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The Unexplained 'charm' of Mrs Norris

To my knowledge, no editor or critic has bothered to comment on or explain Jane Austen's attachment of a 'charm' to Mrs Norris in Chapter 10 of *Mansfield Park.* It occurs when others of the Mansfield party are busy exploring the grounds of Sotherton. Mrs Norris passes 'a morning of complete enjoyment' at the house. From Mrs Whitaker, the housekeeper, she obtains 'the receipt for a famous cream cheese'; from the gardener 'a very curious specimen of heath', a plant he gives her 'in return' for medical advice: 'She had set him right as to his grandson's illness, convinced him it was an ague, and promised him a charm for it …' (104).

Other than illustrating Mrs Norris's character as an inveterate giver of advice, with medical advice to the fore, including her success in 'doctoring' the coachman's rheumatism, this encounter with the gardener does not seem to have any larger bearing on the novel. Nor does Jane Austen feel it necessary to explain the pattern or dynamics of exchange here. This leaves the modern reader at some disadvantage. In the first place, we might wonder what leads the gardener to discuss his grandson's illness with a visitor, a clergyman's widow, how she can be so confident in her diagnosis, and why it is that she offers to provide not advice or medicine but a 'charm' – defined, sceptically, in Johnson's *Dictionary* as 'Words, or philtres, or characters imagined to have some occult or unintelligible power.'[1]

The first of these questions can be answered quite directly. In country districts it was the practice of clergymen's wives to provide minor medical advice to poorer families. In this instance, we can suppose that the Rushworths, the gardener's employers, may have already paid for a visit from the local doctor – this would be an apothecary, such as Mr Perry in *Emma* – and that he had failed to cure the boy. As the illness persisted, the gardener now takes advantage of Mrs Norris's visit to put his grandson's case to her. It was not that Mrs Norris would be expected to have any depth of medical knowledge or training. But she could consult the wide range of medical guides published specifically for family use. They were eminently practical since they placed a heavy reliance on self-medication, either through patent medicines or recommended prescriptions for the druggist to make up. Moreover, not much medical knowledge was needed to recognise ague. It was a widespread malarial fever easily identified for the pattern of its symptoms. It was recurrent with successive 'fits' or 'paroxysms' of fever: hot, with sweating, and cold, with shivering, occurring at regular intervals, with periods of remission. A fever returning daily, in the morning, was known as a quotidian ague; at midday, at intervals of 48 hours, a tertian ague; in the afternoon, at intervals of 72 hours, a quartan ague. Although as many as eleven varieties of ague were differentiated,[2] these were the three broad classifications. The fever was often accompanied by pain in the joints and head, together with nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. As all this information was detailed in medical guides and dictionaries, the sureness of Mrs Norris's diagnosis is quite in order.

The remaining question is her recourse to a 'charm' rather than to a medicine. This is a real and pressing question because, as Jane Austen's readers certainly knew, conventional ague

remedies were widely-used and well-known. One was an arsenic solution. For children, there was a natural preparation derived from a weed parasite (known as a dodder) of thyme mixed with worm seed (a variety of fennel or wort)[3]. Another trusted preparation for children was the South American plant, ipecacuanha, an emetic with purgative properties, used to treat dysentry and induce vomiting.[4] Another favoured remedy from South America was Red Peruvian bark;[5] powdered, it was known as quinquina (a crude form of quinine, the alkaloid extracted in 1820). And even if Jane Austen was short on medical information, she would have been familiar with a simple home-made mixture: two grains of tartar of emetic in an ounce of water, a dessert spoonful to be given every two hours. It was a remedy in the household book of Martha Lloyd, a companion of Jane, Cassandra and Mrs Austen, who lived with the Austen ladies for many years. Her remedies also include a slightly more sophisticated 'Receipt for Ague' which called for salt of tartar, snake root, salt of steel [e.g. iron chloride] and bark.[6]

So it would have been perfectly credible for Mrs Norris to have promised the gardener a home-made medicine out of her own private supply, or a more sophisticated remedy out of her medicine chest – more extensive than a modern first-aid box, these were an essential item for country families, with doctors thin on the ground. This is why, in *Sanditon*, Mr Heywood can offer to treat Mr Parker's 'sprained … foot' (*Minor Works*, 366): 'We are always well stocked, said he, with all the common remedies for Sprains & Bruises' (367). Or why, in *Sense and Sensibility*, when Marianne Dashwood is 'feverish' and 'heavy' with a 'violent' 'cold', 'Prescriptions poured in from all quarters' (306). It might even have occurred to Jane Austen's readers that the offer of a medicine from Mrs Norris was more likely than her promise to supply the gardener with a 'charm'. Or, to put the matter into Johnson's terms, what is a clergyman's widow doing, having truck with 'some occult or unintelligible power', something with which she seems relaxed and familiar, judging from the ease of Jane Austen's delivery – for there is not the least suggestion that Mrs Norris has to pause or hesitate, no suggestion that she has to ponder a choice between a 'charm' and more commonplace alternatives such as a conventional home-brewed dose like Martha Lloyd's, or one of the common folk remedies, such as bark of the white willow (an active ingredient of *salix alba* was salicin, its effect similar to aspirin).

Was it, then, that Mrs Norris came to Sotherton with the reputation of being a 'charmer', as such wise women were known? And is that why the gardener turns to her? And what kind of 'charm' did Mrs Norris have in mind? To take the last question first. Charms came in many forms. Written charms were often hung round the neck. The wording of the charm might be unintelligible, either gibberish, or jumbled varieties of Greek, Latin or Hebrew. The most famous ague charm was 'Abracadabra', carried by Londoners in the Great Plague of 1665. Supposedly, it was made up from the Hebrew words 'Ab' Father, 'Ben' Son, and 'Ruach Acadosch' Holy Spirit, the letters arranged in the shape of an inverted triangle, figuring a funnel draining the sickness away.

ABRACADABRA

ABRACADABR

ABRACADAB

ABRACADA

ABRACAD

ABRACA

ABRAC

ABRA

ABR

AB

A

Another, distinctively Christian, charm for ague is based on the apocryphal story of Jesus shivering when he sees the cross. This is a typical version:

> When our Saviour Jesus Christ Saw the Croos where on he was to be
> Crusified his bodey shaked the Juse said unto him shure you have
> got the Ague Jesus ancered and said wosoever beleveth in me and
> wereth these wordes shall never have the ague nor fever Amen
> Amen Amen +

The instruction was that the charm was 'to be wore in the Bosom of Shurt.'[7]

Plants were also employed as medical charms, the magic residing in mystic formulas mouthed while the plants were being gathered. A more complex system involved astrological influences. The most famous exponent of astrological-herbal charms was the seventeenth-century astrologer Nicholas Culpeper. His *magnum opus*, *The English Physician Enlarged, or the Herbal* (1652), was enormously popular and constantly reprinted, and it was the kind of book that Mrs Norris might well have had on her shelves. A recent edition edited by George Alexander Gordon, *Culpeper's British Herbal and Complete Family Physician : Enlarged, Corrected and Improved,* was published in London in two volumes about 1805. According to Gordon-Culpeper, the plants had to be gathered 'at the critical moment'[8] when the interplay of no less than six astrological forces was to be taken into account,[9] a consideration which also applied to the 'mixing' of the medicine. Thirty-nine herbs are listed as appropriate for the treatment of agues and the reader is instructed to 'take notice under what planet the patient is most afflicted … and so make choice of herbs accordingly'.[10] There is also the astrological dimension to the plant itself. Agrimony (carrying a strong tannin content) 'taken warm before the fit, first removes, and in time rids away the tertian or quartan agues', is a

> herb under Jupiter, and the sign Cancer; and
> strengthens those parts under the planet and sign,
> and removes diseases in them by sympathy,
> and those under Saturn, Mars and Mercury, by
> antipathy, if they happen in any part of the body
> governed by Jupiter, or under the signs Cancer,
> Sagitary or Pisces …[11]

Issues similarly complex are attached to angelica – a 'decoction' drunk before a fit in order to induce sweating:

> an herb of the Sun in Leo; let it be gathered
> when he is there, the Moon applying to his
> good aspect; let it be gathered either in his

> hour, or in the hour of Jupiter, let Sol be
> angular …[12]

The reassurance for religious believers was that Culpeper claimed Biblical authority for his system. In particular, he referred to Psalm 8, verse 3:

> When I consider thy heavens, the work of they fingers,
> the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained:

According to Culpeper, astral forces were determined by God and herbal medicine, astrologically guided, was an aspect of his wisdom, part of the divine plan. If Mrs Norris accepted this, there was no intrinsic conflict in the practice of her Anglican faith and her recourse to herbal medicine Culpeper style.

It may be, of course, that Mrs Norris's 'charm' contained no herbal element whatsoever. It could have been an item of healing white magic, a countryside cure devised with spells at full moon or at some magic hour. There were a number of such magic cures for ague. These included a dried toad for the child to wear under his armpit; a muslin bag of spiders to wear round his neck; a snail in a bag worn round the neck for nine days and then thrown on the fire; or tansy leaves for his shoes; or rowan berries; or Spirit of Vipers distilled from the dried flesh and organs of the snake; or Jelly of Snails; and so on.

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An enquiry into Mrs Norris's 'charm' opens up many possibilities but leads us nowhere certain. On the face of it, nothing else in *Mansfield Park* provides us with any help. Is it, in fact, a detail that at some stage in the novel's composition Jane Austen intended to develop but which in the final revision remained as a loose end that she failed to spot or simply left in, as it were to tantalise the reader, just as we are never told if the 'charm' did any good for the boy's illness? Elsewhere in *Mansfield Park* there is a similar instance, 'old Mrs Admiral Maxwell' (387), a stray naval figure, the godmother of Mary, the Price daughter who died when she was about 6 or 7 and is fondly remembered by Fanny. Mentioned once only, Mrs Maxwell is otherwise unaccounted for. In an earlier version, did she and her husband play some part in the naval aspect of the story? And is Mrs Norris's 'charm' a similar remnant?

My own guess is that this intriguing detail in the characterisation of Mrs Norris is, at some level, connected with her relationship to Fanny. On the one hand, according to Henry Crawford, Fanny bears 'some touches of the angel' (467), and Edmund regards her as being under divine protection: 'Thank God! … it seems to have been the merciful appointment of Providence that the heart which knew no guile, should not suffer' (455). Yet according to Mrs Norris, Fanny occupies a wholly different order of being, instructing her to 'remember, wherever you are, you must be the lowest and the last' (221), a phrasing that reminds us that in the ordering of the Gospels 'the lowest and last' will be divinely elevated to become the first, chosen and blessed. Again, when Mrs Norris identifies Fanny as 'the daemon of the piece' (448), the reader knows better, knows that the part Fanny has to play is, as Avron Fleishman has said, in 'the redemption of Mansfield from its fall into darkness'.[13] As we learn in the final chapter of the book, if anyone is 'the daemon of the piece', it is Mrs Norris – the evil genius of Mansfield Park - fated to dwell

in her private hell, a Danteesque sequestration with Maria Bertam 'in another country – remote and private … shut up together … their tempers … their mutual punishment' (465).

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Could it also be that in using the name Norris Jane Austen was indulging herself in a private joke, to be shared with a friend or perhaps more widely in the family? In the slavery reading of *Mansfield Park,* it is suggested that Jane Austen took the name for its association with John Norris, a notorious supporter of the slave trade who provided evidence to Thomas Clarkson for his history of the abolition movement,[14] a work that Jane Austen read and admired. But Norris then switched sides, and arrived in London as a pro slavery delegate representing the West India merchants of Liverpool, a betrayal which found its way into Clarkson's story.

My own supposition is far less portentous: that the connection Jane Austen makes between Mrs Norris and the 'ague … charm' suggests the name of Thomas Norris, an eighteenth-century quack, a pharmaceutical chemist whose wealth was founded on the success of his own patent 'Drops', advertised as 'Curing Fevers of every Species'. The 'Drops' were puffed by their inventor for upwards of thirty years as a near-universal nostrum, a remedy for an extraordinarily wide range of complaints, as we can see from the title-page shown here. The *Essay* itself, in this fifth edition of 1788, running to over one hundred pages, is nothing more than an overblown advertisement, a succession of testimonials, 'Letters and Certificates of Cures'.[15] Its commercial intent is confirmed at the end, listing the eighty towns with 'Printers, Booksellers, &c' (including three in Winchester), where the 'Drops' are to be purchased.[16] Could it have been that Dr Norris's 'Drops' found their way into the medicine chest at Steventon or Chawton or Godmersham, somewhere sufficiently close to home for the Austens to enjoy a good laugh when *Mansfield Park* appeared and they encountered the remarkable Mrs Norris ready to provide her own cure for ague? Or was it, perhaps, another allusion entirely, to a 'charm'-purveying clergyman's wife, someone well-known to the Austens' in their wide clerical landscape?

Notes

Page references to *Mansfield Park* and *Minor Works* are to Chapman's Oxford edition.

[1] *Dictionary of the English Language* (8th edn. 1799, 'Corrected and Revised'), vol.i, pages unnumbered.

[2] See J Ingle, *Pocket Companion to Culpepers Herbal* (1820), pp.2-4; ed. William Charles Wells, *A Fifth Dissertation on Fever ...* (1803), p. 69 lists six: inflammatory, pestilential, malignant, nervous, jail, putrid.

[3] Ingle (1820), p.6

[4] William Heberden, *An Epitome of Infantile Diseases* (1805), p. 63.

[5] William Saunders, *Observations on the Superior Efficacy of the Red Peruvian Bark in the Cure of Agues and other Fevers* (1789).

[6] Peggy Hickman, *A Jane Austen Household Book with Martha Lloyd's Recipes* (1977), p. 118.

[7] Owen Davies, 'Healing Charms in Use in England and Wales 1700-1950', *Folklore* (1996), 107.23.

[8] Gordon-Culpeper (c.1805), i.vii.

[9] Ibid., i.690.

[10] Ibid., i.699.

[11] Nicholas Culpepper (sic), *The English Physician Enlarged …* (1807), pp.5-6.

[12] Ibid., p.12.

[13] Avron Fleishman, *A Reading of 'Mansfield Park': An Essay in Critical Synthesis* (1967), p.68.

[14] Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade* (1808).

[15] p. 9.

[16] pp. 101-104.