



“Don’t Put Your
Daughter on the Stage,
Lady B’: Talking about
Theatre in Jane Austen’s
Mansfield Park”

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IN *MANSFIELD PARK*, JANE AUSTEN LEAVES US in no doubt that Maria Bertram, the elder daughter of Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram, is placed at risk because of the private theatricals undertaken by the young people at Mansfield in the absence of her father. But the extent to which Maria is in moral danger is more ambiguous, a point which has produced lively discussion amongst critics and scholars. My interest in the debate stems from the various professions in which I have been a participant and which underscore my current points of view. As an actress, I deplore the slurs cast on my profession by those who deem acting to be immoral; I even feel slighted on behalf of my early nineteenth-century counterparts when Henry Crawford suggests in the novel that professional actresses have no “delicacy of feeling” (135). As a theatre historian, I am fascinated by the implicit and explicit information provided in the novel about private theatricals, as well as the wide range of opinion such material has elicited. Was theatricality, as Marc Baer suggests Jane Austen’s novels (and those of Charles Dickens) indicate, a prominent part of late Georgian society’s way of life (250), or are we, “as modern readers” of *Mansfield Park*, “sharply reminded,” as Ellen Donkin asserts, “of just how alien the theatre world had become to the nineteenth-

century middle class" (37)? I shall explore what Jane Austen and her characters in *Mansfield Park* tell us about their ideas of theatre and theatricality, and set their "talking" within the context of the theatre of the early nineteenth century—its participants, scenography, drama, and its critics—in an attempt to ascertain whether we should feel, as Edmund does, that the Mansfield Park theatricals "would be very wrong," and "imprudent . . . with regard to Maria, whose situation is a very delicate one, considering every thing, extremely delicate" (125).

As many scholars and biographers have pointed out, Jane Austen herself did not disapprove of theatrical performances, by either professional or amateur players. The Austen family began their own private theatricals in 1782, and these productions, as Deirdre Le Faye tells us, "were to become a feature of Steventon rectory life during the next few years" (43). About the Austen family's Christmas festivities of 1787, one of Jane's cousins, Phylly Walter, wrote: "My uncle's barn is fitting up quite like theatre, & all the young folks are to take their part" (qtd. in Le Faye 58). It is not clear in what capacity Jane might have served on these occasions, but she would certainly have been an audience member if not a fully-fledged thespian. On her visits to London, Jane regularly attended the theatre: Covent Garden, Drury Lane, and even the Lyceum Theatre, which in 1817, six years after Jane had seen *The Hypocrite* there, the playwright Joanna Baillie said was "struggling with many difficulties, above all the terrible misfortune of not being reckoned *genteel*, and Mr. Arnold [the manager] has not had such good houses as he & his actors deserved" (Donkin 32). In March 1814, at the more "genteel" Drury Lane Theatre, Jane, along with niece Fanny, saw Edmund Kean as Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* and Mrs. Jordan as Nell in *The Devil's to Pay*, and was much pleased; in November of that year, however, Eliza O'Neal's performance in *The Fatal Marriage* disappointed her, for she wrote, "I do not think she was quite equal to my expectation. I fancy I want something more than can be. Acting seldom satisfies me. I took two pocket-handkerchiefs but had very little occasion for either. She is an elegant creature, however, and hugs Mr. Younge delightfully" (Jenkins 212). Three years earlier, due to the poor state of Sarah Siddons' health, Jane had missed seeing the *grande dame* of tragedy perform, a circumstance that prompted her

to tell Cassandra that “she could have sworn quite easily” (Jenkins 147). As her brother Henry worked and lived for a time in Henrietta Street, just around the corner from Covent Garden and Drury Lane theatres, Jane might also have seen actors and actresses out and about on their daily business, going to rehearsals, or setting off in the early evening for the performance, because many of them lived in that vicinity. The degree to which Jane’s views were affected by the theatre is also revealed in a letter in which she refers to a particular display of her niece Cassy’s emotions in terms of an actress’s performance: “That puss Cassy,” she wrote to Fanny, “did not show more pleasure in seeing us than her sisters, but I expected no better;—she does not shine in the tender feelings. She will never be a Miss O’Neal;—more in the Mrs. Siddons line” (Jenkins 216). As an observer, auditor, and possible participant herself, Jane Austen acquired a first-hand knowledge of theatre, actors, and acting, all of which she put to excellent use in *Mansfield Park*.

In the novel, Maria is the female Edmund declares in most danger of being affected by her association with matters theatrical. As a member of the upper strata of society, Maria would be expected to set a good example, not only to other members of her family, especially her younger sister Julia and cousin Fanny, but also to the various members of the household staff and the community in which she lived. Several conduct books of the day comment on the despicable way servants and the lower classes tended to ape the behaviour and fashions of their betters. Maria’s behavior would need to be beyond reproach; therefore, any association with the theatre would be cause for concern. As Thomas Gisborne warns in his book of 1797, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, “to speak of individuals among the upper and middle ranks of life, young women are the persons likely to imbibe the strongest tinge from the sentiments and transactions set before them in the drama” (163). Even the slightest tinge could have a disastrous effect on one of the most precious of feminine qualities, as Gisborne explains: “Among the usual causes by which female modesty is worn away, I know not one more efficacious, than the indelicate scenes and language to which women are familiarised at the theatre” (172). Maria’s actual participation as an actress would place her in even greater danger, because, as Gisborne asserts, “the custom of acting plays in private theatres, fitted up by

individuals of fortune . . . is a custom . . . that it is almost certain to prove, in its effects, injurious to the female performers" (173-74). He considerably lists the most likely injuries:

To encourage vanity; to excite a thirst of applause and admiration on account of attainments which, if they are to be thus exhibited, it would commonly have been far better for the individual not to possess; to destroy diffidence, by the unrestrained familiarity with persons of the other sex, which inevitably results from being joined with them in the drama; to create a general fondness for the perusal of plays, of which so many are unfit to be read; and for attending dramatic representations, of which so many are unfit to be witnessed. (Gisborne 174-75)

The moral danger for Maria of "the unrestrained familiarity with persons of the other sex" and its subsequent destruction of diffidence would be particularly acute. Maria's rationale that her engagement to Rushworth raised "her so much more above restraint" (129) would not, in the eyes of the guardians of female modesty, alleviate the precariousness of her situation.

According to another late eighteenth-century moralist, John Witherspoon, in his *Serious Enquiry into the nature of effects of the stage*, Maria would be at risk even as an audience member. "It ought to be considered," he says, "particularly with regard to the younger of both sexes, that, in the theatre, their minds must insensibly acquire an inclination to romance and extravagance, and be unfitted for the sober and serious affairs of common life" (63). Were Maria to suffer such devastating effects as these, her condition would reflect on Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram, for "What considerate parent," asks Gisborne, "would expose his daughter to the risk of having her ears insulted by the mirth and jests of the unprincipled; or teach her, even if no further mischief would possibly ensue, to seek for diversion in a theatrical assumption of fictitious language and sentiment, and in familiarity of conversation, and contests of snip-snap repartee, with strangers?" (149). Priscilla Wakefield, writing in 1798, is even more adamant about the ills associated with the kind of familiarity involved in private theatricals: "Whatever . . . places the young in too familiar a situation with the other sex; whatever is obnoxious to the delicacy and reserve of the female character, or destructive, in

the smallest degree, to the strictest moral purity, is [not just injurious, but] inadmissible" (9). On the moralists' side of the argument, we must admit that not only Maria, but Julia, Fanny, and Mary Crawford are all put at risk when Tom announces to the young people in general, and his friend Yates in particular: "to make *you* amends, Yates, I think we must raise a little theatre at Mansfield, and ask you to be our manager" (123).

Regardless of whether Jane Austen ever read a conduct book, she would certainly have been aware of the moral, or rather the *immoral* reputation of the professional stage players, particularly the actresses. For longer than a century, actresses had been fighting against the stigma of prostitution so indelibly attached to their profession. Many actresses lived openly outside of wedlock, or were engaged in illicit affairs, some more publicized than others. One of the most famous relationships of the period was that between Dorothy Jordan and the Duke of Clarence. Mrs. Jordan was callously dismissed by the Duke in 1811, after she had borne him ten children, and supported him financially with her stage earnings. Claire Tomalin, whose sympathetic biography of Mrs. Jordan reveals how difficult it was for even a celebrated player to rise above the tainted reputation of her profession, records in her biography of Jane Austen, that this particular actress "moved . . . into a house in Cadogan Street, just round the corner from the Henry Austens," and, she suggests, they might have "noticed the arrival of the five younger FitzClarence children in February 1812, brought to the back door by the Duke, and their departure again in June . . ." (*Jane Austen* 225). The Duke's elder brother, the Prince of Wales, treated the actress Mary Robinson with similar disdain when he ended their affair about thirty years previously, a liaison which he *and* she had taken great delight in flaunting before the public. Whether or not actresses were mistresses of nobles or commoners, whether or not they were respectably married, indeed whatever the condition of their private life, "It [was] nearly impossible," as Clement Scott said as late as 1898, "for a woman to remain pure who adopts the stage as a profession" (qtd. in Davis 94).

Maria Bertram, of course, is not intending to become a professional actress; nevertheless, her feelings for a man who is not her betrothed are not as pure as they should be. Maria has already fallen for the charms of Henry Crawford before the theatricals are pro-

posed, so much so that Fanny is aware that an indelicate relationship has formed between them. She tries to suggest as much to Edmund:

“If Miss Bertram were not engaged,” said Fanny, cautiously, “I could sometimes almost think that he admired her more than Julia.”

“. . . Crawford has too much sense to stay here [replies Edmund] if he found himself in any danger from Maria; and I am not at all afraid for her, after such a proof as she has given, that her feelings are not strong.” (116)

But, far from running away from danger, Crawford appears to seek it out. As soon as the possibility of performing a play is suggested, he declares, “I really believe . . . I could be fool enough at this moment to undertake any character that ever was written, from Shylock or Richard III. down to the singing hero of a farce in his scarlet coat and cocked hat” (123). Jane Austen, who had seen some of the best professional actors perform such roles, realizes that it is necessary for Crawford’s histrionic talents to be superior to those of his fellow performers, especially those of his “rival” Rushworth. Henry’s ability is acknowledged by everyone at Mansfield, even Fanny, who later in the novel is herself in danger of finding her sentiments towards him softened, after listening to his passionate reading of Shakespeare. As Edmund tells Henry, “we all talk Shakespeare, use his similes, and describe with his descriptions; but this is totally distinct from giving his sense as you gave it. To know him in bits and scraps, is common enough; to know him pretty thoroughly, is, perhaps, not uncommon; but to read him well aloud, is no every-day talent” (338). Even the lethargic Lady Bertram is roused to comment: “‘It was really like being at a play,’ said she.—‘I wish Sir Thomas had been here. . . . You have a great turn for acting, I am sure, Mr. Crawford,’ said her Ladyship soon afterwards . . .” (338).

I believe Jane Austen makes Henry a good actor so that Maria can respect his talent, yet be confused by it—she cannot tell whether his sentiments are real or artificial, whether he is expressing his own feelings or those of the character he is playing. Maria is not so good an actress that she is able to distinguish between her own feelings of adulation and infatuation—is she in love with the actor or the man? It is here that we see Jane Austen’s intuitive understanding at work: about how actors, as well as writers, create characters; about the chemistry that can exist between actors. Many performers, includ-

ing myself, have found themselves experiencing in reality the feelings their dramatic character has felt for another in the play. Maria thinks, of course, that she loves Henry the man, and that he loves her, in spite of the fact that in the play her feelings should be maternal — a point Mary Crawford hurriedly points out to the jealous Rushworth when they spy Henry and Maria in rehearsal at exactly “one of the times when they were trying *not* to embrace” (169).

The abruptness with which the truth of Henry’s lack of commitment to her is realized helps precipitate Maria into her marriage with Rushworth, a man whose theatrical talents Jane Austen makes sure are as weak as Henry’s are strong. Even Rushworth is forced to emerge from his “two-and-forty speeches” and his concern of “fine dress” to take notice of Henry. At one point he turns to Fanny “with a black look, and said—‘Do you think there is anything so very fine in all this? For the life and soul of me, I cannot admire him;—and between ourselves, to see such an undersized, little, mean-looking man, set up for a fine actor, is very ridiculous in my opinion.’ From this moment there was a return of his former jealousy, which Maria, from increasing hopes of Crawford, was at little pains to remove . . .” (165). There were, of course, examples of “little” men who had been very “fine actors” on which Austen could draw. David Garrick was renowned for both his short stature and towering performances, and, although he had retired in 1776, the year after Jane was born, she would have known him by reputation; also Edmund Kean, whose performance as Shylock Jane had admired so much, was equally famous and somewhat “undersized.” When Rushworth accepts the role of Count Cassel, it has already been qualified by Yates: “‘A trifling part,’ said he, ‘and not at all to my taste, and such a one as I certainly would not accept again . . .’” (122). Rushworth’s decision, however, is based on his own opinion of the *other* character on offer: “recollecting that he had once seen the play in London, and had thought Anhalt a very stupid fellow, he soon decided for the Count” (138). He is eager to tell Edmund (who, ironically, takes on the role of the “stupid fellow”) about his chosen part: “‘I am to be Count Cassel, and am to come in first with a blue dress, and a pink satin cloak, and afterwards am to have another fine fancy suit by way of a shooting-dress.—I do not know how I shall like it’” (138-39). Even though Maria cuts his speeches, Rushworth still has difficulty learn-

ing his part, a fact which all cast members find aggravating. With the comparison between the two “actors” constantly before her and us, it becomes obvious why Maria has too little respect for one and too much for the other. It seems that Witherspoon’s warning for young females has proved correct: Maria has developed “an inclination to romance and extravagance,” and is in danger of becoming “unfitted for the sober and serious affairs of common life” (63).

Edmund’s initial argument against any of them attempting private theatricals in any form makes a sharp distinction between professional and amateur actors. What *actors* would probably think of as personal advantages, Edmund sees as theatrical disadvantages for *gentlefolk*:

“[I love] to see real acting, [he says,] good hardened real acting; but I would hardly walk from this room to the next to look at the raw efforts of those who have not been bred to the trade,—a set of gentlemen and ladies, who have all the disadvantages of education and decorum to struggle through.” (124)

Tom argues that Sir Thomas encouraged them as boys to recite drama before him as auditor, but Edmund counters the point. “It was a very different thing [he tells Tom].—You must see the difference yourself. My father wished us, as school-boys, to speak well, but he would never wish his grown up daughters to be acting plays. His sense of decorum is strict” (127). The grown-up daughters have other ideas: “[They] were not in the least afraid of their father’s disapprobation.—There could be no harm in what had been done in so many respectable families, and by so many women of the first consideration . . .” (128). The fashionable set might see no danger in acting for private amusement, but Francis Wemyss (who became a professional actor-manager and had himself performed Lady Randolph in a private showing of the tragedy *Douglas*), writing in 1848, talks about how “Private Theatricals are, at the best, ludicrous, and have a dangerous tendency on any young mind imbued with romance” (8). Maria’s romantic sentiments could not be said to have been stirred by Rushworth, but with her predilection to be charmed by Henry, the theatricals offer her the opportunity to indulge her imagination.

The preparations and discussions about their performance which engage the participants once their course has been embarked

upon, also involve scenic considerations. Not every reader of the novel when it was published in 1814 might have been aware of the techniques of acting, but many, if not most, of those living in London or near a major provincial city would have seen some kind of theatrical performance and have knowledge, either first-hand or through the daily press, of scenic devices (such as wings and shutters), the green baize curtain (the raising of which signalled the start of the performance), as well as what went on behind the scenes, particularly in the greenroom, which, according to Tom, is as necessary to their proceedings as a stage:

[The billiard room, he says,] is the very room for a theatre, precisely the shape and length for it, and the doors at the farther end, communicating with each other as they may be made to do in five minutes, by merely moving the book-case in my father's room, is the very thing we could have desired, if we had set down to wish for it. And my father's room will be an excellent green-room. It seems to join the billiard-room on purpose. (125)

As well, "'We must have a curtain,' said Tom Bertram, 'a few yards of green baize for a curtain, and perhaps that may be enough'" (123). Yates agrees, but with certain additions: "'with only just a side wing or two run up, doors in flat, and three or four scenes to be let down; nothing more would be necessary on such a plan as this. For mere amusement among ourselves, we should want nothing more'" (123-24). Nothing, in fact, but a fully equipped theatre! Maria's response to Yates signals her growing partiality for Henry. The latter had suggested that the trappings of a theatre would be unnecessary; Maria eagerly seconded the notion: "'I believe we must be satisfied with *less*,' said Maria. 'There would not be time, and other difficulties would arise. We must rather adopt Mr. Crawford's views, and make the *performance*, not the *theatre*, our object. Many parts of our best plays are independent of scenery'" (124). Maria quickly alters her earlier "echo" of Tom's sentiment—"Oh! for the Eccleford theatre and scenery to try something with!" (123)—to accommodate Henry's. Had she, perhaps, like her fiancé, paid more attention to her costume than her performance, Maria might have been spared her subsequent injured feelings. It seems apparent, however, that the ladies' acquiescence to the co-producers' initial grandiose

ideas signifies their general understanding of what comprises a professional theatrical production for everyone involved, inside and outside the novel, its characters and readers, even if the former have not quite come to grips with what is possible for their particular venture.

The major problem for all participants at Mansfield, both before they begin rehearsing and once they have started, is the choice of play. The dialogue of objections that arise between Tom, Yates, Crawford, Maria, and Julia whilst trying to find a suitable script results in its own small drama. The scene has suspense as we, the readers, cannot help but be enticed into trying to guess who says what; it builds to a climax as each line increases in length, and subsides in anti-climax when we recognize the insipid fawning of Mr. Yates in the last line.

“Oh! no, *that* will never do. Let us have no ranting tragedies. Too many characters—Not a tolerable woman’s part in the play—Any thing but *that*, my dear Tom. It would be impossible to fill it up—One could not expect any body to take such a part—Nothing but buffoonery from beginning to end. *That* might do, perhaps, but for the low parts—If I *must* give my opinion, I have always thought it the most insipid play in the English language—I do not wish to make objections, I shall be happy to be of any use, but I think we could not choose worse.” (131)

Tom’s final compromising position resembles the problems facing theatre managers, demonstrating that he has assumed that role along with his later doubling of character. He has successfully placed himself at both ends of the hierarchical scale: “We are wasting time most abominably. Something must be fixed on. No matter what, so that something is chosen. We must not be so nice. A few characters too many, must not frighten us. We must *double* them. We must descend a little. If a part is insignificant, the greater our credit in making any thing of it” (131). In his decision of *Lovers’ Vows* as the “exact” play, Tom neglects to mention not only the earlier requirements of the “three *principal* women” (my italics, 130), but indeed any of the female roles: “Here are two capital tragic parts for Yates and Crawford, and here is the rhyming butler for me—if nobody else wants it—a trifling part, but the sort of thing I should not dislike,

and as I said before, I am determined to take any thing and do my best. And as for the rest, they may be filled up by any body. It is only Count Cassel and Anhalt” (132). The men choose their roles first and directly, while the Bertram sisters wait their turn to come at their preference in a more oblique way. Unfortunately, they both want the same role—Agatha; and, instead of offering an example of decorous behaviour, Maria immediately adopts the position as rival to her sister Julia. Tom’s confirmation of Maria’s suitability for the role emphasizes, as Maria herself had done, the importance of appearance:

“Oh! yes, Maria must be Agatha. Maria will be the best Agatha. Though Julia fancies she prefers tragedy, I would not trust her in it. There is nothing of tragedy about her. She has not the look of it. Her features are not tragic features, and she walks too quick, and speaks too quick, and would not keep her countenance.” (134)

Once Agatha has been allotted to Maria, attention is turned to the role of Amelia; however, with two ladies yet to be cast the gentlemen cannot agree. Henry tries to smooth the feathers he has been instrumental in ruffling:

“I consider Amelia as the most difficult character in the whole piece. It requires great powers, great nicety, to give her playfulness and simplicity without extravagance. I have seen good actresses fail in the part. Simplicity, indeed, is beyond the reach of almost every actress by profession. It requires a delicacy of feeling which they have not. It requires a gentlewoman—a Julia Bertram.” (135)

Tom disagrees: “No, no, Julia must not be Amelia. It is not at all the part for her. She would not like it. She would not do well. She is too tall and robust. Amelia should be a small, light, girlish, skipping figure. It is fit for Miss Crawford, and Miss Crawford only. She looks the part, and I am persuaded will do it admirably” (135). Julia’s “angry quickness” to react assists the casting decision:

“Do not be afraid of *my* wanting the character. . . . I am *not* to be Agatha, and I am sure I will do nothing else; and as to Amelia, it is of all parts in the world the most disgusting to me. I quite detest her. An odious, little, pert,

unnatural, impudent girl. I have always protested against comedy, and this is comedy in its worst form.” (136)

Jane Austen’s use of this “worst form” of comedy, *Lovers’ Vows*, Elizabeth Inchbald’s adaptation of Kotzebue’s play *Das Liebes Kind*, allows her to set up parallels between what is spoken and unspoken, which would have been particularly apparent to contemporary readers, many of whom would have seen a production of it or, at least, have read about it in the press. The play was extremely popular; in its first season at Covent Garden, after opening in October 1798, it managed 42 performances (at a time when 9—to allow the playwright a third benefit—was considered a good run), and the first edition of its publication was also in great demand. Harris, the manager of Covent Garden, had asked Mrs. Inchbald, who was an actress as well as dramatist, to prepare the play for production. James Boaden tells us that she “felt [it] to be a task of so much difficulty, that she was often on the point of abruptly closing her labour. She at length surmounted all difficulties, and happily . . . produced a play so purified, that no English reader has ever for a moment endured the rival publication of *Miss Plumtree*” (2: 20). If Mrs. Inchbald’s adaptation is so “pure,” why does Edmund and, then, Fanny object to it so much? Elizabeth Jenkins has succinctly outlined the problem:

There is nothing in [the content of the play] of a startling character, and none of the Mansfield party, not Edmund, not even Fanny, would have objected to seeing *Lover’s Vows* in the professional theatre. But Edmund put his finger on the genuine objection to the business when he drew the distinction between “good, hardened acting” and the efforts of ladies and gentlemen. . . . In the Mansfield production of the play Agatha and Frederick faded out of the picture: it was Maria Bertram who clasped Henry Crawford to her bosom and hailed him as her illegitimate son. . . . (Jenkins 185–86)

Let me give you an example of what happens between Maria and Henry in their first scene:

Agatha. I cannot speak, dear son! (*Rising, and embracing him.*) My dear Frederick! the joy is too great. I was not prepared—

Fred. Dear mother, compose yourself. (*Leans her head*

against his breast.) Now, then, be comforted. How she trembles! she is fainting.

A little later, at the end of Agatha's story about how she was seduced by the future Baron Wildenhaim, we discover Frederick has been staring at her. Her seducer, she tells him,

was a handsome young man—in my eyes, a prodigy; for he talked of love, and promised me marriage. He was the first man who had ever spoken to me on such a subject. His flattery made me vain, and his repeated vows—don't look at me, dear Frederick! I can say no more. (*Frederick with his eyes cast down, takes her hand and puts it to his heart.*) Oh, oh! my son! I was intoxicated by the fervent caresses of a young, inexperienced, capricious man; and did not recover from the delirium till it was too late.

Fred. (*After a pause.*) Go on. Let me know more of my father.

As she continues her tale, the stage directions tell us that "*Frederick embraces her*" and Agatha "*presses him to her breast.*" It is easy to see why an amorous couple would feel a need to rehearse such *arduous* actions incessantly; and why, in the case of Maria and Henry, such actions would be both indecorous and inappropriate.

At this point I am ready to assert the truth of Edmund's statement about the delicacy of Maria's situation. We should also be glad that Sir Thomas's arrival spares his daughter; indeed all the performers, from the difficulties aligned with appearing for the first time on stage, as outlined by Cutspear in 1802:

They who, from their childhood, have been accustomed to stage-performance, acquire in this (as in the case in other instances of real life) a confidence, and facility of executing the task assigned to them, which no performer (however strong the mind, however superior may be the talents he possesses) can possibly manifest on a *first* appearance . . . and still less can the delicate and exquisitely susceptible mind of woman undergo this ordeal, without feeling that pain which is ever in proportion to the degree of sensibility. . . . (31)

The women, however, with the exception of Fanny, show no concern about such an unaccustomed ordeal, and, indeed, little for their own

or for Maria's delicate position in their theatrical pursuits. Julia, once she had withdrawn from the play activities and "the conviction of [Henry's] preference for Maria had been forced on her, . . . submitted to it without any alarm for Maria's situation . . ." (160). Julia is only really concerned about the awkwardness of Maria's situation when she wants to punish Maria for being Henry's favorite. Maria herself appears to be aware neither of the danger in which she has placed herself nor of Julia's desire to see her shamed: "Maria felt her triumph, and pursued her purpose careless of Julia; and Julia could never see Maria distinguished by Henry Crawford, without trusting that it would create jealousy, and bring a public disturbance at last" (163). Mrs. Grant only thinks about Julia's exclusion from the play, and the dangers of Maria's situation, in terms of her brother Henry's happiness; therefore, all she plans to do is "renew her former caution as to the elder sister, entreat [Henry] not to risk his tranquillity by too much admiration there, and then gladly take her share in any thing that brought cheerfulness to the young people in general . . ." (161). Mary Crawford tells Mrs. Grant that she imagines that both Bertram sisters are in love with Henry. Mrs. Grant's exclamation — "Both! no, no, that must not be. Do not give him a hint of it. Think of Mr. Rushworth!" — suggests that Henry will be more influenced by such knowledge to *make* advances to Maria. Mary's advice to her sister is curt: "You had better tell Miss Bertram to think of Mr. Rushworth. It may do *her* some good" (161). While Maria does not seem to recognize the impropriety of taking on the role of Agatha, Mary, on closer perusal, becomes worried about acting the role of Amelia. She tells Fanny, "I did not think much of it at first—but, upon my word—. There, look at *that* speech, and *that*, and *that*. How am I ever to look him in the face and say such things? Could you do it? But then he is your cousin, which makes all the difference" (168). In acknowledging the difficulties inherent in her own situation, Mary emphasizes Maria's indecorous behaviour with Henry, who is neither her cousin nor her fiancé. Fanny is greatly concerned as she watches "Maria's avoidance" of Rushworth, and what appears to her to be the "so needlessly often" rehearsals "of the first scene between [her cousin] and Mr. Crawford" (165). Even Mrs. Norris's assumed guardianship of her nieces' welfare seems not to involve consideration of the possible effects of Maria's intimate participation with

Henry Crawford in rehearsal; but then, she is too concerned with her own role in the proceedings to take any notice of what might or might not be appropriate for Maria.

Sir Thomas's arrival might have cancelled the performance of *Lovers' Vows* at Mansfield, but it does not immediately disentangle Maria's attachment to Henry; indeed, it enforces it, along with her estrangement from her sister:

[A]t the moment of [Julia's] appearance [announcing Sir Thomas's return], Frederick was listening with looks of devotion to Agatha's narrative, and pressing her hand to his heart, and as soon as she could notice this, and see that, in spite of the shock of her [Julia's] words, he still kept his station and retained her sister's hand, her wounded heart swelled again with injury. . . . (175)

Maria, once again, confuses the signals: "Henry Crawford's retaining her hand at such a moment," we are told, "a moment of such peculiar proof and importance, was worth ages of doubt and anxiety. She hailed it as an earnest of the most serious determination, and was equal even to encounter her father" (176). But was Sir Thomas equal to encounter what had happened in his absence—having his billiard room turned into an auditorium and his study into a green room? He says very little, but he does a lot. Within a very short time,

The scene-painter was gone, having spoilt only the floor of one room, ruined all the coachman's sponges, and made five of the under-servants idle and dissatisfied; and Sir Thomas was in hopes that another day or two would suffice [*sic*] to wipe away every outward memento of what had been, even to the destruction of every unbound copy of "Lovers' Vows" in the house, for he was burning all that met his eye. (190-91)

Sir Thomas shows, not an aversion to drama, as some critics have suggested, but an aversion to anything theatrical in his own home: it is only "unbound" copies of the play, the actors' scripts, he has burned. And what of Lady Bertram's participation, or, rather, her passive compliance? Having only once declared concern, and that regarding her husband, when she said to Maria, "Do not act anything improper, my dear, . . . Sir Thomas would not like it" (140), Lady Bertram has nothing more to say about the young people's

involvement in theatre, except to remark to Mrs. Norris that she *understands* why Fanny shows an interest in the theatrical activity: “One cannot wonder, sister, that Fanny *should* be delighted; it is all new to her, you know,—you and I used to be very fond of a play ourselves—and so am I still;—and as soon as I am a little more at leisure, *I* mean to look in at their rehearsals too” (167). Even if she had “looked in” earlier, I doubt whether she would have noticed anything untoward happening between her daughters and Mr. Crawford. Both older women are far too wrapt up in themselves to be wary of any danger that might befall the younger members of their fair sex.

Whatever their opinions about the propriety of Maria’s actions, the inhabitants of Mansfield and the surrounds all thought they knew enough about theatre, acting, and themselves to resist the kinds of temptations that beset actresses. Except for Fanny, they have all attended the theatre, heard green-room gossip, held opinions about the profession and the professionals. Jane Austen’s women are certainly not “hardened to it,” but, as gentlewomen, they should, according to Henry, have the “simplicity,” the “delicacy of feeling,” which “is beyond the reach of almost every actress by profession.” I believe Jane Austen disagrees with Henry because she shows that her female characters, the amateurs, are wanting exactly what he says is beyond the reach of professionals—delicacy of feeling. It would be too simple to blame Maria’s eventual elopement with Henry on what occurred between them during the Mansfield theatricals because Maria was already infatuated with the man who discovers too late what it means to be careless with and of feelings. Fanny, the audience member, for all her want of theatrical experience, recognized what she saw:

“I must say, cousin, [she tells Edmund] that I cannot approve his character. I have not thought well of him from the time of the play. I then saw him behaving, as it appeared to me, so very improperly and unfeelingly, I may speak of it now because it is all over—so improperly by poor Mr. Rushworth, not seeming to care how he exposed or hurt him, and paying attentions to my cousin Maria, which—in short, at the time of the play, I received an impression which will never be got over.”

“My dear Fanny,” replied Edmund, scarcely hearing her to the end, “let us not, any of us, be judged by what we appeared at that period of general folly. The time of the play, is a time which I hate to recollect. Maria was wrong, Crawford was wrong, we were all wrong together. . . . Nothing could be more improper than the whole business. I am shocked whenever I think that Maria could be capable of it; but if she could undertake the part, we must not be surprised at the rest.” (349-50)

A professional actress can divest herself of her role at the end of the performance; it is the amateur who is in danger of not being able to distinguish between reality and illusion. Jane Austen’s readers knew enough about theatre—acting and the scenic arts—to comprehend this; theatricality was certainly a prominent part of late Georgian society’s way of life. Lady Bertram did not put her daughter on the stage at Mansfield Park; it was Maria who chose her own role and then committed herself to its performance. Her situation was, after all, extremely delicate, “considering every thing, extremely delicate.”

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