaluative judgments. Instead of Sir Thomas, Fanny now occupies the authoritative center of the estate.

Critics have fought bitterly over whether by the end of the novel Fanny is truly free from Sir Thomas's authority and what that means for the novel's perception of Fanny's success. Lucy Thompson and Mary Chan argue that any subversion is short-lived or eventually nullified by Sir Thomas's power (Thompson 130, Chan 63). Other readers like Ulf Olsson and Shea Stuart qualify Fanny's new position. Olsson argues that Fanny's only power remains in silence or alternative speech like writing letters (54), and Stuart similarly agrees that while Fanny is the "organizing principle and the disciplining agent in the novel," this is because she is "a zero, a cipher . . . an empty vessel" (206). What unites these critics is that they all agree that Fanny completely interiorizes Sir Thomas's view of the world. She is the perfect member of the family because she regulates herself even in Sir Thomas's absence. This interiorization of another's authoritative vision mirrors Michel Foucault's concept of the panoptic gaze. Using Foucault can help us understand Fanny's behavior at the beginning of the novel, and the authority that Sir Thomas wields as a figure of imperial authority, but, without implementing later criticism of Foucault's theory, we are left with no space for Fanny's acts of rebellion and resistance.

By looking at recent postcolonial readings of *Mansfield Park*, I will argue that Fanny's subversion of Sir Thomas's estate is a renegotiation of the normative power of surveillance. She represents a shift in British society from imperial sources of power to domestic retrenchment. My goal is to show how Fanny acts as the moral center of Mansfield Park, thus allowing her to triumph while others (Sir Thomas, Edmund, Mary, and Mrs. Norris) fail to create a stable and functional system of surveillance and control. Fanny becomes a model of domestic and female forms of power. *Mansfield Park* demonstrates that only a normative system built on domestic virtues can effectively secure the authority of a changing gentry because it places values on the health of the family—the mechanism by which aristocratic power perpetuates itself.

Fanny effectuates the shift from imperial to domestic sources of power through her normative gaze that is best explored within the context of a Foucauldian conception of surveillance. Foucault, in his work *Discipline and Punish*, adapts an earlier concept from Jeremy Bentham called the Panopticon—a prison designed to feature only a single central point of surveillance that allows

the observer a clear line of sight to every inmate. While Bentham was interested in creating an efficient prison, Foucault wanted to explore how the power of an authoritative gaze could change behavior. Foucault describes that “he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power . . . he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (202–3). Other prisons use the threat of force to enforce compliance, but Foucault realized that the authoritative power of vision could change how prisoners perceive themselves without intervention from an authoritative figure. Once the regulating gaze is interiorized, the object of the surveillance begins to monitor herself. This self-regulation is what has dominated discussions about *Mansfield Park* because Fanny appears to be the perfect example of one who is “the principle of [her] own subjection.”

Because Foucault writes about the panoptical gaze in absolute terms, readers tend to overplay the significance of Fanny’s self-regulation. Some critics are quick to point out Fanny’s scopophobia and didactic judgments as evidence that she has internalized the panoptic gaze of Sir Thomas. Mary Chan, who offers one of the most direct Foucauldian readings of *Mansfield Park*, argues that Fanny “becomes the model prisoner under the rule of the panoptic gaze” (39), and even when Fanny learns to subvert that gaze, she remains “the perfect Panoptic subject” (46). Fanny is so constantly under scrutiny from Sir Thomas, and Mrs. Norris in particular, that she embodies the surveillance of herself. Unlike the Bertram siblings, Fanny is under particular scrutiny as an outsider. At the beginning of the novel, Sir Thomas reveals his concern about “how to preserve in the minds of my *daughters* the consciousness of what they are” (Austen 9, emphasis in original) once a previously unregulated individual enters the estate. Fanny threatens to upset the panoptical order of the manor that he has so meticulously “scripted” (Thompson 127). Fanny’s self-regulation and shyness suggest the panoptical victory over the outsider that threatened the stability of the household.

If we assume Sir Thomas’s complete control, we are inclined to read other acts of rebellion as ultimately futile. With Fanny under control, even small acts of potential rebellion from the Bertram children against Sir Thomas’s authority fail. Looking into how Tom Bertram alters the layout of his father’s rooms, Thompson observes that this futile attempt at rebellion is ultimately quashed. Thompson describes this moment in terms of absolute patriarchal authority where “neither the men nor it seems the women in *Mansfield Park* can escape

Sir Thomas's control" (130). Echoing Mrs. Grant's observation that Sir Thomas "keeps everybody in their place" (Austen 127), surveillant power in *Mansfield Park* is absolute for critics like Chan and Thompson. However, understanding Sir Thomas's authority as monolithic ignores how he fails to control any of his family at all by the end of the text. Despite his efforts at surveillance, both of his daughters elope, his heir, Tom, becomes deathly sick from riotous living, Edmund's good principles are twisted by Mary Crawford, and even Fanny resolutely refuses to marry Harry Crawford. Sir Thomas's "advice of absolute power" (Austen 220) fails to sway anyone at all. *Mansfield Park* represents the breakdown of Sir Thomas's version of authority and the transition to a different form of authority based on the domestic sphere.

The success of a new value system is seen as a kind of transition of authority within English society during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Mansfield Park* was written during an important moment of transition from direct colonial authority (represented in Sir Thomas) to domestic authority (represented in Fanny). Clara Tuite argues that the imperial expansion of the British Empire led to a domestic retrenchment (93). Once the slave trade had been abolished in 1807, the practice of slavery could not be expanded, but it could be improved. The colonial project became primarily interested in improvement and amelioration (100). Because of the *Mansfield Park*'s proximity to this moment in British history, Tuite argues that the novel "can be seen to allegorize the transition of the aristocratic family throughout the eighteenth century from a patriarchal to a domestic, 'affectionate,' patrilineal structure" (99). For example, when Fanny asks about the slave trade she is met with silence. However, Edmund encourages Fanny to continue to ask questions, and Fanny responds that she was concerned for her cousins and didn't want to embarrass them. The concern for the silence surrounding slavery gets redirected back to the family. Tuite reads this moment as emblematic of the novel's goal of subsuming political relations under domestic relations. She explains that "this gesture also demonstrates the way in which the plot of colonial expansion is critically implicated within—and in fact structured by—the plot of domestic retrenchment and consolidation. The world of the colonies is represented or subsumed by the terms of representation by the other world of the domestic" (104). The domestic world begins to supersede the importance of the political world. Sir Thomas's efforts are inherently political; his attempts at control are based entirely on a cold, distanced authority similar to the ways that a colonial empire deals at a distance with its subjects. The colonial distant model of surveillance breaks down since it can no

longer support itself through expansion. Since expansion cannot fuel the imperial machine, domestic amelioration is the only way to ensure the continued existence of hereditary power. Fanny's success is that she takes the power of the gaze and places its foundation in Mansfield Park as a home of virtue.

The authority that Fanny wields by the end novel depends on a nuanced reconsideration of Foucault's panoptical reading of surveillance. In her feminist critique of Foucault, Monique Deveaux explains that Foucault argued that the panoptical gaze was designed to control the perception of the body until the object of the gaze became self-regulated (228). The problem with equating this paradigm with women's experience is that it "foreclose[s] the integration of Foucault's later work, including his admission that resistance is inherent to the strategic model of disciplined bodies" (228). In other words, understanding this form of surveillance as a monolith denies the agency and forms of resistance of those caught in its gaze. Foucault's monolithic treatment of surveillance ignores forms of rebellion, resistance, and negotiation. The Panopticon is an incomplete metaphor because it fails to see a "more textured understanding of the role of power in women's lives" (Deveaux 231). While the normalizing gaze creates a moment of interrogation and control, individuals can still negotiate their reaction to being seen. As an alternative, Olsson proposes that the economy of language, as a medium for establishing decorum, more accurately portrays the flux of power between interlocutors (35). Both sight and speech capture how the various characters in the novel vie for power and influence within the estate.

To understand how Fanny tips the balance of power in her favor, we must explore how other characters try to refract Sir Thomas's gaze to gain control themselves. I will look at how Mrs. Norris, Mary Crawford, and Edmund Bertram attempt to refract Sir Thomas's gaze to serve their own ends. By seeing each failure, we will see why any model short of domestic retrenchment cannot work due to its inability to surveil accurately or persuade effectively. Fanny's focus on the health of family relations allows for a system that perpetuates itself because it makes effective use of the immediate resources of the family instead of relying on outside systems.

Mrs. Norris is one of the most important stand-ins for Sir Thomas's surveillance. Moira Ferguson calls her Sir Thomas's avatar, "Sir Thomas at his most acquisitive and self-indulgent. He cannot countenance the reflection of himself in Mrs. Norris, who represents his displaced tacit approval of heinous cruelties and ensuing reduced profits" (131). Mrs. Norris functions as the most

clearly refracted form of Sir Thomas's control. In fact, just before Sir Thomas leaves for Antigua, the narrator tells us that he couldn't trust that his wife could adequately watch over the house, but "in Mrs. Norris's watchful attention, and in Edmund's judgment, he had sufficient confidence to make him go without fears of their conduct" (Austen 26). Mrs. Norris's attention is what gives him solace in leaving the house since she functions as an extension of his sight. Mrs. Norris's authority is one of the first things that mediates Fanny's integration into her new family. On Fanny's way to Mansfield Park as a girl, it is Mrs. Norris who talks to her "the whole way" about "its being a wicked thing for her not to be happy" at her great fortune (11). This sense of gratitude and debt is one of the first things that Fanny expresses when hearing that Sir Thomas is leaving for Antigua (26).

Mrs. Norris's influence comes from her appeal to propriety, decorum, and morality. Shortly before confronting Fanny about Henry's proposal, Sir Thomas expresses surprise that the East Room is not heated. After hearing that Mrs. Norris is the cause, Sir Thomas first clarifies Mrs. Norris's role as an enforcer of propriety, and second, he imposes his own judgment to persuade her to forgive Mrs. Norris. He explains that Mrs. Norris "has always been an advocate very judiciously, for young people's being brought up without unnecessary indulgence . . . The principle was good in itself, but it may have been, and I believe *has been*, carried too far in your case . . . I think too well of you, Fanny, to suppose you will ever harbour resentment on that account" (Austen 244, emphasis in original). Mrs. Norris's primary source of influence is her appeal to "principle." In this way, Mrs. Norris and Fanny are similar. They are both noted for their perceptivity which enables them to express moral judgments. Beyond simply decorum, both women use their gaze to enforce judgments about moral character. The difference is that Mrs. Norris is a hypocrite. This is nowhere clearer than when she flees to live with Maria. The narrator tells us that Mrs. Norris joins Maria in the countryside, where they are "shut up together with little society, on one side no affection, on the other, no judgment" (Austen 365). As with Fanny's condemnation of Mary Crawford, it is Mrs. Norris's lack of judgment that condemns her fully. Her greatest failing is letting her affection for Mary replace her ability to judge clearly.

As opposed to Mrs. Norris, who only subverts Sir Thomas's authority, Fanny creates her own source of authority as a kind of domestic retrenchment. Mrs. Norris's gaze, while wrapped in the vocabulary of domestic virtues, is ultimately self-serving, aggrandizing, and false. Fanny, like Mrs. Norris, decries the moral

failings of other characters. Fanny describes Henry as having a “corrupted mind” (Austen 176) or Maria’s behavior as “too gross a complication of evil, for human nature, not in a state of utter barbarism, to be capable of” (346). To Fanny’s credit, Mrs. Norris’s judgments are vocal, and Fanny’s are silent. The difference is that while Fanny does not voice her judgments she still acts on them, hence her refusal to marry Henry and her distrust of Mary. On this point, Chan argues, “Though Fanny learns her watchfulness from Sir Thomas, her gaze is more than just a transposed version of his. Instead, hers is an alternative gaze, the result of an observer judging from a moral rather than patriarchal or economic centre, but doing so inconspicuously” (205). The problem with Chan’s argument is her insistence that Fanny looks “inconspicuously.” This undermines how Fanny’s moral attitude and behavior have radical effects. Her greatest tool of rebellion, silence, is used to disrupt the means of power that Sir Thomas has used for so long.

While her silence makes her inconspicuous to the family, it also means that she must be persuaded since she does not actively participate in normative conversations. Those in power must come to her instead of the other way around. Noting Fanny’s ability to subvert the status quo, Olsson notes that “if someone, like Fanny Price, does not take part in conversation, persuasion becomes necessary: she must be persuaded into different actions, including different speech acts” (42). It is in the act of persuasion that moral systems are revealed, and examination is possible. Edmund expresses shock at his inability to persuade Fanny to marry Henry. After using what Daniel Mangiavellano calls “violent, militaristic language” (96), Edmund explains that “between [Henry and I], I think we should have won you. My theoretical and his practical knowledge together could not have failed . . . I must hope, however, that time, proving him (as I firmly believe it will) to deserve you by his steady affection” (Austen 273). Edmund’s language is entirely mercenary. Fanny is described as a prize to be won by stratagem and power, which is much in line with his father’s attempts at persuasion. However, Edmund concedes defeat and hopes that time will prove that Henry “deserves” her. Much of the language describing Fanny during Henry’s courtship deals with her virtues and moral worth. To deserve her implies not that she is won as a prize, but that his virtues give him moral license to marry her. In this act of rebellious refusal and silence, Fanny is forcing the domestic sphere to become the battleground of power.

Mary Crawford is ultimately unsuccessful at countering Fanny’s influence because Mansfield Park operates as the center of authority and Mary refuses



to adhere to its authority. As opposed to Mrs. Norris, who uses the language of domesticity to try and refract Sir Thomas's power, Mary Crawford's influence is political. Using her city charm, Mary becomes extremely influential over Edmund, the moral bedrock of the family. Thompson argues that during the production of the play Mary is a "figure of resistance" who convinces Edmund to act and expresses "what Fanny cannot say" (130). However, despite moments of influence, Mary's power cannot last because she lacks a system by which to judge the actions of other characters. During her final interview with Edmund, she offers a plan by which their family's reputations and influence could be preserved (Austen 359). Edmund responds with abhorrence, which pushes him to finally reject her influence altogether. Ruth Yeazell notes that Mary's failure is that "her consciousness fails to draw sharp lines of revulsion" (146). Mary's gaze is not normative; she can't create what Foucault calls the dichotomies necessary for control (184). Without a means by which to judge, Mary cannot retain power or influence, which explains why she is always more comfortable away from Mansfield Park. Mary spends much of the book at the Grants' parsonage or in the city, away from the organizing structure of Mansfield. Her form of resistance is to deny normative judgments altogether; while this gives her freedom to behave in ways contrary to that of the Bertrams, she can never successfully infiltrate the power system at play in Mansfield.

Edmund, Mary, and Mrs. Norris all fail to create alternative normative gazes because they rely on Sir Thomas's view of authority, but it remains to be seen how Fanny actively inserts herself as the center of a panoptic gaze. Julie Park argues that Fanny is too passive, defined by introspection and principle. Instead of choosing to act, she waits and watches (178). This reading of Fanny's influence ignores her refusal of Henry Crawford, which, as we have seen, represents one of the primary means by which Fanny challenges Sir Thomas's authority. More importantly, however, is that this emphasis on passivity excludes how Fanny uses her normative judgment in Portsmouth. Upon returning to her home, Fanny is disgusted at the behavior of her family. One conversation between her mother and sister caused that "every feeling of duty, honour, and tenderness was wounded" (Austen 303). The Price family is directly antithetical to how Fanny thinks families ought to be. Their internal disorder cannot perpetuate the family's identity or power.

Faced with disorder, Fanny now turns her gaze to restructure the family as it should be. Olsson describes this as a colonizing moment for Fanny. While Fanny is not exploitive, "she does regard her family as savages in need of

civilization, and she does single out her sister as the good savage, the one possible to save through education. Installed with her old family, Fanny observes the household with a normalized gaze” (53). Fanny, as opposed to just being a passive spectator, is actively engaged in observing, judging, and reforming her sister. For example, in their conversations, Fanny always returns to “Mansfield Park, a description of the people, the manners, the amusements, the ways of Mansfield Park” (Austen 329). After this, Fanny notes Susan’s “taste for the genteel and well-appointed” and her enthusiasm for everything done “in her uncle’s house” (329). By articulating the normative judgments of her gaze, Fanny creates a student eager to be judged and to judge. Susan is judged as genteel (an expression of blood) and wants to learn to judge by learning about the estate (the surveillant structure itself and the center of the domestic space).

Fanny’s influence over her sister reveals how her specific form of normative judgment is more effective than Sir Thomas’s. While Fanny’s normalized gaze is colonial, it is distinct from Sir Thomas’s brand of colonization. Even though Fanny never directly critiques her family, we read that Susan “had so strong a desire of not *appearing* ignorant, as with a good clear understanding, made her a most attentive, profitable, thankful pupil. Fanny was her oracle” (328, emphasis in original). The relationship between Susan and Fanny demonstrates how the older sister resembles Mrs. Norris’s and Sir Thomas’s attempts at education and surveillance. However, the narrator compares Fanny to an oracle, a prophetess whose sight supersedes mortal perception. The image of the oracle is important in resisting alternative readings that overemphasize Fanny’s monstrosity. She dispenses divine, or clear-sighted, wisdom that grants her authority that monstrosity would lack. In her infamous reading of *Mansfield Park*, Nina Auerbach argues that “the mobility and malleability of *Mansfield Park* is a dark realization of an essentially Romantic vision, of which Fanny Price represents both the horror and the best hope” (221). While Auerbach identifies Fanny’s power, she dilutes the importance of Fanny’s influence by wedding her to exaggerated horror. The malleability that Auerbach notices is not related to a Romantic paradigm, but a domestic one. Fanny, in the text, is an oracular figure that maintains order, not a monster that corrupts. Her gaze is better at creating order because instead of relying on political authority or propriety, it relies on moral authority.

Fanny succeeds in creating an alternative mode of judgment that places her at the center of the system. This still leaves the question of whether she ultimately usurps Sir Thomas’s authority or is only refracting Sir Thomas’s gaze.

At the end of the novel, the narrator tells us that “poor Sir Thomas” who was “conscious of errors in his own conduct as a parent” was still tormented by “the anguish arising from the conviction of his own errors in the education of his daughters” (Austen 362–63). He is forced to accept the failure of his surveillant project. Sir Thomas is now bereft of a system by which to assert his authority. Fanny’s domestic virtues come to fill this vacuum. The most “direful mistake” in Sir Thomas’s education of his children was that “principle, active principle, had been wanting” (364). In this way, Sir Thomas is beginning to interiorize Fanny’s vision of domestic virtues.

Nonetheless, how do we explain Fanny’s increased association with Sir Thomas at the end of the novel? Even after everything, Fanny becomes “indeed the daughter he wanted,” even to the point that once she settles with Edmund at Thornton Lacey, “the object of almost every day was to see her there, or to get her away from there” (Austen 371, emphasis added). This, however, is not Fanny’s subjection under his gaze, but the reverse. The narrator explains Sir Thomas’s decision to allow the marriage of Edmund and Fanny in these terms: “sick of *ambitious* and *mercenary* connexions, prizing more and more the sterling good of principle and temper, and chiefly anxious to bind by the strongest securities all that remained to him of *domestic felicity*” (370, emphasis added) he was persuaded to allow them to be married. Fanny’s ascension into Sir Thomas’s good will is predicated on his desire for domestic security. The emphasis on “bind[ing] by the strongest securities” denotes his worry about continuance and perpetuity. Sir Thomas is finally able to see his own family clearly and judge—using Fanny’s gaze—the errors of his education and surveillance. Through Fanny, Sir Thomas can finally return home.

*Mansfield Park* is a novel fraught with characters resisting and negotiating their place under Sir Thomas Bertram’s panoptic gaze. The text resists a monolithic interpretation of the Panopticon by emphasizing how each character attempts to gain influence in a world where earlier forms of colonial surveillance are failing. By incorporating postcolonial and feminist reactions to power systems, we see how it is in the home, not the estate, that lasting authority is found. Fanny represents the domestic retrenchment of the early nineteenth century aristocracy and successfully usurps the previous model of authority. Without a domestic foundation, the surveillant and colonizing scheme of the Bertrams cannot succeed. Fanny does not overturn the colonial project but directs it inward in an act of preservation.

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