Fanny Price as Cinderella:
Folk and Fairy-tale in Mansfield Park

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[Fanny's] thoughts flew to those absent cousins with most unfeigned and truly tender regret, that they were not at home to take their own place in the room, and have their share of a pleasure which would have been so very delightful to them. So often as she had heard them wish for a ball at home as the greatest of all felicities! And to have them away when it was given – and for her to be opening the ball – and with Mr. Crawford too! She hoped they would not envy her that distinction now.1

Wordsworth, according to Sara Coleridge, used to say of Jane Austen that “though he admitted that her novels were an admirable copy of life, he could not be interested in productions of that kind; unless the truth of nature were presented to him clarified, as it were, by the pervading light of imagination, it had scarce any attractions in his eyes.”2 Yet Stuart Tave, writing in 1975, states that what “Jane Austen calls ‘the little particulars of the circumstance,’ (Persuasion, 80), like Wordsworth’s one particular rock (“The Brothers,” 366), one particular flower (“Artega and Elaine,” 58), one particular hour (Prelude iv, 308) are the common details of life seen full with meaning.3 The two comments are emblematic of the continuing critical dissent over the extent to which Jane Austen’s realism transcends mere surface representation to embody some sort of universal truth. Those who follow Charlotte Brontë in finding Jane Austen’s writing to be “more real than true”4 invariably trot out Jane Austen’s own assessment of her art as confined to a “little bit (two inches wide) of Ivory” on which she works “with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour.”5 The assessment of other critics, particularly those writing in the last twenty-five years, leads one to suspect that this bit of ivory, however limited in width, has considerable depth.

The frequency with which the language of myth, folk- or fairy-tale creeps into discussions of Mansfield Park suggests that Jane Austen is aiming at more than “photographic naturalness” in trivial subjects6 in that work. Various critics have discussed the echoes of the Edenic myth in the Sotherton incident and the importance of the “Lear and Cordelia” theme (itself based on a folk-tale) to the novel.7 In his introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, Tony Tanner points out that the novel contains “something of the Cinderella theme” and “is also the story of the ugly duckling who turns out to be a swan.”8 Avrom Fleishman interprets Jane Austen’s use of the Cinderella tale in the light of “The Theme of the Three Caskets” as examined by Freud, the language of Evangelical eschatology employed in the novel, and Fanny’s symbolic status as the child of Jungian psychology. The pattern of Mansfield Park, according to Fleishman, is “the accession of a Cinderella to dominance,” and the significance of this victory lies in the life-denying values (“the pleasures of principle, which feel like death”) that he feels this Cinderella represents.9 Joseph Wiesenfarth, on the other hand, argues that the Cinderella myth “stands in the story as an indication of what has been thrown away”: “Fanny would have been Cinderella had Henry only persevered in being Prince Charming, but he did not.”10

As even this brief selection of varying critical interpretations of the presence and meaning of myth and fairy-tale in Mansfield Park testifies, Jane Austen is not slavishly imitating any one fairy-tale pattern. Instead, she manages the mythic and fairy-tale elements of Mansfield Park in such a way that they effectively serve her own artistic purposes. In Tanner’s words, the novel is not a “warmed-over fairy tale.”11 says Barbara Hardy, the ending is “more than just a fairy tale.”12 A statement that Wiesenfarth makes concerning the use of the Cinderella pattern in Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice is actually more illustrative of her practice in Mansfield Park than is his specific analysis of the latter novel:

What Jane Austen sets before us in the first half of her novel are major elements of the Cinderella story, refusing, however, to allow the expected pattern of that story to be completed. Her refusal is instructive of her whole procedure in using well-known patterns of myth in her novels. She allows these patterns to fulfill the expectations they create only when they come to exist within a moral framework that satisfies her sense of what the true values in human life are.13

Jane Austen allows myth and fairy-tale to resonate through her narrative, but refuses to allow her story to be taken over by any one pattern. A close look at how she introduces elements and patterns of the Cinderella tale into Mansfield Park – sustaining them as long as they are of use in adding resonance to her plot or theme, then subverting them before they are taken too seriously – suggests that Jane Austen is making a conscious and controlled attempt to “clarify” the “truth of nature” by “the pervading light of imagination.”

The opening paragraph of Mansfield Park is a model in miniature of how Jane Austen uses fairy-tale in the novel. Lady Bertram’s story contains faint echoes of the “Cinderella” tale – so faint that they would go unnoticed were they not reinforced by the rest of the novel. A girl in a comparatively humble station in life, she has “the good luck” to “captive Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park … and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet’s lady” (3). She has two sisters “to be benefited by her elevation,” and it is generally expected that they will follow the pattern of the two sisters in Perrault’s version of the tale, who are subsequently married to two “great lords of the Court.”14 Jane Austen evokes
George Levine says that gold chain, a horse. that he is the first to bestow on her, Edmund gives Fanny material things: pen and ink with which to write to her brother, a brother who has gone his separate way and has landed in trouble. 

nursing of Tom through his illness is reminiscent of those stories in which a successful brother comes to the aid of a poor younger brother. 

element of another fairy-tale motif at work in the novel, as he plays the rich and evil older brother to Edmund's good and 
towards Fanny is represented by the myriad workboxes with which he has presented her. 

Fanny's transformation is not "magical" like that of Cinderella, in that it happens over time and is attributed to natural causes: improvement of health due to exercise and good home in the eyes of Sir Thomas and Edmund, or the fact of there no longer being more beautiful cousins around with whom to compare her in Mary Crawford's more cynical view. 

The magical elements of the fairy-tale are nonetheless present: Sir Thomas gives her a dress for Maria's wedding and the transformation – Miss Ward's "uncle, the lawyer, himself, allowed her to be at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to it" – the fairy-godmother in the case is identified as "good luck." The "happy-ever-after" for the pair is described in terms of "all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income," and the sisters, finding that "there certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world, as there are pretty women to deserve them," content themselves with less exalted matches.

This rather obvious example of how Jane Austen transforms what might be romance into realism is important as preparation for the more complicated interweaving of romance and realism in the novel. The most sustained example is the development of the love plot involving the Misses Bertram, Fanny, and Henry Crawford along the lines of the Cinderella tale.

Born into a poor family, Fanny has the "wonderful good fortune" (13), to use her Aunt Norris's words, to be taken in by her richer uncle. Her uncle, well-meaning but initially ineffectual like most fathers in fairy-tales, leaves the heroine to the mercy of selfish stepmothers and stepsisters – appearing here in the form of aunts and cousins. Maria and Julia think of their young cousin as "prodigiously stupid" (18) but "useful" (17), and Fanny's life is devoted to fetching and carrying for them and for her aunts. Fanny, like Perrault's Cinderella, who "bore all patientley," submits humbly to her fate: "There was no positive ill-nature in Maria or Julia; and though Fanny was often mortified by their treatment of her, she thought too lowly of her own claims to feel injured by it" (20). One hardly needs the reference to her attic bedroom and the repeated insistence on the empty grate in the East Room to identify Fanny as a Cinderella-type heroine. Nor is one surprised that she is not perceived as having a part in the various flirtations with which her cousins amuse themselves.

Both Maria and Julia are ready to fall in love with the man who arrives in the neighbourhood in the guise of Prince Charming. Henry Crawford encourages them long enough to destroy the sisters' friendship through their mutual jealousy; his heart, however, is not touched until, with her cousins gone, Fanny rises from her former "humble" position (205). Fanny's transformation is not "magical" like that of Cinderella, in that it happens over time and is attributed to natural causes: improvement of health due to exercise and good home in the eyes of Sir Thomas and Edmund, or the fact of there no longer being more beautiful cousins around with whom to compare her in Mary Crawford's more cynical view. The magical elements of the fairy-tale are nonetheless present: Sir Thomas gives her a dress for Maria's wedding and the carriage to take her to her first real social event (the dinner at Mrs. Grant's), at which Henry decides to make Fanny fall in love with him. Sir Thomas then plans the ball which completes the pattern, culminating in the scene in which Fanny as "Queen of the evening" (267) leads the first dance with Henry Crawford, and speculates on the possibility of her cousins being jealous.

The pattern begins to break down at this point, but in the meantime Jane Austen has used it to good purpose. She has, for example, surrounded Fanny with a variety of potential "fairy-godmother" figures (of both sexes), then used the response of each individual to that challenge to highlight certain aspects of character.

Aunt Norris is the first to claim the role, not realizing that she has already been cast as the wicked stepmother: it is she, after all, who insists that Fanny not have a fire, and who is shocked when Sir Thomas provides a carriage. Lady Bertram, having resigned her rightful position as the wicked stepmother by virtue of being too lazy to be actively cruel, loses her chance at the fairy-godmother role by being too busy to be actively good. Lady Bertram is certain that Henry's falling in love with Fanny is directly attributable to her own generosity in having sent her maid to help Fanny dress on the night of the ball. Fanny apparently never tells her that the generous impulse came too late to be of any assistance.

The essays of the Crawfords into the world of fairy-godmothering are at least tinged with self-interest. Mary's offer of the necklace for Fanny's cross is meant to further her brother's interest (it was actually his gift), and, perhaps, to raise herself in Edmund's estimation as well. Henry, not content with having landed one major part, plays fairy-godmother to Fanny's brother William and contemplates what he will be able to do for Fanny in the future. This appearance of generosity is marred by the fact that he refuses Fanny her one request – that he leave her alone.

Sir Thomas has the most obvious claim to the role, but though he is always generous with material gifts – a good home, an education, a dress, a carriage, a ball, a fire for her room – it takes him most of the book to learn to confer benefits with grace and to express his love. In Fanny's eyes he is often simultaneously a benefactor whom she loves and a monster that she fears.

Tom Bertram Jr. is too unthinking to care much about playing fairy-godmother: the extent of his generous intentions towards Fanny is represented by the myriad workboxes with which he has presented her. Tom, however, is an important element of another fairy-tale motif at work in the novel, as he plays the rich and evil older brother to Edmund's good and poor younger brother. Their story contains other echoes of tales of the type of Grimm's "The Two Brothers". Edmund's nursing of Tom through his illness is reminiscent of those stories in which a successful brother comes to the aid of a brother who has gone his separate way and has landed in trouble.

The multiplicity of motifs attached to Edmund reflects the inadequacy of any one fairy-tale to bear the weight of realism. In the Cinderella pattern, he has as good a claim as any to the status of fairy-godmother. It is he who, without "any display of doing more than the rest, or any fear of doing too much," was "always true to her interests, and considerate of her feelings, trying to make her good qualities understood, and to conquer the diffidence which prevented their being more apparent; giving her advice, consolation, and encouragement" (21-22). Besides the gentleness and love that he is the first to bestow on her, Edmund gives Fanny material things: pen and ink with which to write to her brother, a gold chain, a horse.

Fanny's temporary loss of her horse to Mary Crawford is the sign of another type of magic at work in the story. When George Levine says that Mansfield Park "does not seem to follow the structure of disenchantment," he is thinking only
of the novel’s heroine and forgetting poor Edmund, who falls under the spell produced by the combined influences of a
“young woman, pretty, lively, with a harp as elegant as herself; and both placed near a window”; the “season, the scene,
the air” – “all favourable to tenderness and sentiment”; “Mrs. Grant and her tambour frame,” “not without their use”; and
“even the sandwich tray, and Dr. Grant doing the honours of it” (65). It is interesting that the word “charm” in this passage
appears in Mary’s thoughts of Edmund: “There was a charm, perhaps, in his sincerity.” The charm of which the
Crawfords, both brother and sister, make use tends to blunt peoples’ perceptions of the pair’s sincere attachment to
wrong principles.

Mary never really tries to hide her interest in the surface or material issues of social life, but it is not until Edmund
discovers that she is incapable of seeing what he perceives as the “horror” behind Maria’s sin that his “eyes are opened”
and he can say to Fanny, “The charm is broken” (456). In the meantime, Fanny has been quietly suffering, like the sister
in such stories as the Grimms’ “The Seven Ravens” or “The Six Swans” who must undergo suffering so that her
enchanted brothers may be restored, or the bride who is forgotten or unrecognized by her enchanted fiancé or husband
in tales of the “Sweetheart Roland” type.

Having built up this aura of magic around the pair, Jane Austen seems to discard it at the end. The truth is that the
transferral of Edmund’s love to Fanny is a “natural” process (Jane Austen uses the word twice in this context – 470), just
as the transformation in Fanny’s looks was the natural result of good air and exercise. They are not Prince Charming and
his princess, but two young people with every material advantage, among which are counted “true merit and true love,” in
a well-defined social setting:

With so much true merit and true love, and no want of fortune or friends the happiness of the married cousins must appear as secure as earthly
happiness can be. – Equally formed for domestic life, and attached to country pleasures, their home was the home of affection and comfort;
and to complete the picture of good, the acquisition of Mansfield living by the death of Dr. Grant, occurred just after they had been married long
enough to begin to want an increase of income, and feel their distance from the paternal abode an inconvenience. (473)

As Barbara Hardy points out, the ending is “more than just a fairy-tale” (emphasis mine). The lovers have not relied on
any one fairy-tale pattern to work things out, and their happiness is grounded in real substantive things, not any transitory
magic spell. At the same time, by interweaving the patterns and motifs of fairy-tale into an essentially realistic story, Jane
Austen has expanded the range of her novel and has indeed created a convincing “happily-ever-after” ending.

NOTES

University Press, 1934), p. 276. Further references to the novel are to this edition.


6. Halperin, p. 40. Halperin is paraphrasing an unsigned essay in *Westminster Review*, 60 (October 1853), 358-59, which
Gordon S. Haight has tentatively attributed to George Eliot.

7. See, for example, R.F. Brisenden, “Mansfield Park: Freedom and the Family” in Halperin, and M. Kirkham, *Jane


1975), pp. 53 and 50.

11. Tanner, p. 10.


I refer to these tale types using examples from Grimm as the tales with which modern readers are most likely to be familiar, recognizing that in doing so I may be guilty of anachronism (the Grimms’ first collection was published in Germany in 1812; Jane Austen began work on *Mansfield Park* in 1811 and published it in 1814). Although Jane Austen probably did not read these fairy-tales in the form the Grimm brothers gave them, she is likely to have been familiar with tales of the same type.