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# "I Was Quiet, But I Was Not Blind": The Surprising Consistency of Fanny Price

Blake Elizabeth Bowens

Clemson University, [blakeelizabeth17@gmail.com](mailto:blakeelizabeth17@gmail.com)

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“I WAS QUIET, BUT I WAS NOT BLIND”:  
THE SURPRISING CONSISTENCY  
OF FANNY PRICE

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

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by  
Blake Elizabeth Bowens  
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Dr. Erin Goss, Committee Chair  
Dr. Kim Manganelli  
Dr. David Coombs

## ABSTRACT

*Mansfield Park*'s Fanny is not the heroine most readers expect to encounter in a Jane Austen novel. Unlike the heroines of *Pride and Prejudice*, or *Emma*, for example, she does not have to undergo any period of being wrong, and she does not have to change in order for her position to be accepted. In the midst of conversations about Fanny as a model of perfect conduct book activity, exemplary Christian morals, or Regency era femininity, readers and scholars often focus on whether or not Fanny exists as a perfect and consistent heroine, providing very strong and polarizing opinions on either side. This thesis claims that whether or not Fanny is an interesting protagonist or a disappointing character, her consistency in perfectly acceptable actions and decision cannot be ignored.

Despite opinions and readings that suggest Fanny provides little to no value to the novel, as the protagonist, she drives the climactic action in the novel's plot. This thesis considers the shift that occurs from Sir Thomas's promise that Fanny would never be a Miss Bertram to his acceptance of her as his daughter-in-law and a Mrs. Bertram and aims to understand her role as a model of rational and consistent perceptivity. In contrast to the inconsistent and unobservant characters that surround her, Fanny's consistent observations allow her to offer a new form of sensibility as a reactive, sensitive, and responsive heroine. Furthermore, this thesis reflects upon how readers and scholars respond to and understand Fanny in an attempt to show that Fanny can be an Austen heroine worthy of study when considered through a different lens by focusing on her ability to understand the actions and motives of those around her when no other character can.

“I WAS QUIET, BUT I WAS NOT BLIND”: THE SURPRISING  
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Within novels themselves and frequently to modern readers, characters appear to be individuals with the ability to voice personal opinions and interpersonal perceptions; however, as components of a fictional world, characters fit certain types of expected roles. This idea that characters should exemplify certain traits and characteristics exists within a discourse that assumes characters should serve as proper role models for readers, an eighteenth century ideal that primarily applied to female readers. When characters do not clearly or appropriately fit the role expected of them, readers might be surprised or might be unable to understand the character’s relevance to the plot. This type of reaction seems to happen frequently for readers of *Mansfield Park* because Fanny Price does not meet many of the expectations of an Austen heroine, primarily in that the heroine has to undergo a period of being wrong so that she can grow to fit the expectations the novel sets for her. Yet Fanny always meets and never exceeds what the novel and other characters expect of her. Fanny is not the heroine most readers expect to encounter in a Jane Austen novel. “[Q]uiet and in some ways uninteresting” (Potter 611), Fanny often surprises, confuses, and angers readers who want to encounter a heroine as well-liked and sympathetic as Elizabeth Bennet. Described as the very “perfect model of a woman” (Austen 272), Fanny seems to be an unchanging reminder of what female readers should strive to be. As a dull, uninteresting, and even uninviting character, Fanny makes readers

wonder why they should aspire to be like her; unable to connect with the heroine, readers turn from her and discredit *Mansfield Park*'s representation of women's potential character.

Though not a dynamic character, Fanny still has an important and specific role to serve as the novel's compliant, quiet heroine, even if her seeming inactivity often makes her role unclear in the novel's action; instead of participating, she consistently watches and observes the other characters as they try – and often fail – to properly fit the roles assigned to them by Regency culture and the genre norms governing their various marriage plots. For example, as the patriarch of Mansfield Park and a man of nobility and importance, wealth and power, Sir Thomas should serve as a model of proper action and reaction, yet he remains unaware of what truly goes on in his household, and he lacks control over both his domestic and foreign affairs. Similarly, each of the novel's female characters – aside from Fanny – exemplifies a different version of flawed femininity; Lady Bertram is too passive, Mrs. Norris too controlling, Maria Bertram too much the coquette, Mary Crawford too flippant. Tom and Edmund Bertram, Henry Crawford, Mr. Rushworth, and Mr. Yates each represent a different type of male suitor, and most of them enter into relationships with female companions without due consideration of either what qualities would make a good wife or of what is expected of them as a husband. Most of the characters do not meet the expectations set for them, and they fail to be the kind of model that Fanny is announced to be. Fanny's ability to understand other characters' failures in personality and often corrupt or misguided motives leads to the novel's climax and Fanny's singular moment of seeming incorrect behavior. When Fanny

rejects Henry Crawford's marriage proposal, she seems to fail to meet the expectations others set for her, though this moment really depends upon the characters' inability to perceive Henry as Fanny can. In order for Fanny's position in the novel and personal, feminine desire to be accepted, the other characters have to experience some kind of change in perception or viewpoint. While any change in the novel's other characters may not be noticeable, Fanny's desire is accepted by the novel's end, suggesting something has shifted in the Bertram household.

Even while some scholars consider Fanny "a failure and disappointment of a character" (Troost and Greenfield 16) or even a character "of no substance" (Leavis, qtd. by Potter 616), most would agree that she represents an accepted model of perfect femininity; for some, this perfection redeems Fanny and demonstrates her value, while for others, her perfection only furthers her position as a disappointing and unsympathetic heroine.<sup>1</sup> Whether considering Christian values governing an idealized wife, the modes and manners espoused by conduct manuals, or marriage plot conventions for heroines, Fanny fits the bill. She represents humility, generosity, meekness, and chastity; she remains self-effacing, modest, and genuine. Fanny is consistent in the midst of models of inconsistency. Some scholars and readers admire these qualities and find Fanny an admirable and intriguing character, but many do not. Despite opinions on Fanny's likability, readers and scholars almost always agree that she makes no mistakes and that she remains consistent and passive during the events of the novel. While all of the other

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<sup>1</sup> See also A. Marie Sprayberry, "Fanny Price as Fordyce's Ideal Woman? And Why?" *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal On-Line* 30, no. 1 (2014) and Joseph M. Duffy, Jr., "Moral Integrity and Moral Anarchy in *Mansfield Park*" *ELH* 23, no. 1 (March 1956): 71-91.

characters need to change, Fanny, the novel's constant, does not have to undergo change or growth in order to achieve her proper place. Fanny's seeming moment of imperfection in rejecting Henry Crawford proves to be the correct and proper decision when the novel's conclusion rewards Fanny and grants her desire to marry Edmund. The one moment that made Fanny momentarily interesting actually fits into the narrative of her model of perfection. With Fanny, nothing seems surprising, and nothing seems interesting.

Dawn Potter, author of "In Defense of Dullness or Why Fanny Price is My Favorite Austen Heroine," would disagree. Potter admits that "Fanny's character is a study of the English Protestant good-girl ideal: sweet-tempered and duty driven, morally and socially obedient; also shy, stammering, self-effacing; also doubtful, tender, awkward, and embarrassed" (Potter 611), all traits that otherwise make for a static and unintriguing heroine. Potter explains Fanny's unwavering ability to make the right choice and thus also Fanny's position as her favorite Austen heroine by extolling Fanny's self-perception. Unlike all of the other characters, Fanny "studies herself" in order to avoid the "traps and errors" (612) in which the other characters find themselves. Potter praises a specific type of "peculiar private selfishness" (613) in which Fanny remains aware of her faults before they manifest outwardly, effectively keeping herself from doing or saying the wrong thing. Potter's discussion of Fanny's self-perception does not examine one of the crucial moments for understanding Fanny as the novel's heroine, the novel's most surprising event, and the moment of Fanny's most dramatic conflict: the extended plot of Henry Crawford's rather startling marriage proposal. In her rejection of that proposal,

Fanny shows how she sees and understands Henry while the other characters cannot. She also expresses her desire for the first time in the novel. Including a discussion of Fanny's expression of desire in her rejection of Henry Crawford's proposal and the reactions she receives allows for comparative discussion of her desire and her perceptiveness. Not only is Fanny self-perceptive, as Potter helpfully explains, but Fanny also has an unmatched ability to understand other characters' motives, a perceptiveness not awarded to any other character in the novel. In order to understand how Fanny's desire can eventually be validated, accepted, and met when she becomes Mrs. Bertram, Fanny's self-perception and her ability to adequately see and understand those around her must be understood.

Throughout the novel, Fanny remains disliked by most everyone in the Bertram household and unnoticed in most every important moment in the novel, making her a seemingly unnecessary addition to a novel whose title invites a primary focus on the events and inhabitants of Mansfield Park. However, for almost every scene in the novel, Fanny experiences the action and drama by being either present or within earshot, and this attention to the relationships that happen and develop around her shapes her perception and understanding of the people who dominate her life. As the novel unfolds and other characters' narratives seem to take precedence over Fanny's, her place in this family, these relationships, and the novel's plot remains unclear. Fanny only moves to a place of seeming importance and relevance once her presence and significance is validated by the men who dominate her life: her guardian, Sir Thomas; her guide, Edmund; and her surprising suitor and the novel's rake, Henry Crawford. Despite all of

the suffering she endures and the promises that she would never be either a Miss Bertram or a Mrs. Bertram, Fanny gets a happy ending when almost no other character does.

Though Fanny seems passive, her passivity allows her to be an exemplary representation of rationally informed activity. While most of the other characters are unobservant and even unconscious of their fellow characters, Fanny consistently observes and can thus react with knowledge and reason to situations and characters. As the only character who appropriately and fully understands what happens around her, Fanny is the only character who can make informed decisions and form rational opinions. None of the other characters initially seem to see a fault in their observations or perceptivity, so they only see Fanny's desire and decision to reject Crawford's proposal as surprising, unfitting for and incongruous with the model woman she should be. Fanny does fit a model of femininity, however, and her desire surprises the other characters only because they do not understand the version of the perfect femininity she embodies. Fanny's desire only surprises because she remains consistent, an irony that highlights her perceptivity in the face of everyone's obliviousness. Looking at how the other characters fail to meet the expectations set for them shows how their inconsistency in perception and integrity surprises Fanny and informed readers; their failure to meet expectations also makes their inconsistency exceedingly obvious in the presence of Fanny's constant and consistent perceptiveness. Looking at Fanny through the lens of the cultural values instilled by conduct manuals and Christian morality results in an uninteresting reading of a perfect heroine. Similarly, when the characters view Fanny as a perfect model of a woman in the terms they know, they can only see a lack of gratitude and understanding. Fanny's

consistency in the midst of other characters' inconsistency highlights her status as the "perfect model" of at least a certain type of woman, but it also demonstrates the acuteness of her perception and observation. As a model of perceptivity and observational acumen, Fanny develops an awareness of the other characters' motives, intentions, and realities of personality that allows her to form rational opinions, make reasonable decisions, and practice acceptable behaviors. It is this awareness that allows her status as ideal woman to be not simply that of the conduct manuals but rather that of an undisciplined and even potentially ungendered mode of rational reaction and response.

Perhaps the best way to understand Fanny's consistency in contrast to other characters' inconsistencies is to understand the ways in which those characters do not meet their expected roles. In relation to its formation and presentation of a specific version of model femininity, *Mansfield Park* both does and does not fit the conventions of the marriage plot genre, and the novel presents different versions of marriage-plot-genre suitors at different times during the plot; eventually, the perfect heroine can receive her perfect match, but not without some mishaps. Marriage plot novels have certain conventions set for their heroines and for the heroines' suitors. As Julie Shaffer describes, two common conventions exist within the marriage plot for the heroine: the lover-mentor convention and the perfect woman convention. Despite the fact that it seems difficult for a single heroine to embody these two conventions, Fanny fits both, making her an intriguing example of a femininity that seems to require intervention in order to experience upward moral mobility but that also exists beyond reproach and beyond the need for any real training. Similarly, two common conventions exist within the marriage

plot for the suitors: the familiar suitor and the rake, as outlined by Talia Schaffer and Carole Berger. At different times of the novel, characters mistake Henry for a familiar suitor though he clearly serves as the novel's rake; *Mansfield Park* negates the reformed rake convention, however, as Edmund – the familiar suitor – becomes Fanny's suitable match and as Henry never finds redemption. As *Mansfield Park* contains some elements of all of the described marriage plot conventions, placing the novel into any one of the conventions proves impossible; instead, understanding the ways in which the conventions function together allows for an understanding of the specific expectations and the type of model femininity this version of a marriage plot creates for its characters.

Fanny seems to fit both of the marriage plot conventions, providing a framework for understanding Fanny as a particular version of model femininity both as it is shaped by a male influence and as it maintains a natural tendency towards perfection. Both types of heroines from the lover-mentor convention and the perfect woman convention will eventually end with the same traits, morals, and qualities, resulting in similar versions of a model femininity that values self-knowledge, generosity, and humility. The difference comes in looking at how the heroines begin. Most notably in the lover-mentor convention, “the heroine's growth to maturity depend[s] upon learning from a male mentor, [and] the heroine is quite literally taught by [this mentor] whom she later marries” (Shaffer 54). This convention presents the idea that women's natural tendencies, beliefs, desires, and thought processes in general are subservient to and morally lesser than those of men, and that women simply await the right men to teach and train them. This convention suggests that in order to be a functioning and upstanding member of a

moral society, a woman must be taught by a man how to conform to this perceived version of model femininity. Conversely, the perfect woman convention presents “women [so naturally perfect that] they [themselves] serve as figures able to teach or at least recuperate those less perfect than they” (Shaffer 56). Both conventions present different versions of model femininity and the model woman as the first suggests that women, as lesser beings, can only attain a certain standard of morality and virtue after undergoing some sort of training, and the second suggests women have an innate moral and virtuous perfection.

Fanny seems capable of fitting both conventions because of how the characters ineffectively perceive her; though she initially exists close to perfection without any real intervention, other characters – namely Sir Thomas, Edmund, and Mrs. Norris – view her as incapable and improper, desperately in need of adjustment at the hand of male influence. Before leaving for Antigua, Sir Thomas places no importance in Fanny and gives her no kindness. He remarks to her that he has seen no improvement at all in her over the past six years she has lived with them, a cruel reminder of the lowly position she was in upon her arrival and the chastisement, ridicule, and harshness she endured. In Fanny’s early days at Mansfield Park, she often faces ridicule from nearly everyone in the home.<sup>2</sup> Mrs. Norris mistakes Fanny’s homesickness, perfectly reasonable for a child of only ten, as a lack of gratitude and recognition of this “wonderful good fortune” which Mrs. Norris expected “ought to produce ... [an] extraordinary degree of gratitude and

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<sup>2</sup> See also Mark Canuel, “Jane Austen and the Importance of Being Wrong” *Studies in Romanticism* 44, no. 2 (2005): 125.

good behavior” (Austen 11). In these early days, Fanny only receives harsh and unkind treatment from everyone, from Maria and Julia who mock her lack of education, to the maid-servants who mock her clothes, to the governess, Miss Lee, who “wondered at her ignorance” (Austen 12). Fanny’s experience at Mansfield Park only begins to change for the better once Edmund takes up his role as her guide. Upon seeing a young Fanny crying, Edmund inquires into the matter until he discovers she misses her brother “William ... her constant companion and friend; her advocate with her mother ... in every distress” (Austen 13). From this moment on, Edmund seems to take the role of William, being her advocate with Mrs. Norris’s “abusive tendencies of talking” (McMaster 78) in every situation, like when she decides Fanny should not be allowed to ride a horse. Edmund seems to manipulate Fanny’s affections by stepping into the role of her brother, an action that changes how Fanny views her time at Mansfield Park for the rest of the novel: “Fanny’s feelings on the occasion were such as she believed herself incapable of expressing; but her countenance and a few artless words fully conveyed all their gratitude and delight, and her cousin began to find her an interesting object” (Austen 13-14). Because Edmund shows her kindness and fills the void left in her brother’s absence, Fanny begins to cherish Edmund’s every word and opinion, allowing for the development of their lover-mentor companionship.

Edmund’s influence over Fanny can be seen through the novel’s descriptions of their relationships, positioning Fanny and Edmund in the lover-mentor convention and developing the idea that Fanny needs male intervention in order to achieve a level of accepted femininity. Fanny’s education as a young child at Mansfield Park comes in the

way of literal classroom instruction at the hand of her cousins' governess and more figurative moral instruction at the hand of Edmund. In an attempt to explain the function of romantic relationships, Edmund explains to Fanny why Henry Crawford pays such special attention to Maria when he initially seemed interested in Julia. This conversation in particular positions Fanny's relationship with Edmund in the lover-mentor convention because of what the narrator says shortly after Edmund concludes his explanation:

"Fanny supposed she must have been mistaken, and meant to think differently in future; but with all that submission to Edmund could do ... she knew not always what to think" (Austen 92). Not only does Edmund place himself in a position of guide over Fanny, but Fanny accepts this position and earnestly admires, respects, and holds fast to Edmund's teachings. Fanny accepts Edmund as her guide, and she seems to value his beliefs, opinions, and ideas – primarily those concerned with the morality, actions, and beliefs of others – more highly than her own understanding of the world around her. As a further example of the lover-mentor convention, the relationship between Fanny and Edmund follows a similar structure to that of teacher and student. "Having formed her mind and gained her affections" (Austen 51), Edmund instructs and molds the impressionable young Fanny until he can rely on "her thinking like him" (Austen 51), instilling in her a sense of what it means to be "perfectly feminine" (Austen 51) and a version of morality that Edmund deems acceptable in a perfect woman. Later, when Edmund remarks that Fanny could be "the perfect model of a woman, which [he has] always believed [her] born for" (Austen 272), he likely credits himself with her formation into the almost perfect model of a woman.

While Edmund's influence over Fanny and the relationship that develops between them as a result cannot be ignored, Fanny's personal claim to her admirable traits certainly could position her in the perfect woman convention; as a naturally good woman, the heroine in the perfect woman convention would require no moral or ethical instruction. Certainly, the heroine of the perfect woman would not need instruction from a man as she would "have an equal, if not greater, access than men to truly moral behavior and attitudes" (Shaffer 56). Unlike the heroines of the lover-mentor convention, these "heroines are moral and willing to act as exemplars and yet are also modest, to a great extent self-effacing, and tractable, at least as far as is possible without straying from the actions that they, more than other characters, are able to identify as most moral" (Shaffer 56). Fanny undeniably meets the description of the model woman found in the perfect woman convention. Throughout the entirety of the novel, she is meek, humble, good-natured, mild, chaste, and modest, even before Edmund's intervention. Fanny embodies what Penelope Joan Fritzer has called Austen's tendency to "advocate[] duty, charity, chastity, modesty, honor, humility, education, good nature, and activity (rather than idleness)" (Fritzer 107). Fanny does as she is told by Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris without hesitation or complaining. She accepts the place that Mrs. Norris provides for her, thinking even the most ridiculous claims "perfectly reasonable" because Fanny "rated her own claims to comfort as low as even Mrs. Norris could" (Austen 173); Fanny mildly and humbly accepts that her aunts view her as lesser, in a lower sphere, and "the lowest and last" (Austen 173) of anyone in a room, and she does so as a result of her natural tendency to subservience and her "obliging, yielding temper" (Stampone 199).

Sir Thomas, Edmund, and Mrs. Norris often overshadow Fanny's tendencies towards natural virtue and integrity by paying attention to the qualities she lacks; the other character cannot see that, in her perceptivity, Fanny already has many of the desirable feminine traits and the ability to see a lack of desirable traits in others. Though Fanny requires certain educational training when she arrives to Mansfield Park, and though "there might not be much in her first appearance to captivate" (Austen 10), Fanny seems to arrive with many of the necessary feminine qualities; she is described as being "exceedingly timid and shy, shrinking from notice; but her air, though awkward, was not vulgar, her voice was sweet, and when she spoke, her countenance was pretty" (Austen 10). Fanny seems to need training in how to be more personable, which she receives in part from Edmund but mostly gains on her own. Her formal education ends earlier than it should when the governess stops teaching all three of the girls, though Fanny continues to call the little schoolroom her own space in the home. In this room in the unused eastern section of the house, she could "find immediate consolation in some pursuit, or some train of thought at hand. – Her plants, her books ... her writing desk, and her works of charity and ingenuity were all within her reach" (Austen 119). It is in this room that she undergoes much of her improvement and much of her educational growth. In one chapter of Steiner's book *Jane Austen's Civilized Women: Morality, Gender, and the Civilizing Process*, Steiner remarks that while at Mansfield Park, Fanny's physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual qualities improved greatly because of the self-education she received while there: "In her East Room, Fanny attends regularly to her collection of books and plants, where books stand for culture and the achievements of the human

mind, and the plants for natural resources ... Fanny has established a realm in the East Room, where human health improves nature, and in return is improved by it" (Steiner 117). With Steiner's ideas in mind, the argument could be made that Fanny is not entirely shaped by Edmund, and much of her moral, spiritual, and emotional beliefs are from her own study and introspection. While in her own private room, Fanny often thinks about the events of the day in order to make sense of what happens around here; in this room, she develops her own stance against acting in Sir Thomas's absence, considers her own opinions about the Crawford siblings, and thinks through Henry's proposal. In this room,<sup>3</sup> her perceptivity takes form, and Fanny develops her own understanding of the relationships and individuals around her through the passivity that defines her consistency.

Too frequently does scholarship focus only on Fanny's perfection in character and how the other characters can – or should – appreciate her virtue. The idea of Fanny's feminine perfection dominates how readers perceive Fanny's presence in the novel,<sup>4</sup> and the same can be said for how the other characters perceive Fanny. Placing importance on how Fanny is perceived instead of how Fanny can perceive places the majority of the novel's value in masculine recognition of feminine excellence while ignoring Fanny's own value. For example, scholarship that considers the influence of conduct books (also called courtesy literature, conduct manuals, or advice manuals/books) on the novel's

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<sup>3</sup> See also Deidre Lynch, "Young Ladies Are Delicate Plants": Jane Austen and Greenhouse Romanticism" *ELH* 77, no. 3 (2010): 716.

<sup>4</sup> See also Ann Banfield, "The Moral Landscape of *Mansfield Park*" *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 26, no. 1 (June 1971): 14.

representation of model femininity claims the novel's primary interest lies in its representation of the models that women are offered as pleasing to men. Popular in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, these books served as guides for development of women's moral, social, and personal qualities. Both Nancy Armstrong and Penelope Joan Fritzer position Austen's novels in a tradition of literature that follows courtesy manuals; Armstrong looks at the way Austen's prose and narrative styles "follow the path cut through this tangle of speech patterns and writing styles by the female conduct books" (Armstrong 137), and Fritzer considers the ways in which Austen's characters exemplify "the same virtues that appear throughout the courtesy books" (Fritzer 107). To men and women of these centuries, "[t]he woman described in manuals, especially those by men, is the woman whom a man would find desirable. In many ways, she is a fantasy to which women, eager to please men and find husbands, tried to conform" (Todd vii). These manuals value traits and qualities similar to those found naturally in the perfect woman convention, but the manuals themselves follow the idea that women need male intervention in order to achieve acceptable feminine excellence, in that they themselves serve the guiding role often found in the lover-mentor convention. The type of perfect woman described by these manuals would have been expected to follow certain traditions, keep certain practices, and perform certain duties. As Nancy Armstrong explains in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, these "books of instruction . . . all posited a similar feminine ideal [that] tended toward the same objective of ensuring a happy household" (Armstrong 63). For families of the middle to upper class, these practices and duties included drawing room skills such as the ability to play

an instrument; to sew, stitch, hem, and embroider garments; to paint or otherwise create a form of art; to carry on pleasant small talk and polite conversations; and to provide hospitality to guests and visitors. Most importantly, the perfect woman described here would have to be “out” – that is, noticeably and openly eligible for marriage. In looking at Fanny’s eligibility for marriage, she does fit many of the necessary requirements of a perfect woman by the standards of society and of conduct books, especially once she has her own “coming out” ball, to borrow a phrase from Jacqueline Reid-Walsh. This “coming out” ball is, of course, thrown by Sir Thomas as a symbol of his admiration and acceptance of Fanny, further implicating Fanny as a type of model femininity that requires male intervention and recognition.<sup>5</sup>

During the novel, Fanny seems to require male intervention because much of Fanny’s claim to desirable feminine character traits comes from the praise of the three dominating male figures in her life: Edmund, Sir Thomas, and Henry Crawford. In the words of Edmund and Sir Thomas, Fanny is described as the “perfect model of a woman” (Austen 272), all while she is praised for being “grateful and tender-heart[ed]” as well as “rational” (Austen 272), and noted as being “peculiarly free from willfulness of temper, self-conceit, and every tendency to that independence of spirit, which prevails so much in modern days in young women” (Austen 249). When Henry makes his intentions to marry Fanny known, he first tells his sister, Mary, about his feelings for Fanny, focusing mostly on “Fanny’s charms. – Fanny’s beauty of face and figure, Fanny’s graces of manner and

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<sup>5</sup> See also Jane Nardin, “Jane Austen, Hannah More, and the Novel of Education” *Persuasions: Journal of the Jane Austen Society of North America* 20 (1998): 17.

goodness of heart ... [t]he gentleness, modest, and sweetness of her character ... Her temper [Henry] had good reason to depend on and to praise” (Austen 230). Despite Fanny’s humble beginnings in the Bertram household, by Volume III, her feminine excellence receives validation, praise, and recognition from the masculine sources of power in the novel. Until this point, Fanny has no real relevance in the family beyond running errands for her aunts; however, once Sir Thomas, Edmund, and Henry Crawford see value in Fanny, even Lady Bertram decides Fanny’s companionship and assistance has value worthy of the gift of one of her beloved dogs, the gift of which will be “more than [Lady Bertram] did for Maria [as a wedding present]” (Austen 261).

Readings that focus on other characters’ perception of Fanny show her as one type of model femininity, a version that does not fully capture the striking consistency or the novel’s emphasis on her perception. Yes, Fanny Price indisputably exhibits many of the qualities expected of the heroines of marriage plot novels; as Jenny Davidson shows, the novel itself takes up “the commitment to politeness that characterizes eighteenth century moral and political writing ... as [its] central concern” (Davidson 246), a feat largely accomplished by Fanny herself, “a virtuous and immutable transparency” (Watson 68, qtd. by Davidson 245). However, these types of studies do not consider the ways in which Fanny surprises everyone with her rejection of Henry Crawford’s proposal; this moment of surprise ironically provides the best insight into Fanny’s perceptivity and consistency in contrast to the other characters’ oblivious and inconsistent tendencies. Until Fanny asserts her desire, Sir Thomas and Edmund consider her to be “peculiarly free from willfulness of temper, self-conceit, and every tendency to that

independence of spirit, which prevails so much in modern days in young women” (Austen 249) as well as “grateful[,] tender-heart[ed, and] rational” (Austen 272), all virtues and traits admired in the perfect woman convention. As soon as she acts in such a way that would surprise her guardian and her guide, however, she is seen as “willful and perverse” (Austen 249) and “so very determined and positive” (Austen 272). Willfulness, determination, and positivity would be appropriate qualities in a consideration of masculine virtue; however, because Fanny should be meek, submissive, and obliging to the masculine will instead of following her own, she momentarily loses the admiration, esteem, and respect of two of the men who valued her so.

Although Sir Thomas and Edmund see this moment as Fanny’s failure to meet their expectations for the model of a perfect woman, it actually shows the ways in which Fanny’s apparent passivity allows her to make informed, reasonable, and active decisions. Sir Thomas, Edmund, and Mary Crawford all seem shocked that Fanny did not realize Henry had feelings for her only because they do not realize how perceptive Fanny has been or how accurately she can understand Henry’s motives. In her own words, Fanny remarks, “I was quiet, but I was not blind” (Austen 284). Fanny was completely aware of how Henry acted towards her, but she simply attributed it to the insincere nature of his relationships with women. Further, she can recognize his seeming acts of kindness and charity towards her as manipulation in an attempt to get her to accept his proposal. Henry first approaches the topic with Fanny after he announces he has arranged for her brother, William, to visit. As soon as Fanny realizes what Henry is doing as he explains the “sensations which his heart had never known before” (Austen 235), she believes “that

everything he had done for William, was to be placed to the account of his excessive and unequalled attachment to her” (Austen 235). Immediately, the beginning of their would-be romantic relationship is set off by deceit, through which Fanny can see. As Henry is seemingly unaware of the body language that suggests she is “distressed” (Austen 235), Fanny finally speaks up: ““Don’t, Mr. Crawford, pray don’t. I beg you would not. This sort of talking which is very unpleasant to me”” (Austen 236). Ignoring her literal begging, Henry continues his proposal, and in doing so positions himself as a gift, “offering himself, hand, fortune, every thing to her acceptance” (Austen 236). Fanny is, momentarily, in a position of power because Henry needs her response. Similarly, as the text does not provide Henry’s actual proposal but instead records Fanny’s response to each character in great detail, the novel seemingly places Fanny in a position of power in the proposal. The omission of Henry’s question and provision instead of Fanny’s response places more importance on Fanny’s response than on Henry’s question, showing the reader that Fanny’s refusal holds more value and serves as an example of reason; Fanny provides real and practical reasons to reject his proposal, while it can be assumed that Henry, with no real basis for an attraction, bases his question upon mostly superficial observations. Furthermore, Fanny’s temporary power is not only short-lived but also illusory since Henry seems to only be prepared to accept “yes” as a response; she says no in many ways, but he refuses to accept no as a possible answer.

Fanny’s momentary and seeming failure to be the model that her family and the novel’s conventions expect her to be exemplifies two important elements: first, how Fanny’s refusal surprises and upsets the other characters, and second, how looking more

closely at her reasons can show that Fanny seems more observant than those around her. Henry's proposal itself is not recorded, but Fanny's denial is recorded five times total, suggesting that something important lies in her response. Through all of Henry's insistent antics, Fanny remains strong and resolute. In her own words, Fanny smartly says, "I had not, Miss Crawford, been an inattentive observer of what was passing between [Henry] and some part of this family in the summer and autumn. . . . I could not but see that Mr. Crawford allowed in himself gallantries which did mean nothing" (Austen 284). The whole time Sir Thomas was away and the Bertram children interacted with the Crawfords, Fanny carefully observed Henry's actions and noted his intentions. She remarks to Edmund, "I think the difference between [Henry and me] too great, infinitely too great; his spirits often oppress me" (Austen 274). Had Fanny stopped her explanation here, perhaps Edmund's comment that she is "upright and disinterested . . . so very determined and positive" (Austen 272) might have made sense. However, Fanny continues her explanation, stating that she "cannot approve [Henry's] character" (Austen 274), and "as a by-stander" (Austen 272) to much of the interactions between the Bertrams and Crawfords, Fanny "saw more [of Henry's character] than [Edmund] did" (Austen 272). Fanny's understanding of Henry's true character is so based in her observation that the narrator remarks, "Her ill opinion of [Henry] was founded chiefly on observations . . . She had hoped that to a man like her uncle, so discerning, so honourable, so good, the simple acknowledgment of settled *dislike* on her side, would have been sufficient" (Austen 248). This comment raises an interesting possibility as it reaffirms Fanny's seeming passivity through observation that allows her to attain truth; Fanny's

responses to and denial of Henry Crawford's proposal serve as perhaps the most rational and – to a rational observer – the most expected moment in the novel. Based upon Fanny's character and how she interacts with those around her, the idea that Henry's character, personality, and general outlook do not match Fanny's own seems among the least surprising details of Austen's novel. However, as noted before, the other characters' inconsistencies in integrity and inability to accurately view Fanny do not allow them to understand how Fanny can be correct in denying Henry Crawford's proposal.

Fanny's refusal of Henry's proposal shows how her consistent perceptivity and observation can best be understood when looked at in conjunction with the types of suitors presented throughout the novel and the expected roles they should fill; much of Fanny's perceptive observations can be seen through her understanding of Henry Crawford and how he is not a proper match for the novel's perfect heroine. As outlined by Talia Schaffer, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there would most commonly be marriages based upon romantic love and marriages based upon “the shared project of what is in effect a small business’ [a home or household] ... a lifetime of management ... an ongoing negotiation” (Schaffer 2). This type of marriage would require a form of activity from women, though only through an accepted range of actions; similarly to the advice of the conduct books, women should complete domestic tasks that deal with hospitality, certain kinds of accepted hobbies or “drawing room skills,” and caring for the children and husband.<sup>6</sup> From these differing ideas of marriage, three

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<sup>6</sup> Wives of the middle or upper class did experience idleness, however, as Lady Bertram is aptly described as the conduct book woman that “represent[s] the woman of the house as apparently having nothing to do,” Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), 79.

different types of suitors seem to emerge: the romantic suitor, the familiar or companionate suitor, and the rake. The romantic suitor and the rake share the required element of romantic and physical attraction between the man and woman, while the familiar suitor would form a desire for a mutually beneficial relationship that often results in an increased social standing for one of the two involved; in marriage plot novels, the romantic suitor and the rake often merge into one. Arguably, the familiar suitor “emerged ... [as] an alternative” (Schaffer 42) to the idea of the rake as the rake poses a threat, and the familiar suitor provides safety. The convention of the rake itself would suggest that at least two suitors were in competition with each other: one as the true hero who would – hopefully – win in the end, and the other as a false hero who was often more attractive, seductive, and immediately interesting than the proper choice. However, the reformed rake convention suggests that the rake is indeed the proper match, and the love of the perfect heroine could redeem the rake, turning him from “an unacceptable person [... a] speciously thrilling seducer” (Schaffer 42) to a suitor of rationality, reason, and promise. In either case, the rake often possesses the “malice and cunning of the conventional villain” (Berger 531), making him a questionable match for the perfect heroine.

Like many of Austen’s novels, *Mansfield Park* continues to offer a multifaceted version of the marriage plot, containing both types of marriages, both types of suitors, and both representations of the rake convention; however, the way that the characters discover who fits what role is entirely different and further shows Fanny’s consistent rational observations and the inconsistent, irrational, and oblivious nature of the two men because Fanny can recognize her true and suitable match from the beginning while Sir

Thomas and Edmund both are incapable of seeing that Henry serves as the novel's false hero. Mary Poovey explains the threat that the Crawfords represent at Mansfield as they "epitomize the external challenge to Mansfield Park and the values it ideally superintends, for though Henry Crawford owns an estate in Norfolk, he does not fulfill his patriarchal responsibilities" (Poovey 213). While true that the novel's mishaps and dramatic moments ensue in Sir Thomas's absence, the additional factor causing these occurrences is the presence of the Crawfords, particularly Henry. His own sister remarks that Henry "is the most horrible flirt that can be imagined" (Austen 34), and she believes he would never settle down with a sensible woman. Henry's description in the narration fits the description of the rake character almost perfectly; first, Maria and Julia considered Henry "absolutely plain" (Austen 35), but over time, they begin to see the charm in his "countenance ... [as] he was so well made, that one soon forgot he was plain" (Austen 35) until they decide him to be "the most agreeable young man [they] had ever known" (Austen 35). The encounters throughout Volume I aptly show that Henry Crawford attracts the two Bertram girls simply because he reacts to them in a pleasing way. Considering the upbringing Maria and Julia experience under Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris's care, there is no surprise that the girls believe "that it is only through their address to excite emotions in men, that pleasure and power are to be obtained" (Wollstonecraft 144). Henry's control over Maria and Julia comes from the fact that he knows they wish to "excite emotions" in him, and he believes "the Miss Bertrams [are] worth pleasing" (Austen 35).

Throughout the novel, Henry serves as both examples of the rake convention because no character other than Fanny can see how he remains unredeemed and unchanged, and ultimately, Henry only serves to cause destruction to the Bertram girls' lives and relationships. In the rake convention, the character of the rake often attracts female companions because of his seductive, dangerous, and intriguing personality. He often serves a kind of threat, which would be appealing to women who want to have excitement in relationships. Henry directly poses a threat to the Bertram ladies through his meddling in Maria's engagement. Julia believes herself to be the logical potential match for Henry because of her sister's betrothal to Mr. Rushworth; however, Henry, as the rake, enters into the situation and proves dangerous to Maria's relationship. All the while, he toys with both Bertram daughters: "his manners being to each so animated and agreeable, as to lose no ground with either, and just stopping short of the consistence, the steadiness, the solicitude, and the warmth which might excite general notice" (Austen 91). Henry says himself that he finds Maria agreeable because "[a]n engaged woman is always more agreeable than a disengaged. . . . Her cares are over, and she feels that she may exert all her powers of pleasing without suspicion" (Austen 36). Henry's statement holds true in Maria's case; as explained in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, this idea that an engaged woman would still seek to "excite emotions in men" was not uncommon. She says, "Were women more rationally educated . . . they would be contented to love but once in their lives . . . [however,] having been solely employed either to prepare themselves to excite love, or actually putting their lessons in practice, [women] cannot live without love" (Wollstonecraft 146-147). Henry seems

quite aware of this predisposition in women of his class, and he exploits Maria's tendencies in order to entertain and please himself. As bystanders to the situation, Edmund and Fanny both observe the way Henry interacts with Maria and Julia, yet Fanny seems to be the only one who understands the truth of what goes on. Like Maria, Julia, and later Sir Thomas, Edmund cannot see the truth in Henry's actions. To explain Henry's seeming interest in Maria, Edmund says, "I believe it often happens, that a man, before he has quite made up his own mind, will distinguish the sister or intimate friend of the woman he is really thinking of, more than the woman herself" (Austen 92). Fanny, however, closely observes moments between Henry and Maria that no one else seems to notice, such as Henry's flirtatious suggestion in the chapel at Mr. Rushworth's estate that he should not want to see Maria married. Considering Henry does eventually ruin Maria's reputation when he breaks her marriage and runs away with her all before leaving her to nothing, Fanny's assumptions and observations prove correct. Yet, Edmund cannot see Henry's true persona, and Sir Thomas does not truly know Henry at all. Even though the two are oblivious to Henry's true intentions and characteristics, the idea that they believe him well-suited for Fanny still seems surprising.

Henry seems to take on the position as the novel's reformed rake when Sir Thomas and Edmund believe Henry's affection for and interest in Fanny prove that he seems to be seeking the proper qualities in a wife, suggesting that Henry acknowledges Fanny as the model of perfect femininity and the perfect wife he should want; however, as Fanny's observations and eventual rejection suggest, Sir Thomas and Edmund simply cannot see and understand Henry in the correct way. Some scholarship seems to also

believe Henry to be the almost reformed rake, seen when Anita Soloway argues that Henry uses language specifically connected to the perfect wife as described in Proverbs 31. The “virtuous woman” (KJV, Proverbs 31.10) described here is clothed in “strength and honor” (31.25), and her words are full of “wisdom” and the “law of kindness” (31.26). She works diligently in the house and beyond (31.18,21,24), and she is trusted, blessed, and praised by her husband and children (31.11-12,28). Perhaps most notable is the fact that Henry would “praise” (Austen 230) Fanny’s virtues, echoing verse twenty-eight of the Biblical text. Also, as Soloway points out, Henry “views the quiet, guileless Fanny as the only person to whom he can safely expose his deepest self” (Soloway 83). Henry tells his sister, “I could so wholly and absolutely confide in [Fanny] ... and *that* is what I want” (Austen 230). Henry feels he can trust Fanny, a quality described in Proverbs 31: “The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life” (KJV, Proverbs 31.11-12). Soloway’s reading suggests that Henry could be redeemed by his love and affection for Fanny, and he even seems to admire her for the qualities that make her a perfect model of femininity. Sir Thomas and Edmund believe he could be reformed, and this marriage could be a familiar marriage of rational esteem, as described by Schaffer. However, Henry proves inconsistent when he cannot wait for Fanny to return from Portsmouth, and he removes the possibility of following the reformed rake convention. When Henry ruins Maria’s reputation, positioning him finally as simply the novel’s rake, unreformed, Sir Thomas changes his perception of Fanny when he realizes that her understanding of Henry was right all along.

*Mansfield Park* also represents multiple forms of the familiar suitor and familiar marriage first incorrectly when Sir Thomas suggests Fanny would be rightly matched with and appropriately provided for by Henry and then correctly when Fanny and Edmund eventually marry; before the correct representation of the familiar suitor and marriage can be shown, however, Sir Thomas and Edmund must change their perceptions and see both Henry and Fanny as they exist, defined by their character traits. Once Fanny asserts her desire and tells Sir Thomas she does not want to marry Henry, Sir Thomas reminds Fanny she is of a lower class and tries to guilt her into accepting Henry's proposal upon the basis of how her family "might be benefitted [from this marriage], how *they* might rejoice in such an establishment for [her]" (Austen 249). Even though he does not know Henry at all, Sir Thomas refers to the prospect of marrying Henry as "an opportunity of being settled in life, eligibly, honourably, nobly settled, as will, probably, never occur to [her] again" (Austen 249). To Sir Thomas, Fanny has been presented the opportunity to marry "a young man of sense, of character, of temper, of manners and of fortune" (Austen 249). He accuses Fanny of being concerned only with "what a young, heated fancy imagines to be necessary for happiness" (Austen 249), showing Sir Thomas incapable of perceiving Fanny as the observational and rational woman she is and of perceiving Henry as the alluring yet dangerous suitor he is. Edmund, too, must change his perception of Henry, Mary Crawford, and Fanny, moments that show his inconsistency in integrity and that question his role as Fanny's guide. Despite Fanny's adoration, Edmund does not initially show romantic interest in her and instead values the wrong version of femininity when he pursues Mary Crawford. Though Fanny herself recognizes Mary is

not the right type of woman for Edmund, he seems oblivious. When visiting Mr. Rushworth's estate in Volume I, Mary lets her opinions about Edmund's plans to become ordained known;<sup>7</sup> upon hearing he should be ordained, Mary "looked almost aghast" and has to "rally her spirits" in order to recover (Austen 70). Though Edmund seems largely unaware of his mismatched companion, Fanny remains aware almost from the novel's beginning. When Mary and Edmund first begin their romantic relationship, the narration remarks that Fanny "was a little surprised that he could spend so many hours with Miss Crawford, and not see more of the sort of fault which he had already observed, and of which she was almost always reminded by a something of the same nature whenever she was in her company" (Austen 52). Edmund either remains oblivious to Mary Crawford's true sentiments and lacking moral quality that he so admires in Fanny, or he chooses to ignore Mary's less savory traits because of his physical attraction to her. Either way, Edmund must undergo a change before he realizes his own inconsistency and who his own proper match should be; ironically, he praises Fanny's qualities of model femininity while failing to see the lack of such qualities in his own proposed match.

Characters' inconsistencies and inability to accurately perceive each other go beyond the realm of relationships and romance, as the novel's patriarch demonstrates through his general lack of awareness and control over his affairs abroad, his family, and his household. In fact, the only consistency in Sir Thomas's narrative is his lack of control. This lack of control can be seen in many moments throughout the novel, from the novel's opening when he allows Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris to accept a daughter from

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<sup>7</sup> See also Banfield, 8.

Mrs. Price beyond his best judgment to his lack of control over his holdings in Antigua.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most relevant to this discussion is actually his perception of his own biological children and his disappointments in their character. In his own words, Sir Thomas both conspicuously and inconspicuously states his disappointment in his own children. Mary Poovey points out that the undesirable traits the Bertram children possess are a product of their upbringing: “Sir Thomas has raised his children with an unhealthy combination of restraint and indulgence that has given them – especially his daughters – an idiosyncratic education instead of the principles of ‘duty’ they should have learned” (Poovey 213). Sir Thomas seems unaware of his hand in his children’s outcomes,<sup>9</sup> however, and he instead focuses on the characters throughout the novel whose dispositions please him, ignoring his paternal duties to better his own children. When praising Henry Crawford for wanting to marry young, Sir Thomas says, “I am an advocate for early marriages ... This is so much my opinion that I am sorry to think how little likely my own eldest son, your cousin, [Tom] is to marry early; but at present, as far as I can judge, matrimony makes no parts of his plans or thoughts. I wish he were more likely to fix that” (Austen 248). Furthermore, Sir Thomas suggests possible disappointment in his daughters through his praise of Fanny. Nina Auerbach claims that Fanny’s desires are only met “as a last resource when Sir Thomas’s natural children disgrace themselves in turn” (Auerbach 215), leaving only the adopted Bertram as a way

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<sup>8</sup> The circumstances surrounding the particular strain of Caribbean imperialism in the novel might suggest Sir Thomas does not have much power abroad due to what Moira Ferguson calls “general economic crisis” members of his social class were experiencing historically, “Mansfield Park: Slavery, Colonialism, and Gender.” *The Oxford Literary Review* 13, no. 1–2 (1991): 119.

<sup>9</sup> Nardin, 15-20.

to redeem the family in Sir Thomas's mind. This idea, of course, only highlights the potentially incestuous quality of the following marriage and the unkept promise of Mrs. Norris at the novel's opening. By the conclusion of the novel, Sir Thomas joyfully welcomes "the promise of Fanny for a daughter [and meets] Edmund's application [with] joyful consent" (Austen 371). Sir Thomas recognizes Fanny's "usefulness" and "excellence" (Austen 371) and sees her as "indeed the daughter that he wanted" (Austen 371) and the wife he wants for his son. This "full acknowledgment of [Fanny's] worth by Sir Thomas" (Soloway 84) depreciates his own biological daughters' worthiness; by his own admittance, Fanny is "the daughter that he wanted," suggesting his two daughters are unsatisfactory to his sensitivities.

Sir Thomas's praise of Fanny and Edmund's sudden realization that she is a suitable wife mark the moment in the novel when, finally, characters view Fanny accurately as she exists rather than through their own misrepresentations of her. Even though Fanny acknowledges Edmund as her suitable match from the beginning, and even though *Mansfield Park* was once noted as a "long history of [Fanny's] patient affection" (*Morning Review*, qtd. by Troost and Greenfield 22), Sir Thomas and Edmund, in their inconsistencies, do not recognize Fanny as the suitable match until Volume III and in the novel's final chapter. Again, the novel does not show much in the way of how the relationship between Edmund and Fanny develops or why Edmund really decide to admire Fanny romantically; the narrator only remarks, "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” (Austen 369). Remaining a component of the lover-mentor convention, Edmund credits himself for developing the perfect wife of “mental superiority” (Austen 370), as he believed “her mind [was] in so great a degree formed by his care, and her comfort depending on his kindness, an object to him of such closer and peculiar interest, dearer by all his own importance with her than any one else at Mansfield” (Austen 370). As mentioned by Clara Tuite and other scholars,<sup>10</sup> Fanny only becomes the focus of the novel and Sir Thomas’s affections and care once there are no other eligible women to be married and once Sir Thomas realizes she is the most prepared to be a virtuous wife. Sir Thomas’s interest in Fanny actually meets the expectations set by the opening of the novel, as only now does he begin to “adequately provide for” (Austen 5) her, turning *Mansfield Park* into “a plot of female upward mobility” (Tuite 105). Sir Thomas’s sudden realization that Fanny is admirable and a version of model femininity he wants to see in his children provides an example of his inconsistency; as Ellen Pollack notes, throughout the novel “the Bertram household [is in a] world of categorical instabilities and circumstantial uncertainties” almost exclusively at the hand of “the family patriarch, Sir Thomas” (Pollack 164), and his back-and-forth over Fanny’s value and morality allows for much of the novel’s drama and much of Fanny’s distress.

If Sir Thomas must see that Fanny exemplifies the qualities he should have instilled in his daughters, then Edmund must see that Fanny embodies the traits that Mary

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<sup>10</sup> See also Nina Auerbach, “Jane Austen’s Dangerous Charm: Feeling as One Ought about Fanny Price” *Women & Literature* 3 (1983): 215 and Anita Soloway, “‘For Her Price Is Far above Rubies’: Choosing a Wife in Mansfield Park” *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal*, 36 (2014): 84.

Crawford lacks; before the novel can conclude, Edmund must realize that Fanny's admirable traits make her the most suitable wife he could find. Sarah Bowen explains how Edmund might come to realize Fanny is his ideal match by providing background for what Edmund's ordination would have included based upon the *Book of Common Prayer*. In this "solemn diaconal ordination service" (Bowen 102), Edmund would have been reminded that the wife of a clergyman must be "grave, not slanderous, sober, faithful in all things [and that ordained husbands must rule] their children and their own houses well" (*Book of Common Prayer* 692, qtd. by Bowen 102). Though Edmund has been working with Fanny throughout the novel and attempting to instill in her these admirable traits that the perfect model woman and the perfect Christian wife should have, he seems unaware of the fact that, as a clergyman, he should seek the type of wife Fanny's traits would allow her to be. What finally makes Edmund realize Mary does not exemplify the version of model femininity he admires comes from how she responds to Henry and Maria's affair. She calls their actions "folly" (Austen 357), a term Edmund finds completely inappropriate for the gravity of the situation. He realizes she had "[n]o reluctance, no horror, no feminine . . . no modest loathings" towards the situation, and he asks, "For where, Fanny shall we find a woman whom nature had so richly endowed?" (Austen 357). This comment alone shows that Edmund remains oblivious to Fanny's true value even once he can clearly see and know Mary, and he only begins to perceive Fanny correctly once he can acknowledge her as his suitable match.

Even though much of the novel points to Fanny finally marrying Edmund, some readers might have anticipated an acceptance of Henry's proposal and of Mary and

Edmund's romance because, despite the suggestions that they are wrong for each other, either relationship could have fit into a marriage plot convention.<sup>11</sup> Henry's marriage to Fanny would have resulted in the reformed rake convention, and Mary's marriage to Edmund could have fit another familiar marriage plot, in which the wife is brought into maturity through her marriage to a more serious man.<sup>12</sup> Readers might also be surprised that none of the other characters end in happy or suitable marriages: Tom Bertram seems unlikely to find a wife at all, Maria joins the widowed Mrs. Norris in a kind of exile, and Julia elopes into an unacceptable marriage against her father's wishes. Fanny and Edmund, therefore, end as the novel's celebrated couple as the novel rewards the consistency that has characterized Fanny throughout the novel.

As the quiet and often unnoticed heroine, the idea that Fanny's passivity actually allows for appropriate and acceptable active decisions surprises some readers. According to Deirdre Lynch, some readers believe Fanny "ought to be labeled a hypocrite [because t]he girl who 'cannot act' (*MP*, 145) does so all the time," pointing to the "tactical ... [and] efficacious [way that Fanny] get[s ...] what she wants" (Lynch 716) as the reason to believe Fanny more active than she seems. While true that Fanny does have a hand in getting what she wants, ultimately the end of the novel shows that, despite Fanny's "quiet devotion" to Edmund all along, she does not get what she wants until every other character in the novel can perceive and understand her as she truly exists; this surprise

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<sup>11</sup> See Peter W. Graham, "Falling for the Crawfords: Character, Contingency, and Narrative" *ELH* 77, no. 4 (2010): 867.

<sup>12</sup> See also Gillian Dooley "'My Fanny' and 'A Heroine Whom No One But Myself Will Much Like': Jane Austen and Her Heroines in the Chawton Novels" *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal On-Line* 38, no. 1 (2017).

that has led some readers to consider Fanny a hypocrite seems to only be a result of readers' having a set of expectations for Fanny that she does not meet. As Mary Waldron, Linda Troost, and Sayre Greenfield outline, Fanny's position between Elizabeth Bennet and *Emma's* titular character often confuses, surprises, and angers readers, critics, and scholars alike. Like Sir Thomas and Edmund, many readers fail to recognize Fanny for what she is and hold her to irrelevant expectations. For some, her unlikability as a character positions Fanny as an irredeemable heroine that should not get the novel's only happy ending; these readings often consider Fanny's consistency to be her most unfavorable trait.

For most of Austen's novels, the heroine has to undergo a period of being wrong so that she can grow to fit expectations; the ever-consistent Fanny, however, always meets and never exceeds what the novel and other characters expect of her. Therefore, refusing Henry's proposal serves as a moment of surprise because having the ability to assert autonomous desire does not fit the expectations of the model of femininity that Fanny otherwise completely represents. When Sir Thomas reprimands Fanny's decisions, readers might see this as Fanny's moment to change and grow and as her one moment of being wrong. However, the novel's conclusion and her becoming Mrs. Edmund Bertram validates, accepts, and grants Fanny's autonomy and surprising desire. In this way, Fanny's surprise is two-fold: the fact that Fanny has her own autonomous desire does not fit the expectation of a compliant model woman, and the only moment in the novel that would suggest she needs to grow and change – denying Henry's proposal – is accepted and validated as being the correct decision. Through these moments of surprise, Fanny's

status as a model of femininity should have faltered, yet instead it becomes even more assured.

Despite these moments of intrigue and surprise, Fanny's unchanging, consistent quietness causes many readers to see her as dull and uninteresting. As Juliet McMaster argues, however, *Mansfield Park* considers silence to be a "positive entity, and a highly valuable one" (McMaster 77). Fanny's silence allows her to "specialize in listening" (McMaster 86), a specialty that provides her a more rational understanding of characters' faults, even when her guardian and guide cannot see them. Considering Fanny's consistent quietness, her sudden active assertion of desire causes some, including other characters, to see her as ungrateful, impractical, and even rude. However, understanding Fanny's observant passivity shows how she can be perfectly responsive rather than uninteresting, ungrateful, or unimportant. McMaster considers Fanny's "silent attention [to be] most creative for us readers. In the hurly-burly of the comings and goings, the sayings and doings of the other characters, she is the constant quiet presence that takes it all in, understands, and makes it all morally significant, aesthetically coherent" (McMaster 88). Looking at Fanny's quiet and passive perceptivity as a way to understand how she can infuse moral significance into the novel seems to enter into the discussion of Fanny as only a conduct book heroine. This idea that Fanny serves as a kind of moral compass for the novel has been expressed in other scholarship as well; for example, Mary Poovey suggests, "*Mansfield Park* seems a citadel in a turbulent world" (Poovey 213) that requires an "ideal ... exemplar of femininity" (Poovey 212) in order to redeem the family. Fanny must "embody and enforce ideal principles" in order "to make propriety

and romantic desire absolutely congruent. By showing how self-effacement can yield self-fulfillment, [Austen removes the idea that] the expression of individual desire [is] dangerous to society as a whole” (Poovey 214). In this way, the novel can present a model of perfect and acceptable femininity while also providing for the possibility of following individual desire. However, considering Fanny only as she can morally redeem the other characters and only as she can provide moral significance for the novel does not consider the importance of her consistent perceptivity and the other characters’ need for improved perceptions.

In many ways, Fanny represents an acceptable form of sensibility through her passive perceptivity while also representing the novel’s model of acceptable femininity. Unlike Mrs. Norris, who is set in her ways, Fanny is reactive and responsive to the realities of the situations around her. Unlike Sir Thomas, Edmund, Mary Crawford, and almost every other character, Fanny is observant and sensitive to the personalities and intentions of the characters around her. Though viewing Fanny as a model of observant passivity and sensibility could further the idea that she represents an impossible ideal of feminine perfection, Fanny’s consistent perceptivity could – and seems to – allow her to be an exemplary model of necessary observation and rationally informed activity. The irony in Fanny’s passive activity and perceptivity does not, however, render her a hypocrite, as McMaster suggests some readers believe; instead, it should encourage readers to take a second look at Fanny’s role in the plot and her centrality to the novel as a whole. In contrast to Fanny’s perceptive and observational consistency, the novel’s other characters are inconsistent and lacking the proper perceptivity and sensibilities to

live up to the expectations set for them. Whether or not the characters realize that Fanny was correct all along, and whether or not they realize they were wrong to consider her “wilfull and perverse,” by the end of the novel, the characters who once rejected Fanny validate and grant her desires and feminine will. While true that Fanny consistently acts, reacts, and responds in the acceptable and appropriate way as the novel’s model of perfect femininity, her consistent observations allow her to also become a new form of sensibility as a reactive, sensitive, and responsive heroine.

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