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Honors Thesis

The Widow’s Place: Mrs. Norris in *Mansfield Park*

“The most hateful character in Jane Austen’s novels,” “a vicious pest,” “Austen’s most nearly psychotic creation.” Such is the critical consensus on Mrs. Norris of *Mansfield Park*: that she is hateful, vicious, and psychotic (Lauber 519; Duffy 72; Edwards 55). But this instinctive dismissal, even going as far to suggest that her evil “requires no demonstration” (Lauber 519), prevents a deeper examination of her character. This reductive view fails to consider Mrs. Norris’s social status, especially in relation to the late eighteenth century, and prevents readers from examining her complicated role in relation to the novel’s protagonist, Fanny Price.

In this paper, I make three contributions to the critical debate concerning *Mansfield Park*. First, I call attention to a much-neglected context of the novel, namely eighteenth-century expectations of widows. As historians such as Richard Wall and Olwen Hufton have shown, early modern widows and single women often lived together for societal and economic reasons. Because it was feared that never married women or widows would meddle with others, especially impressionable young women, widows and single women were encouraged to live together. In addition, they benefited from being able to share the costs of housing and food, among other things. This social context is directly relevant to *Mansfield Park*, and in particular to the depiction of Mrs. Norris.

Second, I show how Mrs. Norris rejects her societally approved place as a widow and usurps other roles. Critics such as Laura Fairchild Brodie have argued that the Mansfield Park society excludes Mrs. Norris from the life of the park to such a degree
that she feels that she must justify her existence. I argue, however, that Mrs. Norris makes choices that push her farther from society. When she refuses to live with Fanny as her society wishes, she must adopt other roles because she has rejected what Austen and her contemporaries would have regarded as her normal place.

Third, I demonstrate the direct relationship between Fanny’s rise and Mrs. Norris’s fall in the novel. Critics have long explained Mrs. Norris’s exile as an example of her being punished for her bad choices. While I concur with this argument, I believe it needs to be expanded. I argue that Austen sharply contrasts Mrs. Norris’s rejection of her place with Fanny’s acceptance of hers. Austen then shows how Fanny’s acceptance leads to her advancement into the Mansfield family, while Mrs. Norris’s refusal to act as she ought leads to her exclusion. In fact, the advancement of one and diminution of the other are in counterbalance. By creating this direct relationship, Austen uses Mrs. Norris to show the importance of single women and widows entering their societally supported places.

In the eighteenth century, widows were expected to form households with communities of single women. This expectation has been widely demonstrated in various historical studies. For example, in Wall’s thorough demographic survey for widows, widowers, and never-married persons in England from 1500 to 1800, he found that 43.9 to 53.8 percent of never-married women under 45 lived with one parent. Significantly, an additional 3 to 7.6 percent lived with other relatives (Wall 311).

This pattern was common enough that early modern historian Hufton created a term for it: “spinster clustering.” She described it as “the grouping together of women (in
twos, threes, and fours) to rent some kind of accommodations” (129). These spinster clusters were often “unmarried women and widows” who “group[ed] together” (Hufton 130), and the trend persisted through the eighteenth century. Many of these arrangements were within the immediate family, as when widows kept a younger daughter in the house. But these relationships often also extended beyond the immediate family. In this case, the women would “cohead households” or a single woman would live as a dependent in the household of a relative, such as an aunt (Froide 239). Examples of this arrangement can be found in murder notices, as in the “Barbarous and bloody news” of a widow and her niece being killed in their mutual household (Anon). The forced living arrangement reflects Jeanine M. Casler’s view that “the widow was in actuality a second-class citizen” and was treated as such (10). Despite such legal examples of widow’s independence as property ownership and self-possession (Bacon 436), the social power of widows was considerably less than that of their married contemporaries, and the community often encouraged spinster clustering at the expense of these women’s choices. Because spinsters were needed to care for elderly relatives, women’s historian Bridget Hill suggests that families pressured their single daughters to stay single for the sake of the family (69). Once those older family members died, or when a spinster was no longer needed at home, the single woman’s living arrangement options was narrowly defined: she was encouraged to live with other family members, like a widowed aunt (Froide 239). Earlier in history, ordinances even went so far as to “forbid singlewomen to live on their own” (Froide 264). The natural place for them to go was into spinster communities, which included widows and other women in similar situations.
Spinster clusters often provided many advantages for widows and single women. Katherine Kitteridge notes that “it was beneficial for a single woman in early modern England to ‘remain attached to a widow, since in this way she could share in economic opportunities available to her’” (Froide 265). Widows were much more likely to run an independent household than were their never-married peers (Froide 239). After the death of their parents, many spinsters were dependent on relatives and had few other options (Froide 238; Hill 70; Hufton 125). Moving in with a widowed relative offered a permanent spinster a home. In exchange for the living arrangement, these women shared the work and economic burden of the household, and often the spinster looked after her relatives in their old age (Hufton 129; Hill 77).

Like many of her contemporaries, Jane Austen lived in a typical spinster cluster. She spent much of the later part of her life with her widowed mother and single sister, since she did not marry (Brodie 699). During her mother’s illness, she was responsible for the housekeeping (Hill 75), and her sister was often called to other relatives’ houses to help with the housekeeping while the lady of the house was lying in (Hill 76). For Austen, the arrangement was, while not ideal, fairly beneficial. Though the family of women struggled to find a place to live, when Austen’s brother did finally take them in, he took the whole trio, and they all had a roof and the means to run their own household (Hill 75-7).

Given that Austen lived in a spinster cluster, it is not surprising that early in *Mansfield Park*, the recently widowed Mrs. Norris is overtly encouraged to create such a community for herself and Fanny. Mrs. Norris’s society encourages Mrs. Norris to adopt
the traditional role for widows: managing a small household. Austen conveys the
community’s wish by having the trustworthy characters suggest that Mrs. Norris should
live with her fellow single woman, Fanny. Sir Thomas is the first to assert these
expectations. Upon Mrs. Norris’s widowhood, he thinks the prospect of the pairing has a
“most decided eligibility,” particularly because of the “change in Mrs. Norris’s situation”
(19). Austen writes that Sir Thomas believed “that such a [pairing] must be” (19). In the
eighteenth century, Sir Thomas’s expressions of what “must be” represent the will of the
society because he is the patriarch. But Austen adds further proof that the society wishes
Mrs. Norris to form a community with Fanny. In order to highlight the eligibility of the
plan, Austen writes that Edmund, too, approves of Mrs. Norris heading a spinster cluster.
Throughout the novel, Austen gives more weight to Edmund’s approval or condemnation
than the judgment of any other character, except Fanny. His praise of the Mrs. Norris and
Fanny pairing is even more avid than his father’s, and shows the plan’s extreme
desirability. He tells Fanny:

   It has every thing else in its favor. My aunt is acting like a sensible woman in
   wishing for you. She is choosing a friend and companion exactly where she
   ought, and I am glad her love of money does not interfere. You will be what you
   ought to be to her. (20-1)

Mrs. Norris is not known for being sensible, but the suggested plan would make her so.
Furthermore, Edmund suggests that the pairing is supported by society and tradition: she
is doing as she “ought.” Edmund goes on to state “Mrs. Norris is much better fitted than
my mother for having charge of you now” (21). Both Mrs. Norris and Fanny are off the
marriage market—one because of age and social position, the other simply because of her
social status—and therefore they are more suited to live together. The two would have a
friendship and living arrangement condoned by societal expectations and precedent. This society—as represented by its patriarchs—wishes Mrs. Norris to adopt the traditional role of heading a spinster cluster.

Austen shows that Mrs. Norris would be welcomed into society if she chooses to allow Fanny to live with her, but she refuses to do so, even to the point of making choices that inconvenience her and distance her from the society of Mansfield Park. When discussing the eligibility of the Mrs. Norris-Fanny household, Edmund asserts that the two families—the Bertrams and the Norris-Prices—“will be meeting every day in the year” (21). Throughout the novel, Mrs. Norris appears constantly at the main house, so it is evident the family would welcome the pair of single women. Austen implies that the family’s promotion of the Norris-Price living arrangement is natural: it is the most natural thing for two women in similar circumstances to bond together, and each is expected to grow from the situation. But Mrs. Norris chooses “the smallest habitation which could rank as genteel among the buildings of Mansfield parish” (22) so that there will not be room for Fanny. Austen critic Laura Fairchild Brodie argues that Mrs. Norris’s new residence, the White house, is an example of Mrs. Norris being “confined to the periphery of the park” (707). But the distance from the White house to the main house is a consequence of Mrs. Norris’s own choice in her attempt to shirk her duty to Fanny. Mrs. Norris excludes Fanny from her new household, and, in doing so, places herself on the periphery in a barely genteel living circumstance. Had she selected a larger house and taken Fanny with her, as Edmund asserts is the “sensible” course of action, Mrs. Norris might have lived closer and in a nicer residence.
Mrs. Norris’s refusal to accept Fanny is part of her larger refusal to accept that she is a widow. Austen writes that “Mrs. Norris took possession of the White house, the Grants arrived at the parsonage, and these events over, every thing at Mansfield went on for some time as usual” (25). The continuation of things as usual means that nothing has changed for Mrs. Norris. Mrs. Norris has moved farther away, but she hasn’t accepted a new position within her community. Before, she was responsible for the care of her gouty husband, but now, since “she could do very well without him” (18), she has no one to care for and nothing actually to do. She has merely moved from one location to another and downgraded her social position and actual responsibility, but has not accepted her potential job as the head of a spinster household.

Despite this, Mrs. Norris still insists on being “of use.” Being “of use” is Mrs. Norris’s attempt, as put by Bridget Hill, to “justify [her] existence” (2). Mrs. Norris seeks several different roles to give herself value: she uses men as an absent source of authority, she acts as a mother to the Bertram girls, and she attempts to run Mansfield Park. As a woman acting as if she were not widowed, she is valued for her opinions. As a mother, she is needed to educate and match-make. As an estate manager, she is “of use” in practicing economy and preventing mismanagement of the servants. But in each of these instances, Austen illustrates that these roles are not valuable or valued.

For Mrs. Norris, being and acting like a married woman is appealing. Before the death of her husband, Mrs. Norris was a powerful and influential figure in the Bertram household. Despite the fact that her husband never appears in the novel and never has a line of dialogue, Mrs. Norris uses him to assert her own power. He was a good excuse for escaping responsibility for Fanny originally—since his gouty complaints required her
care and made possession of a child difficult (7-8). But she also refers to him as a source of absent authority. When talking about Fanny’s arrival Mrs. Norris says:

‘That is exactly what I think,’ cried Mrs. Norris, ‘and what I was saying to my husband this morning. It will be an education for the child said I, only being with her cousins; if Miss Lee taught her nothing, she would learn to be good and clever from them.’ (9)

In one of the few references to her husband the entire novel, Mrs. Norris justifies her thoughts by showing that they have been tried out before on another figure: a trustworthy male. Her thoughts on education have value because she said them to her husband, and this gives her additional authority and place without having to be tied to the man himself, since he never appears on the scene. Before her widowhood, Mrs. Norris has the status of a married woman without the domination of a husband, since she is the only voice from the Norris household.

Even without referencing her husband, however, Mrs. Norris has greater authority in the married state. In the discussion about adopting a Price child, Mrs. Norris is the primary voice and the only character with significant dialogue, while the others’ thoughts are conveyed through narration or Mrs. Norris’s chatter. For example:

No sooner had he deliberately begun to state his objections, than Mrs. Norris interrupted him with a reply to them all whether stated or not. ‘My dear Sir Thomas, I perfectly comprehend you, and do justice to the generosity and delicacy of your notions, which indeed are quite of a piece with your general conduct; and I entirely agree.’ (5)

Sir Thomas’s voice is heard only briefly, and not even in his own words. Mrs. Norris’s voice is the significant one. Later in the discussion, Mrs. Norris even speaks for Sir Thomas, asserting, “you are thinking of your sons” (6). In the narrative, Sir Thomas has no chance to state his own thoughts, but Mrs. Norris can speak for him.
As a married woman, Mrs. Norris’s voice has significant impact. When she’s married, Mrs. Norris is also allowed to use her boundless energy more successfully in making and carrying out plans. Mrs. Norris first suggests bringing a Price child to Mansfield, and then continues making arrangements without opposition. She says: “if you are not against it, I will write to my poor sister to-morrow, and make the proposal” (6). The “if you are not against it” is a formality only: Mrs. Norris has stated her opinion, overturned Sir Thomas’s objections, and made the plan. Having done all this, there is still yet more for her to do: she takes charge of writing, suggesting the plan to her sister, and arranging to get Fanny to the household. Her activity has a channel when her opinion is respected.

Upon her widowhood, Mrs. Norris continues to call on the opinion of absent male authorities to assert her own power and convenience. This helps her get her way in individual instances, but ultimately does not increase her personal power within the family. When Edmund attempts to buy Fanny a horse, Mrs. Norris tries to talk him out of the plan. Notably, in this instance, all her arguments revolve around Sir Thomas, though they really express her own opinion:

She could not but consider it as absolutely unnecessary, and even improper, that Fanny should have a regular lady’s horse of her own in the style of her cousins. She was sure Sir Thomas had never intended it; and she must say, that to be making such a purchase in his absence, and adding to the great expenses of his stable at a time when a large part of his income was unsettled, seemed to her very unjustifiable. ‘Fanny must have a horse,’ was Edmund’s only reply. Mrs. Norris could not see it in the same light. (29)

Mrs. Norris is not truly considering Sir Thomas’s wishes: she does not want Fanny to have a horse because she dislikes Fanny. Austen makes this contrast clear by highlighting how the lady’s horse would be “in the style of her cousins” and by asserting that “Mrs.
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Norris couldn’t see it in the same light.” But to get her own way Mrs. Norris appeals to an absent man whose authority is greater than her own but who cannot contradict her. She speaks for Sir Thomas’s wishes as she spoke for her husband’s in earlier passages. In this instance, Mrs. Norris is able to successfully claim a male authority to get her way. As much as Mrs. Norris’s selfishness annoys Edmund, “he could not help paying more attention to what she said, and at length determined on a method of proceeding which would obviate the risk of his father’s thinking he had done too much” (29). But, while he does as Mrs. Norris wishes, Edmund’s considerations here are all for his father, not for Mrs. Norris, and ultimately this maneuver gains her no actual power. Furthermore, on the return of the man in question, Mrs. Norris must entirely give up this method, which means she has no chance to use this small amount of power to any great harm.

When calling on male authority doesn’t work for her, Mrs. Norris attempts to claim the female authority of motherhood, and spends much of the novel attempting to be the Bertram girls’ surrogate mother. Mrs. Norris chooses this role because eighteenth-century mothers had an obvious and important role, and motherhood was a small source of power. According to Ruth Perry, this was the time “when motherhood was becoming central to the definition of femininity [and] the modern conception of the all-nurturing, tender, soothing, ministering mother was being consolidated in English culture” (Perry 337). Importantly, mothers have specific tasks. They supervise their daughters’ education, care for them with the help of servants, and place them on the marriage market and encourage eligible suitors. These jobs are all natural directions for Mrs. Norris’s energy. Mrs. Norris adopts this role in part because other characters feel she is well suited for it. On leaving for Antigua, Sir Thomas is worried about
Leaving his daughters to the direction of others at their present more interesting time of life. He could not think Lady Bertram quite equal to supply his place with them, or rather to perform what should have been her own; but in Mrs. Norris’s watchful attention, and in Edmund’s judgment, he had sufficient confidence to make him go without fears for their conduct. (26)

In Sir Thomas’s understanding, Mrs. Norris’s watchful attentions are those of a mother—a replacement for Lady Bertram’s absent maternal instincts.

Mrs. Norris takes over Lady Bertram’s job of educating Maria and Julia. Early in the novel, the Bertram daughters report Fanny’s many failings, and Mrs. Norris’s response is part of her larger educational system with the girls. Austen writes, “such were the counsels by which Mrs. Norris assisted to form her nieces’ minds” (16). Her efforts are those usually taken by a mother, and her educational scheme is far more effective than Lady Bertram’s, which is essentially non-existent. It is also more deliberately enacted, since Mrs. Norris is always the one to answer the girls. As an educating mother, Mrs. Norris again has a place, and she has the power to form two young minds with her value system.

Mrs. Norris’s mothering attentions are also often asserted in her role as a matchmaker. In this role, Mrs. Norris employs all of her energy, feels useful, and believes she is “impregnable” (148) and powerful. Austen includes only a short passage about the lead-up to Maria and Mr. Rushworth’s marriage. Significantly, within this section, Mrs. Norris is the most active party:

Mrs. Norris was most zealous in promoting the match, by every suggestion and contrivance, likely to enhance its desirableness to either party; and, among other means, by seeking an intimacy with the gentleman’s mother, who at present lived with him, and to whom she even forced Lady Bertram to go through ten miles of indifferent road, to pay a morning visit. […] Mrs. Rushworth acknowledged herself very desirous that her son should marry, and declared that of all the young ladies she had ever seen, Miss Bertram seemed, by her amiable qualities and
accomplishments, the best adapted to make him happy. Mrs. Norris accepted the compliment, and admired the nice discernment of character which could so well distinguish merit. Maria was indeed the pride and delight of them all […]; but yet as far as Mrs. Norris could allow herself to decide on so short an acquaintance, Mr. Rushworth appeared precisely the young man to deserve to attach her. (31)

Mrs. Norris’s energies are thoroughly useful in this particular role. By working as a matchmaker, she needs to suggest and contrive, force and compliment. Notably, the maternal aspect of this matchmaking role extends beyond contriving the marriage itself: Mrs. Norris actually acts the part of Maria’s mother when she accepts compliments for Maria. She speaks for Lady Bertram in asserting who deserved to attach Lady Bertram’s daughter, and has a motherly pride in a child who is not her own.

Mrs. Norris believes that her maternal roles give her power that will last. When faced with Sir Thomas’s displeasure about the acting scheme, Mrs. Norris diverts the conversation and ultimately asserts her value based on her power to guide and mother Sir Thomas’s children:

Her chief strength lay in Sotherton. Her greatest support and glory was in having formed the connection with the Rushworths. There she was impregnable. She took to herself all the credit of bring Mr. Rushworth’s admiration of Maria to any effect. (148)

Importantly, Mrs. Norris fancies herself “impregnable” because of her role as a matchmaker-mother. The role of mother is an unassailable one, and it prevents Sir Thomas from judging her actions too harshly. Indeed, being a mother figure really is a place of power for Mrs. Norris because her talk of Sotherton and her assertions of her value through her role as mothering matchmaker divert the conversation from her misguided encouragement of the theater scheme.
Yet as an educator and as a matchmaker, Mrs. Norris is more harmful than helpful. Earlier I quoted a passage about Mrs. Norris “assisting to form her nieces’ minds.” In full it reads:

Such were the counsels by which Mrs. Norris assisted to form her nieces’ minds, and it is not very wonderful that with all their promising talents and early information, they should be entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity, and humility. In every thing but disposition, they were admirably taught. (16)

Austen’s sarcasm in this passage highlights the depth of her disapproval. Mrs. Norris’ methods for educating her nieces are harmful and lead eventually to the girls’ scandals. Austen highlights this at the end of the novel when Sir Thomas finds that her “excessive indulgence and flattery” led to Maria’s “unfavorable character” (363). Mrs. Norris is especially harmful because, even while she mis-educates her nieces, Austen shows that she does not have any ability to guide them correctly. Brodie suggests that Austen “stresses the widow’s frequent incapacity for serving as a moral guide” (Brodie 708). Though the quote is addressed toward Mrs. Rushworth, it is equally true for Mrs. Norris.

When trying to put a stop to the theatrical production, Edmund says that his aunt “has no influence with either Tom or my sisters that could be of any use” (101). Her role is usurping and harmful, and it does not make her “of any use.” Her matchmaking role is similarly harmful. By arranging a marriage without any love and ignoring the signs that her niece is in love with another, Mrs. Norris promotes a match that leads to the ruin of her favorite niece and the loss of any vestige of power Mrs. Norris once had. The arrangement of the Bertram-Rushworth marriage, which first seemed to make Mrs. Norris “impregnable,” is what ultimately destroys her power.
In addition to calling on male authority and the authority of a mother, Mrs. Norris acts as the manager of Mansfield Park in Sir Thomas’s absence. This is one of Mrs. Norris’s most noted roles since it relates to the debate about *Mansfield Park* and abolition. According to Joseph M. Duffy, Jr., “the presiding figures at the Park are its nominal head, Sir Thomas Bertram, his wife, and his sister-in-law Mrs. Norris” (Duffy 74-5). The reference to Sir Thomas as the “nominal head” is particularly apt since Mrs. Norris takes over in the name of Sir Thomas throughout the first volume of the book. In the post-colonial perspective of the work, the nominal head and Mrs. Norris are even parallel: Mrs. Norris is a slave master equivalent to Sir Thomas, running the Park as he runs the Antigua estates. In this instance, the slaves involved would be the domestic staff and Fanny, who is worked beyond her means (Karounos 729-30). As manager, Mrs. Norris cuts corners, prevents waste, and chastises the servants. For example, Mrs. Norris handles Sir Thomas’s servants as if they were her own:

*I am* of some use I hope in preventing waste and making the most of things. […] I had been looking about me in the poultry yard, and was just coming out, when who should I see but Dick Jackson making up to the servants’ hall door with two bits of deal board in his hand, bringing them to father, you may be sure; […] I knew what it all meant, for the servants’ dinner bell was ringing at the very moment over our heads, and as I hate such encroaching people, […] I said to the boy directly […] *I’ll* take the boards to your father, Dick; so get you home again as fast as you can. —The boy looked very silly and turned away without offering a word, for I believe I might speak pretty sharp; and I dare say it will cure him of coming marauding about the house for one while, —I hate such greediness—so good as your father is to the family, employing the man all the year round! (111-2)

Mrs. Norris tells the story of a young boy coming to get a meal with his father in the servant’s quarters, which Mrs. Norris takes the liberty to prevent. In her mind, this is a prevention of waste—she sees “greedy” “marauding” servants and protects the family
finances by preventing the servants from getting away with securing extra food for their families. Mrs. Norris runs the servant quarters as if they were her own to command. And, indeed, with Sir Thomas absent, the servants are under her command. The boy “turned away without offering a word” as if Mrs. Norris were the master whose sharp words mattered. Importantly, Mrs. Norris sees her domestic economic measures as creating a role for her and making her “of use.”

By protecting the family finances and running the servants quarters, Mrs. Norris has a role. Mrs. Norris does her best to maintain that role as master of the house even after Sir Thomas’s return.

Still Mrs. Norris was at intervals urging something, and in the most interesting moment of his passage to England, when the alarm of a French privateer was at the height, she burst through his recital with the proposal of soup. ‘Sure, my dear Sir Thomas, a basin of soup would be a much better thing for you than tea. Do have a basin of soup.’ Sir Thomas could not be provoked. ‘Still the same anxiety for every body’s comfort, my dear Mrs. Norris,’ was his answer. ‘But indeed I would rather have nothing but tea.’ ‘Well then, Lady Bertram, suppose you speak for tea directly, suppose you hurry Baddeley a little, he seems behind hand to-night.’ She carried this point, and Sir Thomas’s narrative proceeded. (141)

Sir Thomas is the natural master of the house, the one who could call for his own soup, or hurry the servants for tea, or direct his own wife to hurry the servants for tea. But Mrs. Norris has a powerful need to fulfill the role of hostess to Sir Thomas. She is determined to show her knowledge of and mastery of the servants and of Sir Thomas’s wife. Her management of this affair leads to her “carr[ying] this point,” and she succeeds in running Sir Thomas’s return.

Mrs. Norris’s role as the manager of Sir Thomas’s estate is more harmful than helpful. In the above section, Mrs. Norris’s attempts to play hostess are more annoying than they are helpful since she interrupts the real host’s stories to assert her own power
over the servants. Furthermore, even Mrs. Norris’s most useful trait—her sense of economy—is wasteful and usurping. Mrs. Norris’s savings apply to things like a roll of green baize used for a curtain for the theater scheme, which, when the theater scheme ends, she then takes home with her (153). In this and many other cases, Mrs. Norris’s management is misapplied—the theatrical production should not have occurred and thus the cloth could have been spared entirely—but worse than that, her management is often actually theft. She may save money here and there, but ultimately always on wasteful items that ultimately benefit no one but herself. The energy is even more misapplied when considering the fact that Mrs. Norris’s energy is turned to roles that should not be her own. Rather than using her energy on her own household or on her relationship with a fellow dependent woman, Mrs. Norris attempts to grasp other people’s jobs.

When she usurps these three roles, Mrs. Norris fulfills the negative stereotypes associated with eighteenth-century widows. Karen Bloom Gevirtz laid out the common stereotypes for affluent widows in the eighteenth century. She writes that these literary characters were “selfish, unmaternal, manipulative, exploitive, enterprising, and more interested in money than in emotions” (Gevirtz 137). Mrs. Norris’s activity is selfish, manipulative, and exploitive because her claims to want to be “of use” convince others to act in ways that only enrich her. For example, as the theater scheme unfolds:

As the whole arrangement was to bring very little expense to anybody, and none at all to herself, as she foresaw in it all the comforts of hurry, bustle, and importance, and derived the immediate advantage of fancying herself obliged to leave her own house, where she had been living a month at her own cost, and take up her abode in theirs, that every hour might be spent in their service, she was, in fact, exceedingly delighted with the project. (102)
Mrs. Norris claims a desire to spend her time in service, but the reality is that the theater scheme is economical for her—she no longer has to pay even to live in her own house—and socially advantageous. Her desire for importance highlights her willingness to trade her nieces’ social good for her own economic advantage. Furthermore, she values those she does love, like Maria, for their commodity value. Austen shows that Maria has little real interest in Mr. Rushworth beyond his lands and property, and that Mrs. Norris feels the same way. When the marriage occurs, Mrs. Norris values the match as something for her own gain rather than as something to help Maria. At a time when culture “emphasiz[ed] self-sacrificing maternal love” (Perry 366), these purely monetary considerations make her extremely unmaternal and show her making choices from a love of money rather than a love of her nieces.

Unlike Mrs. Norris, Fanny accepts her place in the Mansfield Park society and becomes a valued member of the family. Mrs. Norris correctly perceives Fanny’s utility as a threat to Mrs. Norris’s place in the household. As Fanny moves to the center of the novel and the family, Mrs. Norris is diminished. By the end of the novel, Fanny is rewarded for her correct behavior, and Mrs. Norris is punished. Her punishment is a worse version of the role she once refused.

In sharp contrast to Mrs. Norris, Fanny assumes the roles set out for her by society. Fanny’s main role is as companion for her aunt Bertram. As Cohen points out, “Fanny immediately establishes a place in the Bertram family. […] It soon follows that she becomes a means by which the Bertram girls can measure their accomplishments, Mrs. Norris can express her ingenuity, Lady Bertram can refine her lethargy and
dependence” (Cohen 678). Most importantly, Fanny ends up accepting the place that many single women held in society: acting as a personal servant for an older, wealthy relative. Fanny consistently puts the good of Lady Bertram above her own, including cutting roses until she’s fatigued and has a headache so her aunt can loll in the shade. She also accepts that she will stay at home to keep her aunt company while the rest of the family goes into society. When arranging the Sotherton scheme, Mrs. Norris blithely says that Lady Bertram “will have a companion in Fanny Price you know, so it will all do very well” (60). Everyone assumes that Fanny will stay behind while the others enjoy pleasure and company. Notably, Fanny never once protests this. In fact, Fanny does not speak in the entire scene. She does not question that her role is to stay behind, to help her aunt, or to be the good single companion. Edmund eventually decides to change Fanny’s role and take her out to Sotherton, but even then, Fanny does not further this scheme. When told of the new plan “Fanny’s gratitude […] was in fact much greater than her pleasure […] that he should forego any enjoyment on her account gave her pain” (63). Fanny wholeheartedly accepts that her place is with Lady Bertram and that any change in that place for a day trip is a gift for which she should be grateful. She is so grateful, in fact, that it ruins her ability to enjoy the gift at all.

Austen is careful to show that Fanny is willing to accept any place the family wishes her to enter. For example, she agrees to live in the spinster cluster before Mrs. Norris rejects her. Like Mrs. Norris, Fanny does not love the plan, but she is a good single woman, and she never questions the plan’s eligibility. She says to Edmund: “something is going to happen which I do not like at all; and though you have often persuaded me into being reconciled to things that I disliked at first, you will not be able to
do it now. I am going to live entirely with my aunt Norris’” (20). Importantly, even though Fanny feels she will never be “reconciled” to this change in her life, she does not refuse the change. She says that “something is going to happen” and assumes that, because it has been stated by her Aunt Bertram and wished by her uncle, it will all go according to their plan. Furthermore, despite her protestations, she gives Edmund the chance to persuade about the advantages of the plan.

Because Fanny accepts her place, she becomes a necessary member of the Bertram family. Mrs. Norris is among the first to acknowledge this, albeit involuntarily. Mrs. Norris asserts that Lady Bertram “will have a companion in Fanny Price you know, so it will all do very well” (60). Because of Lady Bertram’s indolence, someone must always stay behind to help her with her work and talk with her. Fanny serves as this companion, and as a result, plans can advance “very well” without having to consider who will stay behind with Lady Bertram. Her role frees everyone else up for pleasure and schemes.

But her role isn’t merely a convenience. As the book advances, Fanny is the one whom the family, and Lady Bertram in particular, cannot do without. When Mrs. Norris tries to persuade her sister that she won’t miss Fanny when she goes to Portsmouth, Lady Bertram has a rare moment of defiance in asserting “I am sure I shall miss her very much” (291). The conclusion of the novel also highlights Fanny’s necessity. Here, Austen presents Fanny as “the daughter that [Sir Thomas] wanted” (371). Fanny is the companion who helps run the household in her youth and then becomes the ideal wife for Sir Thomas’s lonely son. But just as importantly, at the end of the novel, when Fanny advances to the position of daughter, another Price child comes up behind Fanny to fill
Fanny’s former role. This family must always have a dependent single woman willing to act as a lady’s maid in order for the household to run effectively. Fanny is necessary as herself by the end of the novel because she is needed to replace the daughters, and, long before that, she is necessary as a dependent single woman who accepts her role and submits to the will of the others.

Mrs. Norris perceives Fanny’s necessity as a threat. Mrs. Norris repeatedly asserts that the family can do without Fanny. When Fanny is asked to dinner, Mrs. Norris goes out of her way to insist that this has nothing to do with Fanny herself:

‘You ought to be very much obliged to Mrs. Grant for thinking of you, and to your aunt for letting you go, and you ought to look upon it as something extraordinary: for I hope you are aware that there is no real occasion for your going into company in this sort of way, or even dining out at all; and it is what you must not depend upon ever being repeated. Nor must you be fancying that the invitation is meant as any particular compliment to you; the compliment is intended to your uncle and aunt, and me. Mrs. Grant this it a civility due to us to take a little notice of you, or else it would never come into her head, and you may be very certain, that if your cousin Julia had been at home, you would not have been asked at all.’ (172)

In this way, Mrs. Norris insists upon the fact that any good intended for Fanny must really be a compliment to others, including herself. Her vehemence on this point is actually rather strange, but for Mrs. Norris, Fanny’s company must be unnecessary. Furthermore, Mrs. Norris attempts to prove that Fanny isn’t needed at home either. She says, “Oh! depend upon it, your aunt can do very well without you” (172). Interestingly, this is a point Mrs. Norris frequently harps upon. When Fanny is being sent to Portsmouth, Lady Bertram insists she will miss Fanny, and Austen writes:

And as to the not missing her, which under Mrs. Norris's discussion was the point attempted to be proved, she set herself very steadily against admitting any such thing. […] Mrs. Norris wanted to persuade her that Fanny could be very well
spared—*she* being ready to give up all her own time to her as requested—and, in short, could not really be wanted or missed. (291)

Again, Mrs. Norris is unreasonably insistent that Fanny is not necessary. She must prove that Fanny would not be missed, and she argues for Fanny being “spared.” This insistence is rather strange. Mrs. Norris generally ranks Fanny very low in the family structure, and she truly believes her to be inferior. As a result, it is odd that Mrs. Norris spends so much time arguing about Fanny at all: if Fanny is so lowly, what does it matter that she is needed to do trivial work? But Mrs. Norris needs for her niece to be “not really […] wanted or missed.” The only explanation is that Mrs. Norris somehow perceives the need for Fanny as a threat to herself or to the ones she loves. She seems to think that Fanny’s necessity invalidates her own.

Mrs. Norris’s feelings that Fanny is a threat are legitimate. Austen suggests that this particular society does not need Mrs. Norris when they have Fanny. Throughout the novel, the two characters seem to be exchangeable. When Lady Bertram is attempting to figure out if she can do without Fanny so Fanny can go to dinner at the Grants, she asks “But can I do without her, Sir Thomas?” and says that she needs Fanny to make the tea. Sir Thomas’s reply is that: “‘Your sister perhaps may be prevailed on to spend the day with us, and I shall certainly be at home.’ ‘Very well, then, Fanny may go, Edmund’” (171). The two single women are exchangeable: if Fanny is there, Mrs. Norris need not be; if Fanny is absent, Mrs. Norris is necessary. Importantly, it is Fanny’s absence that leads to the requirement of Mrs. Norris: Mrs. Norris really is not important when Fanny is around to fill the place Mrs. Norris desires.
Over the course of the novel, Austen uses narrative devices to demonstrate that Fanny’s voice increases in importance and forces out Mrs. Norris’s. This is due, in part, to the fact that Fanny is the heroine of the novel. At the beginning, many scenes take place without Fanny present, and Mrs. Norris dominates. Mrs. Norris speaks for the other characters, goes un-contradicted, makes plans, and arranges the plan to bring Fanny to Mansfield and the theatricals. She also dominates the actual narration, since her words often stand in for entire conversations and since her name and actions begin many of the paragraphs and sentences. But as Fanny grows up, she becomes the center of the book, and this changes. Starting with Volume Two, the narration moves with Fanny. The story stays with her even as she goes to Portsmouth while the family drama unfolds in London and at the park. Mrs. Norris’s name appears far less often in each chapter as the book advances, showing how the narration moves away from her.

Fanny’s control of the narration also comes at the expense of Mrs. Norris as Austen begins to refer to her only in relation to Fanny. This is shown most clearly by the transition in Mrs. Norris’s name. In volume one, Mrs. Norris is always called “Mrs. Norris.” But as the narrative moves into Fanny’s perspective, Austen begins to call her “aunt Norris” instead (160; 225; 365). Her very identity moves from being her own to being contingent on her relationship with the heroine. Fanny’s advancement in the narration parallels her advancement into the family. Furthermore, with every step Fanny takes into the family, Mrs. Norris becomes less useful and necessary.

At the beginning, Mrs. Norris dominates and Fanny truly is the lowest and the last. In Volume One, Fanny is meek and quiet: no one but Edmund knows she cries by herself and misses her immediate family, and her education and intelligence is mocked.
Sir Thomas especially emphasizes that her place is not within the family when he worries that she will marry her male cousins and asks Mrs. Norris to help him show Fanny that while she is raised with his daughters, she is not a “Miss Bertram” (9). The passage highlights that Fanny begins with an outsider status, and, because she is expressly forbidden from marrying in, that Fanny is meant to stay as an outsider. In this period of the two characters’ lives, Fanny’s outsider status means that she is not so useful as to make Mrs. Norris unnecessary. This is clearest in the scene with the rose cutting. In this passage, Fanny is needed first to cut roses for her aunt, and then to walk to and from her aunt’s house running errands. When defending her choice to use Fanny as a servant, Mrs. Norris says:

‘I cannot be in two places at once; and I was talking to Mr. Green at the very time about your mother’s dairymaid, by her desire, and had promised John Groom to write to Mrs. Jeffries about his son, and the poor fellow was waiting for me half an hour. I think nobody can justly accuse me of sparing myself upon any occasion, but really I cannot do everything at once.’ (59)

While Fanny is so lowly as to be classed beneath Mrs. Norris and forced to take her orders, both women have a role and both are necessary. Mrs. Norris has tasks, and so does Fanny.

Starting with volume two, however, Fanny becomes a member of the family. Sir Thomas is the first to make this change. Upon his return he searches her out as if she were one of his own children: “‘But where is Fanny? —Why do not I see my little Fanny?’ and on perceiving her, calling her his dear Fanny, kissing her affectionately, and observing with decided pleasure how much she was grown!’” (139). The action is extremely fatherly, and Austen describes his manner as “lost in tenderness” (139). Sir Thomas treats Fanny as an extension of his children despite having always insisted that
she be differentiated from the “Miss Bertrams.” Upon the removal of the Miss Bertrams following Maria’s marriage, Sir Thomas more overtly asserts Fanny’s place as a member of the family. As Fanny prepares to go to dinner with the Grants, Mrs. Norris informs her she should not expect to have the carriage called for her. Fanny accepts this, and both women assume that Fanny is an outsider not to be treated with special privileges. But Sir Thomas contradicts this when he asks:

‘Fanny, at what time would you have the carriage come round?’ [Fanny] felt a degree of astonishment which made it impossible for her to speak. ‘My dear Sir Thomas!’ cried Mrs. Norris, red with anger, ‘Fanny can walk.’ ‘Walk!’ repeated Sir Thomas, in a tone of most unanswerable dignity, and coming farther into the room. ‘My niece walk to a dinner engagement at this time of the year! Will twenty minutes after four suit you?’ (173)

Sir Thomas emphasizes Fanny’s belonging by calling her “my niece” and asserting that a slight to Fanny would be an indignity to the family. Despite Mrs. Norris’s protestations afterward that the carriage is for Edmund, not Fanny, there is no denying that this gesture is intended to include Fanny in the family arrangements, and even Fanny, despite her meekness, acknowledges that (173-4). Importantly, Fanny’s rise here comes at Mrs. Norris’s expense. Mrs. Norris asserts her power over Fanny—declaring that Fanny may not have the carriage—and is overruled.

Fanny again rises and Mrs. Norris sinks when Sir Thomas arranges the ball. When the plan is proposed, Mrs. Norris declares its ineligibility on the grounds of Fanny’s unworthiness. She says:

‘If dear Julia were at home, or dearest Mrs. Rushworth at Sotherton, to afford a reason, an occasion for such a thing, you would be tempted to give the young people a dance at Mansfield. I know you would. If they were at home to grace the ball, a ball you would have this very Christmas. Thank your uncle, William, thank your uncle!’ ‘My daughters,’ replied Sir Thomas, gravely interposing, ‘have their pleasures at Brighton, and I hope are very happy; but the dance which I think of’
giving at Mansfield will be for their cousins. Could we be all assembled, our satisfaction would undoubtedly be more complete, but the absence of some is not to debar the others of amusement.’ (197-8)

The ball is the occasion where Fanny is placed on the marriage market as Sir Thomas’s charge. Mrs. Norris’s insistence that a ball should only be called for Sir Thomas’s daughters is based in the assumption that Fanny’s place has continued to be ineligible for marriage and outside of the family. But when Sir Thomas’s chooses to put Fanny on the marriage market, he asserts his own claim and pride in her. Furthermore, by holding a ball in her honor, he is valuing Fanny similarly to his daughters. Fanny has been embraced as a member of the family rather than an outsider. But this privilege comes at the denigration of Mrs. Norris. For one thing, Sir Thomas explicitly contradicts her and asserts his will over hers. But equally important, this is an instance where Mrs. Norris is not allowed to talk for others. When she interrupts Sir Thomas to assert that she “knew what you were going to say” about the ball, Sir Thomas “gravely interposes” to contradict her (197). As plans are made for Fanny’s betterment, Mrs. Norris is forced to cease speaking for other characters, and her power decreases.

At the end of the novel, Fanny is included in and Mrs. Norris excluded from Mansfield Park. In the final chapter, Fanny crosses the final boundary and enters the family as “Mrs. Bertram,” the necessary daughter. Austen writes that: “Fanny was indeed the daughter that [Sir Thomas] wanted” (371). Upon her marriage to Edmund, Fanny becomes a part of the core of the Bertram family. But her entry to the family is more than marital. She has become not a daughter-in-law, but a daughter, a full member of the household. Importantly she now carries the name of “Bertram,” decreasing her divide from the previous “Miss Bertrams.” Meanwhile, Sir Thomas begins to devalue Mrs.
Mrs. Norris just when he begins to value Fanny the most. While coming to think of Fanny as a marriageable woman, he begins “to deprecate [Mrs. Norris’s] mistaken but well-meaning zeal. Sir Thomas, indeed, was, by this time, not very far from classing Mrs. Norris as one of those well-meaning people who are always doing mistaken and very disagreeable things” (259). Her decreasing valuation continues until she is removed from the park. Importantly, Mrs. Norris’s exile comes at the very moment that Fanny is most embraced by the family and made into the daughter Sir Thomas always wanted.

Mrs. Norris's removal from Mansfield was the great supplementary comfort of Sir Thomas's life. His opinion of her had been sinking from the day of his return from Antigua: in every transaction together from that period, in their daily intercourse, in business, or in chat, she had been regularly losing ground in his esteem, and convincing him that either time had done her much disservice, or that he had considerably over-rated her sense, and wonderfully borne with her manners before. He had felt her as an hourly evil […] To be relieved from her, therefore, was so great a felicity […]. She was regretted by no one at Mansfield. (365-6)

At this point in the novel, Mrs. Norris has lost all the power and value she ever had. There is nothing left for her but exile. Now that Fanny and Fanny’s moral system are considered worthy, Mrs. Norris has lost the patriarch’s esteem, is said to have no sense, and is considered an “evil.”

When she is exiled, Mrs. Norris is forced into the role that she refused to accept at the beginning. Now that she must live in a distant land with Maria, Mrs. Norris faces poetic justice. She is now a widowed woman living an independent, separate life with a fellow superfluous woman, which is identical to the situation she earlier adamantly refused to enter. Mrs. Norris’s decision to “quit Mansfield and devote herself to her unfortunate Maria” (365) means that Mrs. Norris is finally accepting her societally condoned place as a widow. This, finally, is the change that did not occur upon Mrs.
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Norris’s widowhood. Austen writes that upon Maria’s elopement “[Mrs. Norris] was an altered creature, quieted, stupefied, indifferent to everything that passed. The being left with her sister and nephew, and all the house under her care, had been an advantage entirely thrown away; she had been unable to direct or dictate, or even fancy herself useful” (351-2). Mrs. Norris, essentially, finally goes into mourning. Unlike after her widowhood when things continued “as usual,” Mrs. Norris is “altered.” She does not continue to search out new roles for herself; she does not attempt to take the roles of others. She becomes a quiet, demure single woman. Furthermore, she now abandons the bad widow stereotypes. Mrs. Norris is said to “devote” herself to Maria.

Because Mrs. Norris has to be forced into acting like a widowed woman, her place is now a punishment, which it need not have been. Austen states explicitly that Maria and Mrs. Norris’s “tempers become their mutual punishment” (365). Their lives together will be quite miserable. Had Mrs. Norris chosen to take Fanny upon her widowhood, Fanny would not have been a hard charge. She would be sweet and helpful and would give Mrs. Norris plenty to manage and do. But Maria is no Fanny, and her headstrong nature will make Mrs. Norris’s new life hellish. Critics suggest, though, that the most hellish part for these women is not each other but the actual exile. Because she waited until forced to take her place in society, Mrs. Norris now must leave the park entirely to fill her new role. In Julia Prewitt Brown’s accounting of this change, this exile is “damnation” in contrast to Mansfield Park’s “newly discovered bliss” (Brown 96). Mrs. Norris’s earlier marginalization, as I argued, was her own choice, and this hellish total exile is an extension of that choice: had she agreed to take Fanny, she would have been closer to the park, had a role to fill, and would not have ruined Maria. Furthermore,
she would not now be asked to leave the country with a different unfortunate woman to fulfill her widow’s role.

This focus on the widow’s place is not evident in Austen’s other works. Austen does not speak through Lady Catherine de Bourgh of *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Thorpe of *Northanger Abbey*, or even the title widow of *Lady Susan* to comment on a specifically described social role.

In this regard, *Mansfield Park* is a unique novel. The book’s consideration of widows’ sanctioned roles also alludes to the larger difference in the themes and meaning of this text compared to those of the others. *Mansfield Park* stands alone in Austen’s canon for its examination of a whole social world rather than individual marriage plots. Through the lens of her study of widows, we can see that the focus of this novel is on the interlocking social structures of eighteenth-century society. Here, Austen proves willing to examine the balance or imbalance created as individuals accept or refuse their societally sanctioned places. More than that, she strives to make the Bertrams of *Mansfield Park* representatives of the larger culture of eighteenth-century England—a culture in which every character must accept a proper role or face removal. Only when the widow has entered her place, and all others theirs, can the balance and stability of the family, and therefore England, be maintained.
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