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Austen Canon Project: Introduction

For this project, I chose to write a brief continuation of *Mansfield Park* from the perspective of Maria Bertram. The canonical information about Maria and Mrs. Norris’s fate which I used as the basis of this piece comes from pages 314-316 of *Mansfield Park*. No plot points from the novel have been altered, although I have perhaps taken liberties with what Austen intended for Maria. Although at the novel’s close Maria has been sent away to live out her days with her Aunt Norris in a kind of purgatory for both women, I was struck by the great deal of potential inherent in the ending of Maria’s narrative. Just twenty-one, with no expected future of childbearing, Maria could potentially live for several decades, isolated and without any hope for a “second spring of hope or character” (315). Almost anything could happen to her in that time, despite the relatively bleak picture Austen paints, and for that reason I was interested in exploring what might have happened to Maria within a few years from the close of the novel.

The primary characters in this piece are, of course, Maria and Mrs. Norris. The third-person perspective is closely tied to Maria; her intimate understanding of her aunt’s behavior makes up for the lack of shifting perspective which can be found in Austen’s novels. I chose to add two characters: Abigail, a housemaid, and Jemima, a child. These individuals make up Maria and Mrs. Norris’s “little society” (315). I did not attempt to exactly mimic Austen’s style, but I did aim for a strong similarity. It was not my intention in writing this to redeem Maria, but I hope that I have successfully represented this complex character.

No Second Spring

The middle of every month meant that they could expect a letter. The exact day of receipt always varied, sometimes a week earlier, a week later; Lady Bertram never failed to mention that her nerves were greatly taxed in writing to her sister, but she never failed to write. Similarly consistent, Aunt Norris never failed to alert Maria to the receipt of the monthly letter, whenever it happened to arrive.

“Maria, dear,” said Aunt Norris, through the bedroom door. “A letter has arrived from your mother.”

There was a long pause which suggested that she was waiting for a response; when Maria did not give one, she continued. “I will read it to you in the breakfast-room; I will be there as soon as I see to it that Abigail has not burned the buns. She always burns them.”

No footsteps moved across the creaky floorboards, so Maria answered, “Yes, Aunt. I’ll be in the breakfast-room shortly.”

They had only one dining-room, of course, and had only had one for years, but in the mornings, it was the breakfast-room. Finally, Aunt Norris’s footsteps signaled her departure. Even the floorboards sighed in relief.

Maria had never stopped her task, but she returned her focus to it anew, pulling the brush through the child’s hair with a soft tug. “Ow,” said the girl. “Ow.”

“Sorry,” Maria hummed, and the child quieted. She had thick, dark hair, quite long for only three years old—or at least, Maria thought so, but she had never been interested in the length of a child’s hair before. It was long enough that Aunt Norris’s hand had itched towards the scissors more than once, but Jemima ran every time.

Maria set the brush aside. Jemima tensed in anticipation at the familiar clatter of the brush on the wooden dresser-top but remained in place long enough for Maria to smooth down her dress. The yellow cotton was worn from the vigorous washing which a child’s frock required; Maria had witnessed enough wash days in progress now to know how hard Abigail would scrub the thin fabric. All of Jemima’s dresses needed replacing, but Maria had not had the will or the patience for the dressmaker lately.

There was no more putting off the breakfast-room; Jemima would not wait, anyway. The sooner they had gotten it over with, the sooner she could go about her day. The child led the way out of the bedroom and down the stairs, each step slow and thoughtful, and Maria had no choice but to follow behind. Aunt Norris was still in the kitchen. Maria could hear her voice, scolding, through the door at the end of the short hallway at the foot of the stairs.

The bread was already out on the small table, and not badly singed, so Maria could only assume that Aunt Norris was chiding Abigail about something else. The letter, of course, had not been left out on the table. Aunt Norris had learned the hard way that Maria would open them and read them herself if given the opportunity. This would not do for Aunt; she always preferred to relate the sparse information within the letters herself, withholding whatever she liked.

By the time Aunt Norris entered the room, Maria had already finished pulling apart Jemima’s bun and dabbing butter on the pieces and was buttering her own. “Ah, there you are, my dear,” Aunt Norris said. “I hope the bread is not too burnt. I told the girl—”

“It is exactly to my taste,” Maria said, without looking up from the butter knife. Once she would have been bound not to directly interrupt her aunt, at least not if it could be helped, but there was no point in letting her begin listing Abigail’s faults once again. They would be here until the girl came in with dinner.

“Very well,” said Aunt Norris. Maria could picture her stymied frown well enough without needing to look. Aunt Norris moved from the doorway to her usual spot in the single chair directly across from Maria. Aunt Norris did not speak to Jemima, although she sometimes did at breakfast; perhaps she could tell Maria was not in the mood to facilitate their limited conversation.

Jemima, a remarkably measured child, continued to eat, only making soft, childlike noises to herself. She looked very much like her father, but she had very little of his animation.

“Your dear mother has written us today,” Aunt Norris said, as if Maria did not already know this. The sound of paper rustling finally induced Maria to look up. Aunt Norris placed her spectacles on her nose, then fixed beady eyes on the paper.

“The letter is rather shorter than usual,” said Aunt Norris, “but it is sooner come than my sister’s letters generally are. She writes that her nerves have been very fraught lately, with Fanny’s confinement approaching, as well as pug’s.”

To this, Maria had nothing to say. It had not entered her mind very often over the past few months, but it was always strange to think of Fanny in such a way. A child for Fanny and Edmund, undoubtedly to be the first grandchild in the hearts of her mother and father, though the third in actuality; one day, perhaps, there would be a whole litter of Bertram grandchildren at Mansfield, with even more if Julia and Mr. Yates ever returned there. Maria knew of Julia’s son only through passing reference, but he was just a year younger than Jemima. They would never play together, of course, despite the similarity of age.

“My sister is quite lonely, with Fanny, she says, hardly able to walk—Edmund would do well to visit in her place, if Fanny must rest,” Aunt Norris said. The curl of her lip suggested she thought Fanny’s impending confinement a poor excuse for anything, but especially for putting her sister’s health and happiness in jeopardy.

Jemima reached for her cup, and Maria quickly picked it up for her and moved it to her mouth. In the meantime, Aunt Norris continued, “Julia and Mr. Yates are not expected to visit until Christmas; if you remember, dear Maria, this past Christmas they were forced to quit Mansfield early due to unexpected business … What business Mr. Yates can have at Christmastime, I know not, but I do not suppose the same can be expected this year.”

Maria still had no response to offer. Julia and Mr. Yates’s exploits, gadding this way and that way about and only showing themselves at Mansfield when they felt it necessary, were so routine as to no longer be of interest. Once, Maria had devoured any news—even this secondhand news, written in the style of their mother’s elegant but languid speech—of her sister’s trips: to Bath, to London, to visit these friends and those. The knowledge held no charm now because it had been years since she had experienced such diversions herself; she had not left this cottage, except to venture into the small village a mile away, in almost four years. She could no longer picture herself in Julia’s place, in Bath, in London, or with friends.

No news of Tom was forthcoming, but that was to be expected; after his illness, he had become far less interesting. Until he married, Maria supposed—if he married—he would continue to exist as he currently did, at their father’s right hand. Her mother made no more mention of their society, limited as it likely was, or at least none that Aunt Norris deemed worthy of Maria’s interest. Indeed, there was nobody for her mother to speak of whom Maria was likely to care about. She had had no news—no news at all—about anyone outside of her family as long as she had lived here and could reasonably expect no difference.

“You are very quiet this morning, my dear,” Aunt Norris said, looking over her spectacles at Maria. Her raised eyebrows and wide eyes were meant to be kind, but instead made her look rather desperate. “Are you feeling well? Is breakfast not satisfactory?”

She lowered the letter as if to put it away, and Maria knew she was only an instant from rising, ready to hurry back to the kitchen to urge Abigail to bring more food, jam, tea, whatever it was that Aunt Norris thought could put Maria in good spirits with her. There was nothing for it; Maria felt as though she had woken up this morning quite determined to be in a low mood, and Aunt Norris certainly could not stop her.

“I’m quite well,” Maria said, as Jemima reached up to tug on her sleeve.

“Outside, Mamma,” Jemima said, twisting the spare fabric in her small hand. They were both going to be cross this morning, then.

Maria took up her napkin and used it to wipe Jemima’s sticky hands, then her mouth. “In a moment,” she said. “Is there no mention of my father, Aunt?”

There was a little pause before the paper rustled again, though Aunt Norris could not have been taken completely by surprise by the question. Either Aunt Norris told, or Maria asked, every single month. “Your mother says Sir Thomas is well,” Aunt Norris said. “She closes by sending her love to us all, and wishing that I would write back quickly, as she has no other society at present.”

In the early days of their life here, before Jemima was born, Maria always asked, “Is there no line from my father?” She had expected, someday, that he would have something to say to them, although she could not imagine what it might be. No expressions of his love had ever come to them, not even through her mother. He had made it perfectly clear that she was expected to remain here for the rest of her days, with Tom presumably to provide for her after their father was gone, but he had never said that the rest of the family was never to visit, or even to write. Maria had often wondered whether they did not write out of respect for his wishes, or if it was something they all agreed upon—in a way they had rarely ever agreed before—but it did not seem to matter now. Nothing much at Mansfield seemed to matter to her now, yet still she waited for a letter every month.

“Outside,” Jemima said again, pulling away from Maria’s grip.

“All right, my love,” Maria said. Maria sat her napkin down, covering her uneaten breakfast, and rose. Aunt Norris sputtered, although she had not yet had a moment to touch her food, either. Maria led Jemima to the door quickly, lest Aunt Norris have time to rise and join them. “We’ll take our walk now, Aunt. Do not trouble yourself.”

Maria and Jemima entered the narrow hallway that ran the short distance through the cottage, then just as quickly left the house through the front door. It was a sunny morning; the weather had been good for several days now. The child smiled up at her mother at their newfound freedom, and Maria smiled back, but felt nothing much at all.

Works Cited

Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*. Edited by Claudia L. Johnson, 1st ed., W.W. Norton, 1998.