



Jane Austen and Adultery

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“. . . the beautiful Mrs. R. whose name had not long been enrolled in the lists of hymen, and who had promised to become so brilliant a leader in the fashionable world, having quitted her husband’s roof in company with the well known and captivating Mr C. . . .”

(Mansfield Park)

“**I** AM PROUD TO SAY that I have a very good eye at an Adultriss,” boasted Jane Austen to her sister Cassandra on 12 May 1801. There is nothing immodest about the boast—Jane Austen *did* have an excellent eye “at an Adultriss.” What is surprising is that she appears to make the boast with a sense of discovery, as if she had only just noticed this remarkable talent within herself! Surely the author of the juvenilia and *Lady Susan* must have known before this time that she possessed such an eye? Throughout most of her life Jane Austen appears to have enjoyed spotting those guilty of adultery, discussing the “crime” with her sister and depicting its awful results in her fiction.

Jane Austen’s lifetime coincided with what was to become known as the Age of Scandal. No citizen of the Regency age could have remained unaware of the adulterous relationships of the royals, the peers and peeresses of the realm, admirals as famous as Lord Nelson himself, society hostesses, and politicians.

Clergymen might preach fidelity and morality from the pulpit, but when the highest in the land were openly parading their mistresses and illegitimate children it is hardly surprising that the parson's advice was frequently ignored by those further down the social scale.

Emma, Jane Austen's last published novel, was dedicated to His Royal Highness the Prince Regent. It was a dedication made at the Prince's request, not out of respect for the man himself. "I hate [him]," she wrote to her friend Martha Lloyd in 1813 when the Prince's marital problems had reached a peak of notoriety and scandalous gossip (16 February). Jane Austen's feelings were shared by a great number of the Prince's subjects—his adulterous affairs, his morganatic marriage, bastard children, and the treatment of his wife had alienated and shocked the public.

From the age of sixteen the Prince of Wales was a womaniser. The man who once described himself, with an understatement worthy of Jane Austen herself, as "rather fond of wine and women," had a steady stream of mistresses throughout his life (Cawthorne 111–12). Actresses, married women, singers and dancers, divorcees, courtesans, maids and matrons—the Prince took them all to his bed! Cartoonists had a field day depicting the grossly overweight prince with his fat mistresses (it was Maria Fitzherbert, his morganatic wife, who was the first woman to be described as "fair, fat and forty"), but those who wished to criticize his sexual excesses had to be careful. When Leigh Hunt described the heir to the throne as "a libertine head over heels in debt and disgrace, a despiser of domestic ties, the companion of gamblers and demi-reps" (i.e., women of doubtful reputation), he found himself paying a fine of £500 for the privilege and spending two years in prison for libel (Cawthorne 109).

So worried was George III by the immoral behavior of members of his family that in 1772 he introduced the Royal Marriage Act. This made the wedding of any of the royal children null and void unless it had received the express permission of the monarch. Unfortunately, knowing that any engagements and marriages they entered into had no force of law seemed only to act as encouragement. The young Princes felt that they had a license to do as they pleased to such an extent that one minister in the House of Commons wryly suggested that the title of the Act should be changed to "An Act for Enlarging and Extending the Prerogative of the Crown, & for the Encouragement of Adultery and Fornication" (Cawthorne 106). It was in the year of Jane Austen's birth that the prince secretly married Maria Fitzherbert, a Roman Catholic widow, who was to remain astonishingly faithful to her royal "hus-

band” in spite of the cruel way he sometimes treated her. Promising an Anglican clergyman a bishopric and £500 to clear his debts, which would get him out of debtor’s prison, was, the prince felt, a small price to pay in order to marry the woman he loved. This was to be but one of the many costs of love which he would have to pay. All his life the prince found adultery to be an expensive business. He often had to placate irate husbands with hefty sums to prevent them from taking him to court, and he had many an illegitimate child to feed, clothe, and educate (Cawthorne 112).

Jane Austen remarked on the prince’s marital affairs to her friend Martha Lloyd when she wrote to her in 1806. The prince had been forced by his father and the government to marry legally, and the woman chosen for him was Princess Caroline of Brunswick, a woman he disliked at first sight and whom he was soon to detest so much that he locked her out of Westminster Abbey on the day of his coronation. In 1806 Caroline was under investigation for suspected adultery and immoral conduct by order of the King. Known as “The Delicate Investigation,” it uncovered every sordid detail of the Princess’s sex life. In an attempt to defend herself, the Princess wrote a public letter outlining her side of the case. “I suppose all the World is sitting in Judgement upon the Princess of Wales’s letter. Poor Woman, I shall support her as long as I can, because she *is* a Woman, and because I hate her Husband—but I can hardly forgive her for calling herself ‘attached & affectionate’ to a Man whom she must detest,” was Jane Austen’s comment on the affair (16 February 1813). Her sympathy for the Princess was shared by much of the population of England at the time. Caroline had enormous public support. She was eventually to be acquitted of the charge of adultery due to lack of hard evidence, but the Commissioners who wrote the report for the King commented that “other particulars of her conduct had given occasion to very unfavourable interpretations.” During a second trial for adultery which took place in 1820, soon after Jane Austen’s death, the Duke of Wellington, a supporter of the prince and not of his wife, found his carriage stopped by a mob in the street which demanded that he shout “God Save the Queen.” The Duke replied, in a remark strongly reminiscent of Jane Austen’s Mr. Bennet, “Well, gentlemen, since you will have it so, ‘God Save the Queen’—and may all your wives be like her” (Cawthorne 116–17). The Duke was in no position to condemn, for he too was guilty of adultery. His mistress, Harriette Wilson, was one of the most famous courtesans of the day.

The prince’s brothers followed his bad example. The Duke of Clarence had ten illegitimate children by his mistress, the well-known actress Mrs. Jor-

dan. The Duke of York's affair with Mary-Anne Clarke created a huge scandal in 1809 when it was learned that she had been procuring from him the sale of army commissions in return for bribes. The Duke of Sussex, like his eldest brother, married without the consent of his father King George III. His choice was a Lady Augusta Murray, and he married her twice, but the King declared both marriages invalid (Cawthorne 116–17). The couple continued to live together and had two children, and although the Duke eventually left her, he was still very much in love when he travelled abroad for his health in 1801. His journey was to Lisbon and was made in the *Endymion* under the command of Sir Thomas Williams, husband of Jane Austen's cousin Jane (nee Cooper). Jane Austen's youngest brother Charles was a lieutenant serving on the *Endymion* under Sir Thomas. Charles wrote to Jane, who reported to Cassandra that he “spent three pleasant days in Lisbon.—They were very well satisfied with their Royal Passenger, whom they found fat, jolly & affable, who talks of Ly Augusta as his wife and seems much attached to her” (11 February 1801).

The Prince's uncles were no better behaved than his brothers. The Duke of Cumberland liked to indulge himself with beautiful actresses and was even rumoured to be guilty of incest, while the Duke of Gloucester used to flaunt his mistresses by driving them in a royal carriage around Hyde Park. His preference was for married ladies, a taste which proved to be an expensive one when Lord Grosvenor successfully won £10,000 in damages as a result of the Duke's adultery with Lady Grosvenor (Cawthorne 104).

In spite of her determination to “support [the Princess] as long as I can,” Jane Austen was worried by a friendship the princess had formed which did not bode well for the state of her morals: “the intimacy said to subsist between her & Lady Oxford is bad.—I do not know what to do about it;—but if I must give up the Princess, I am resolved at least always to think that she would have been respectable, if the Prince had behaved only tolerably by her at first” (16 February 1813). There was nothing “respectable” about Lady Oxford, and Jane Austen was obviously well aware of the scandal attached to her name. Lady Oxford, wife of Lord Harley, Earl of Oxford, led such a notoriously licentious lifestyle that the children she had borne to her numerous lovers were referred to by the town wits as the “Harleian Miscellany.” Lord Byron was later to be one of her lovers (Grosskurth 170). *Ménages à trois* were far from uncommon amongst the aristocracy of Jane Austen's day. The Duke of Devonshire lived, in all senses of the word, with his wife Georgiana and with her best friend Lady Elizabeth Foster, and their numerous children were

all brought up together. The parentage of Lady Melbourne's six children was decidedly doubtful; Princess Lieven, one of the strict patronesses of Almack's, had lived openly as Metternich's mistress for years (Murray 6).

Lord Craven, an acquaintance of the Austen's family friends the Fowles and a remote connection of her friend Martha Lloyd, a man whom Eliza de Feuillide described as "very pleasing indeed," kept as mistress in 1801 fifteen-year-old Harriette Wilson, the same lady who was later to be enjoyed by the Duke of Wellington. Jane Austen commented on the relationship to Cassandra: "the little flaw of having a Mistress now living with him at Ashdown Park, seems to be the only displeasing circumstance about him" (8–9 January 1801). Lord Craven was a notorious rake (Louisa Brunton was another of his well-known mistresses), but when Harriette published her memoirs in 1825, to the horror of the men who had indulged in affairs with her, she described him as a dull lover, more interested in drawing pictures of coconut trees and in mapping out his former West Indian campaigns than in making love to her (Murray 143; *Letters* [Notes] 512).

Lord Lucan's adultery was also remarked upon in Jane's letters to her sister. He had married in 1795 a Lady Elizabeth Belaysse, whom he had seduced away from her husband. They had six children, and the excitement of the days of seduction obviously wore off for they quarrelled frequently and he turned to other women. "Lord Lucan has taken a Mistress," Jane informed Cassandra in 1807, adding a sarcastic remark about such an event being "joyful" to both the nobleman and the lady (8–9 February 1807; *Letters* [Notes] 551–52).

At nearby Hurstbourne Park, residence of the Earl of Portsmouth, a very public adulterous relationship was turning the Earl into a cuckold. Jane Austen had known the Earl as a young boy when he had lived with her family at Steventon as one of George Austen's pupils. As a young woman she occasionally attended balls at Hurstbourne Park. Mrs. Austen had commented when he lived with them on the backwardness of the little boy, and as he grew up the Earl's mental condition worsened. In spite of his mental incapacity, however, he was married off in 1814 to Mary-Anne Hanson, daughter of the family lawyer. Locking up her mad husband and treating him with great cruelty (she had him whipped on a regular basis), Mary-Anne very soon brought her lover William-Rowland Alder into the house. Together they had three children. The Earl was formally declared insane only many years after Jane Austen's death. Mary-Anne was then able to marry her adulterous lover (*Letters* [Notes] 564–65).

As Jane Austen discovered, adultery was a popular pastime amongst the aristocracy. The “Adultress” she took such pleasure in spotting at a Bath ball in 1801 was a Miss Twistleton (her married name was Mrs. Ricketts), daughter of Lady Saye and Sele of Broughton Castle in Oxfordshire and another Austen family acquaintance. Mary-Cassandra Twistleton had eloped at the age of fifteen with Mr. Ricketts in 1790 and bore him three children. In 1797 she committed adultery with Charles-William Taylor, who was M.P. for Wells. After a divorce in 1799, she finally married a third man, a Mr. Head-Graves, but at the time Jane Austen saw her she was living at home in the in-between state of neither maid nor wife, and with such a reputation that Jane Austen would certainly not have been the only by-stander at the ball to stare. Not impressed with what she saw, Jane described the “Adultress” to her sister: “I fixed upon the right one from the first. — A resemblance to Mrs. Leigh was my guide. She is not so pretty as I expected; her face has the same defect as her sister’s [Mrs. Leigh], & her features not so handsome; — she was highly rouged, & looked rather quietly & contentedly silly than anything else” (12–13 May 1801; Tucker 152–54, 163–64).

The Twistletons were remote cousins of the Austens on Jane’s mother’s side of the family and this was not the first time their name had been linked to a scandalous affair. Miss Twistleton’s older brother Thomas had eloped to Scotland while still a schoolboy. The romance started when young Thomas had acted in a family theatrical production called *Julia* opposite a beautiful young woman named Charlotte Wattell. The couple eloped and were married at Gretna Green, but eight years later Mrs. Twistleton took as her lover a Mr. John Stein, by whom she had a child. Wishing to return to the stage as a professional actress, she may well have used the affair as a pretext for divorce. This was eventually obtained, but only after two years of very public and unpleasant legal wrangling. Unlike Mr. Rushworth in *Mansfield Park*, Mr. Twistleton made no “second . . . more prosperous trial of the [married] state” (*MP* 464). He took Holy Orders and eventually became Bishop of Colombo, a post that took him away from the scandalous gossip which perpetually followed him in England. In 1813 Jane Austen, discussing the allotment of various Leigh family clerical livings, commented satirically to Cassandra: “All these & other Scrapings . . . are to accumulate no doubt to help Mr. Twistleton to secure admission again into England” (23–24 September 1813).

In 1808 Jane Austen was again discussing with her sister by letter an adulterous scandal. Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Powlett, a Southampton acquaintance of the Austen family, took Viscount Sackville to court over an

adulterous relationship with his wife, Mary-Letitia Powlett. Jane Austen was sorry to hear the news. "This is a sad story about Mrs. Powlett. I should not have suspected her of such a thing.—She staid the Sacrament I remember, the last time that you & I did.—A hint of it, with Initials, was in yesterday's Courier; and Mr. Moore guessed it to be Ld Sackville, beleiving there was no other Viscount S. in the peerage, and so it proved" (20–22 June 1808). Mrs. Powlett had indeed run off with the Viscount, leaving her home to meet him at the White Hart Inn in Winchester where they were discovered by the landlady and one of the maids "in a compromising situation." The details of the discovery and the plans of the adulterous elopement were published in the *Hampshire Chronicle* on 1 August 1808, which commented, "No private subject has so much occupied the attention of the neighbourhood, as this affair." The trial, which took place in Southampton while Jane Austen was in residence there, occupied still more public attention. Colonel Powlett attempted to get £10,000 in damages from Lord Sackville, but the jury placed the value of the lady's virtue somewhat lower at only £3000 (22).

Usually Jane Austen was interested in the adulterous scandals of her acquaintances and enjoyed passing on gossip to her sister. With one family she knew, adultery occurred so often as to become "normal" family behavior, and Jane Austen started to find it all rather a bore. This was the Paget family. Sir Charles Paget was a naval officer who knew Charles Austen well and who recommended Charles's promotion to the command of the *Indian*. Probably Sir Charles spoke to Jane's brother about the sexual peccadilloes of his relations and the news was subsequently passed on to Jane. Perhaps she heard via the newspapers or local gossip. There was certainly enough scandal about the Pagets over the years to fill several gossip columns. The first Paget scandal was when Sir Charles' brother Henry, first Marquis of Anglesey, left his wife and eight children to elope adulterously in 1808 with Lady Charlotte Wellesley, sister-in-law to the Duke of Wellington. The ensuing scandal was enormous. Both Henry's and Charlotte's marriages were terminated by divorce, leaving the couple free to marry each other, but Paget was first forced by a court to pay £24,000 in damages to Henry Wellesley, Charlotte's husband, and fight a duel with Charlotte's brother, Captain Cadogan. Caroline, Henry Paget's divorced wife, then married her adulterous lover the Duke of Argyll. Another brother—Sir Arthur Paget—seduced the married Lady Boringdon in 1808 and married her after the divorce was finalized, just in time to legitimize the birth of their child. Lady Caroline Paget (Henry Paget's eldest daughter by his first marriage) had become engaged to the Earl of March.

Normally this event would have interested Jane Austen, but she could only see the likelihood that family history would repeat itself again. "What can be expected from a Paget, born & brought up in the centre of conjugal Infidelity & Divorces?" she asked Cassandra. "I will Not be interested about Lady Caroline. I abhor all the race of Pagets" (13 March 1817; Tucker 162, 171–73).

Some biographers have even suspected that Jane Austen's aunt Philadelphia Hancock had an adulterous affair with Warren Hastings while she was living in India and that her child Eliza was the result of the illicit relationship between them. Hastings, who was godfather to Eliza, gave her a present of 40,000 rupees (about £5,000) and this added fuel to the fires of rumor. Certainly Philadelphia was said by local gossips to have behaved adulterously. "It is beyond a doubt that she abandoned herself to Mr. Hastings," Clive of India wrote to his wife a few years after Eliza's birth. However, there is no firm evidence to prove this and Mr. Hancock appears never to have suspected his daughter's paternity (Honan 43; *Letters* [Notes] 423).

Adultery was very much a part of Jane Austen's world. The royals, the neighbors, the connections of her family—many indulged in what was regarded as something of a national pastime. Actresses were notorious for their extra-marital affairs, and the plays they acted in frequently portrayed the delights, complications, and eventual punishments of adultery. When Jane Austen attended a performance of *Don Juan* in 1813, she was fascinated by the "compound of Cruelty & Lust" in the eponymous hero's character (15–16 September 1813). It is hardly surprising then that Jane Austen could even imagine adultery taking place in her home at Chawton. Preparations for Austen family's move to Bath were well in hand when she wrote jokingly to Cassandra about their future domestic arrangements: "We plan having a steady Cook, & a young giddy Housemaid, with a sedate, middle aged Man, who is to undertake the double office of Husband to the former & sweetheart to the latter" (3–5 January 1801).

Adultery also entered Jane's homes via the imaginations of other authors. Madame de Genlis's popular novel *Alphonsine* was read and discussed at Southampton in 1807. This tale of a lady's adultery with a page after she had left her husband because of non-consummation of the marriage offended Jane Austen: "We were disgusted in twenty pages, as, independent of a bad translation, it has indelicacies which disgrace a pen hitherto so pure" (7–8 January 1807).

Even without family friends and connections to keep her up-to-date with the latest gossip concerning adultery, Jane Austen would have had no

difficulty in acquainting herself with the illicit affairs of the fashionable world. In *Mansfield Park* Mr. Price reads of Maria Rushworth's "matrimonial fracas" in his daily newspaper. The gossip columnists were as active in the nineteenth century as they are in the twentieth. Although initials were usually used in place of a full name, they were a poor screen to the identity of those involved. Jane and her friend Mr. Moore had no trouble working out that Lord S. was Viscount Sackville. Count von Hardenburg, the Hanoverian Ambassador to England, learned that his Countess was having an affair with the Prince of Wales from the pages of the *Morning Herald* (Cawthorne 110). There were even pamphlets published on the subject. For a small price one could purchase pamphlets such as *The Court of Adultery: A Vision*, which provided juicy details concerning the sex lives of the rich and famous. Details of adultery trials were published, too. Obviously such publications found a market. It is to be hoped that Jane Austen never spent her money or time on such tawdry pamphlets, but she must have been aware of their existence.

In *Mansfield Park* Mary Crawford refers to her brother's adulterous behavior as "folly." Edmund Bertram gives it a far harsher name. To him, it is "a dreadful crime" and, even worse, it is a "sin of the first magnitude" (*MP* 441–57). The laws of England of the day took a materialistic view of the matter, seeing adultery as a question of property, ownership, and the breaking of a contract. Husbands such as Mr. Rushworth could take their wives' lovers to court and successfully sue them for damages in an action known as a "criminal conversation" suit, but more popularly referred to as a "crim. con." Technically the name referred to a conversation heard by a third party indicating evidence of adultery which could be used as grounds for divorce or, more explicitly, the "criminal" or adulterous "conversation" or intercourse which took place between couples who were not married to each other. As a wife's body was legally considered to be her husband's property, he therefore had a right to claim damages if her body were "used" by another man, and thereby lessened in value. If the wife ran off with her lover, the husband could also claim extra financial compensation for the loss of her services as his housekeeper. A "crim. con." was a civil suit, and in deciding damages the jury would consider the rank and fortune of the parties, the length both of the marriage and of the affair, where "the outrage" was committed (if the wife took her lover into the marital bed the damages to be paid would be higher), and whether or not the husband and lover had been friends beforehand. John Craven, uncle of Jane Austen's friends Martha and Mary, was cited in a "crim. con." case brought by Mr. John Potter Harris of Baughurst, Hampshire, for

adultery with Mrs. Harris (*Letters* [Notes] 513). Jane was only a baby when the trial took place in 1776, but she would have heard later from Martha and Mary of the details of the case and of the £3,000 that John Craven had to pay in damages. The trial did not appear to cause lasting damage to Craven's reputation in the district as he later became a magistrate for Hampshire.

"Crim. con." suits were between men only. Mrs. Crawford, Henry's aunt, would have had neither resources nor legal standing to bring her husband's mistress into court. She just had to put up with the situation. Only if the Admiral brought his mistress into the home could she have gained divorce, but there were no "crim. cons." by which she could gain her revenge. Had Mrs. Willoughby found that her husband continued to seduce young girls in Bath after marriage, she too would have had to quietly endure it. The law favored only the cuckolded husband, not the wronged wife. There were obvious social reasons for this, and Dr. Johnson was clear upon the point: "All the property of the world depends on female chastity," he stated, while "confusion of progeny constitutes the essence of the crime of adultery" (Boswell 347). His advice to "wise married women" was that they should not "trouble themselves about infidelity in their husbands." The honor of a man, however, was a very different matter. To be cuckolded was a slur on his virility and his ability to control his own household. Mrs. Rushworth is demonstrating to the world, by her adultery, that Mr. Rushworth cannot keep her in order. More than that, the very honor of the country was felt to be at stake. Across the Channel in France sexual promiscuity, so felt the English, had resulted in a revolution. Jane Austen's "good Mrs. West" put the case clearly: "Should it be told to future ages, that the capricious dissolubility (if not the absolute nullity) of the nuptial tie and the annihilation of parental authority are among the blasphemies uttered by the *moral* instructors of these times . . . they would not ascribe the annihilation of thrones and altars to the arms of France, but to those principles which, by dissolving domestic confidence, and undermining private worth, paved the way for universal confusion" (275). Mrs. Percival, guardian of Catherine in Jane Austen's fragment *Catherine, or The Bower*, insists that "the welfare of every Nation depends upon the virtue of its individuals, and any one who offends in so gross a manner against decorum & propriety is certainly hastening its ruin" (*MW* 232–33). Catherine has merely gone to a dance with a young man!

At the end of *Mansfield Park* Mr. Rushworth obtains a divorce. Whether he also took Henry Crawford to court in a "crim. con." suit we do not know, but it is far more likely than not that he would do so. One can easily imagine

his mother insisting he gain his revenge in this way. In court Henry Crawford would have found himself facing hefty damages because he is a rich man and because he has taken advantage of Mr. Rushworth's hospitality (he has been invited to dinner and a party at Mr. Rushworth's residences) to seduce his wife. Of course, Jane Austen makes it clear that Mrs. Rushworth did her fair share of seducing, too, but the court would have ignored that aspect of the scandal. In spite of the fact that Mrs. Rushworth's marriage was not of long standing, a jury is unlikely to have been sympathetic to Henry. He could well have found himself agreeing with a London magazine of the day which remarked "adultery is not one of the cheapest amusements that might be thought of" (Stone 317).

In 1788 Lord Kenyon, newly appointed Lord Chief Justice, began his reign of terror against adulterers at the King's Bench. So large were the damages awarded in these trials that they became an attraction in themselves. Husbands short of ready cash saw a "crim. con." as a good way of obtaining money and so deliberately set traps for straying wives. The number of actions brought to court rose rapidly. "As most of us bargain to be husbands, so some of us bargain to be cuckolds," wrote one well-satisfied man. It was even alleged that some aged husbands deliberately married beautiful young wives so as to catch them out and make money from the ensuing legal proceedings. "Crim. con." trials usually proceeded very quickly, and the payment for damages resulting from them, plus legal costs, were subsequently enforced like any other debt. It could be a highly effective way of increasing one's bank balance.

Mr. Price in *Mansfield Park* has his own suggestion as to how adulterous wives should be handled: "I don't know what Sir Thomas may think of such matters; he may be too much of the courtier and fine gentleman to like his daughter the less. But by G- if she belonged to me, I'd give her the rope's end as long as I could stand over her. A little flogging for man and woman too, would be the best way of preventing such things" (MP 439-40). A vision of the upright Sir Thomas Bertram standing over Maria with a whip and flogging her has to raise a smile, but whipping those caught in adultery was not uncommon. In the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries in England such behavior was often punished by a public whipping or by a spell in the market place stocks. When Lord Petersham was caught in 1811 in bed with Lady Frances Webster, he had to endure the humiliation of being chased and horsewhipped by her irate husband in the open street (Murray 39). Mr. Price would have read of the incident in his newspaper with heartfelt approval!

“Crim. cons.” in all their lurid detail, royal scandals and illegal marriages, adulterous elopements and illegitimate children made up a veritable feast of material for popular novelists of the day. Jane Austen’s niece Anna was only following popular literary tradition when she depicted her villain plunging into “a vortex of Dissipation” (28 September 1814). Jane Austen, however, uses adultery rather differently in her own writing. In the juvenilia, those sexy, jokey, violent stories of her youth, adultery abounds. The characters involved, however, appear hardly to feel the chains of decorum. Self-gratification is everything, and they elope, marry illegally, forget their children, and run off with other men’s wives with no shame whatsoever over their criminal behavior.

Jane Austen at twelve or thirteen years of age already saw the absurdity in the laws of compensation for cases of adultery. Courts treated women as chattels, pieces of property transferred from a father to a husband. If the property was damaged or stolen, then an appropriate fee must be paid by the man who had done the damage. The original owner of that property should then regard himself as duly compensated and feel satisfied. To the young Jane Austen this was ridiculous. Marriage ought not, she felt, to be treated as a business (although some of the characters in her mature novels, notably Charlotte Lucas, were to enter marriage purely for business reasons), and no amount of money should satisfy a husband whose wife has left him for another man. Austen satirizes such arrangements brilliantly in her juvenilia. Sir William Mountague, a man of even shorter memory than Louisa Lesley, has fallen violently in love. In order to marry Miss Arundel, he must first shoot Mr. Stanhope, the man she prefers. After this murder takes place, the wedding date is set, but two days before it, Emma Stanhope, the sister of his unfortunate victim, demands “some recompence, some atonement for the cruel Murder of her Brother” (*MW* 42). “Sir William bade her name her price. She fixed on fourteen shillings.” Sir William pays the money and adds an extra bonus: He “offered her himself & Fortune,” completely forgetting his original love for Miss Arundel, and marries Emma the next day. Marriage is reduced here to a payment in compensation for a murder; human life and love are reduced to the value of fourteen shillings. The story goes on to show that the “love” involved is not even worth that. “For a fortnight,” we are told, Sir William is “compleatly happy” with his bride, but then “chancing one day to see a charming young Woman entering a chariot in Brook Street, he became again most violently in love.” He finds out her name and at the end of the unfinished story is desperately making plans to see this Miss Percival again, without a

thought for the wife he has left at home. Marital ties are formed, broken, and forgotten with astonishing rapidity as the youthful writer satirizes her society's attitudes to adultery, marriage, and engagements in her juvenilia.

Adultery is not as openly admitted to in the last of Jane Austen's early writings, *Lady Susan*. Mrs. Manwaring appears to feel no doubt about the guilty nature of her husband's liaison with the eponymous heroine. The reader hears of letters which Mr. Manwaring is so imprudent as to write to Lady Susan after she leaves his home. Lady Susan, however, is not a sensual woman—power, not sex, is what she has in mind. However, her behavior has been of such an adulterous appearance that “Mrs. Manwaring [is] insupportably jealous” and “the females of the family are united against [her]” (*MW* 244–45).

When illness has opened Tom Bertram's eyes to the error of his ways and made him “the better for ever,” his greatest self-reproach arises from the “unjustifiable theatre” and all its “dangerous intimacy” which he was responsible for introducing into Mansfield (*MP* 462). It is at Sotherton that Maria first breaks bounds with Henry Crawford, taking “circuitous” routes and an “unreasonable direction” with him, but only during the rehearsals of *Lovers' Vows* does she have repeated opportunities to indulge in intimate scenes with the man she loves and to do it in such a way that the man she is engaged to has no very great cause for complaint (*MP* 100).

It is well known that Jane Austen as a young girl enjoyed amateur theatricals in the barn at Steventon. From December 1782 (when Jane was seven) until Christmas of 1788 the Austen children and their relatives joined together to act such plays as *Matilda*, a play in which the heroine's virtue is under siege from a villain named Morcer; *The Sultan, or a Peep into the Seraglio*; and *High Life Below Stairs*. The decidedly risqué farce *Bon Ton* was performed by the young Austens in 1788 at the instigation of cousin Eliza de Feuillide. Its portrayal of a couple each on the brink of adultery obviously appealed to the sophisticated “Parisienne.” At the age of thirteen Jane Austen watched fascinated while, in rehearsals for *The Wonder! A Woman Keeps a Secret* by Susannah Centlivre, a play which depicts the adulterous behavior of a Portuguese nobleman's wife, her cousin Eliza, a married woman at the time, flirted with both James and Henry Austen and apparently caused some heartache in the young gentlemen.

By 1814, the year in which *Mansfield Park* was published, the increasingly strong evangelical movement had emphasized the link between immorality and the rage for private theatrical entertainment. In his *Enquiry into*

the Duties of the Female Sex, a book Jane Austen read with approval in 1805, Thomas Gisborne criticized acting as being “almost certain to prove injurious to the female sex.” He felt it would encourage vanity and destroy diffidence “by the unrestrained familiarity with the other sex, which inevitably results from being joined with them in the drama” (Butler 231–32). Public scandals, such as the elopement of young Twistleton during family theatricals, added force to such arguments. Why then, many critics have asked, does Jane Austen depict the acting episode in *Mansfield Park* as such a very decisive step in Maria’s road to ruin?

A large part of the problem comes from the choice of a play. *Lovers’ Vows* had a dubious reputation. Its original title *Das Kind der Liebe* (*The Love Child*) indicates its subject: a wealthy Baron has seduced a young girl and left her pregnant. The child of that relationship returns many years later to confront his father with his tarnished existence; finally, father and mother are united and all is forgiven. A second plot depicts a forward young lady who virtually proposes to the man she loves and ignores all the conventions dictating proper conduct for one of her position in society. *Lovers’ Vows* portrays a premarital sexual liaison as a laudable expression of natural love. Its heroes and heroines are not innocent young lovers; rather, they are seducers and fallen women. They are assertive and promiscuous, and they attract little moral opprobrium as a result of their behavior. Kotzebue, the original author of the play in its German version, was an apostle of sexual liberty who was eventually assassinated as a result of his moral and political convictions.

The play is finally chosen for production at Mansfield Park because it satisfies the illicit desires of so many of the actors. Henry, Maria, and Julia show no interest in playing innocent young lovers. Instead, they are attracted by the illicit aspects of love: the women wish to take on roles that give them the opportunity to embrace Henry Crawford; they all want to experiment with lives untrammelled by the restrictions and virtue of their own decorous environment. In other words, not being satisfied with their own roles in life, they wish to become other people and, in so doing, to satisfy certain desires which in their ordinary lives would remain unfulfilled. Once having sampled free, unrestrained liaisons, they cannot return to the bland roles of their previous restrained lives.

Once rehearsals begin this role-playing becomes more obvious to sharp-eyed spectators like Fanny Price. Fanny’s first action, on hearing which play has been chosen, is to take it to the East Room and read it like a novel. She is horrified by what she reads, finding it “totally improper for home representa-

tion . . . so unfit to be expressed by any woman of modesty" (*MP* 137). But the text is worse than a novel. It demands not a passive reader's response, but an active and dramatic response from all those involved. By forcing the actors to perform in a highly charged emotional situation on stage (and *Lovers' Vows* moves rapidly from one highly charged scene to the next), the play precipitates actual, rather than theatrical, emotional situations off stage. Henry and Maria are good actors. They enter fully into their roles and rehearse indefatigably. As a result, Maria falls very genuinely in love with Henry Crawford as she acts out maternal love for him on stage. Henry Crawford, who is in lust, not in love, finds himself trapped by his impersonation of passion. Later, when his feelings for Fanny make him want to cut Maria from his life, he is unable to do so. By the end of the novel they have literally become the roles they assumed. Henry is a man forever tainted by sexual misconduct; Maria is a fallen woman.

It was for good reason that the sixteenth-century Puritans banned the playhouses. What men and women are not, they should not play at being, they insisted. Dramatic impersonation involves taking on new modes of thought appropriate to the role being played, as *Mansfield Park* shows only too clearly. The Puritans also made adultery punishable by death.

Adultery saves Fanny Price. It takes her a little while, however, to learn to view Maria's adulterous behavior as an ultimate blessing to herself. She reads the news in her father's newspaper:

"it was with infinite concern the newspaper had to announce to the world, a matrimonial *fracas* in the family of Mr. R. of Wimpole Street; the beautiful Mrs. R. whose name had not long been enrolled in the lists of hymen, and who had promised to become so brilliant a leader in the fashionable world, having quitted her husband's roof in company with the well known and captivating Mr. C. the intimate friend and associate of Mr. R. and it was not known, even to the editor of the newspaper, whither they were gone." (*MP* 440)

At first Fanny attempts to deny it—"It is a mistake . . . it must be a mistake"—but she protests "from the instinctive wish of delaying shame. . . . It had been the shock of conviction as she read. The truth rushed on her" (*MP* 440). Her reaction to the news is moral: "her heart revolted from it as impossible"; "it was too horrible a confusion of guilt, too gross a complication of evil, for human nature, not in a state of utter barbarism, to be capable of!" (441).

Mansfield Park presents a fascinating range of reactions to adultery. Like

Fanny, Edmund reacts physically to the shock: "He looked very ill; evidently suffering under violent emotions, which he was determined to suppress" (445). When he goes to see Mary Crawford and say goodbye, the enormity of his sister's crime is driven home by the religious tone of his language as the visit is later described to Fanny. "Sacrificing," "the merciful appointment of Providence," "a dash of evil," "a perversion of mind," "faults of principle," and "a corrupted vitiated mind"—these are the words Edmund Bertram uses. To him, Maria's adulterous elopement is "a dreadful crime," a "sin," a disgrace never to be wiped out (445–60).

Edmund's reaction to adultery is a far cry from the careless unconcern displayed by the men and women of Jane Austen's juvenilia, but Mary Crawford's response would not be out of place in those early writings. It is certainly not the response Edmund hopes for from her. "Let us talk over this sad business," she invites him. "What can equal the folly of our two relations?" (454). Mary displays "no reluctance, no horror, no feminine . . . no modest loathings" (455). In Mary's eyes the crime is getting caught in adultery, not the act of adultery itself. "It was the detection, not the offence which she reprobated." Mary merely regrets "the folly" of Henry and Maria in allowing the relationship to become more than "a regular standing flirtation, in yearly meetings at Sotherton and Everingham," and she cannot understand how her brother and friend got in so deep as to allow even a servant to hold them in her power (456). (Servants were the bane of adulterers—Mrs. Rushworth senior's servant, we are told, "had exposure in her power" and "was not to be silenced." Obviously, she had seen and heard plenty!) After all this, Edmund's eyes are opened to Mary's true character and he sees the "faults of principle . . . of blunted delicacy" and the corrupted mind beneath the charming exterior; he sees a mind whose true nature the more perceptive Fanny had discovered some time before. Mary finally finishes herself off in Edmund's eyes with the "saucy, playful smile" which is so totally out of place at such a moment (459).

Every character in *Mansfield Park* responds characteristically to the news of the adultery. Mr. Price, crude and violent, suggests physical punishment, but cares "too little about the report" to contradict Fanny's denial of its truth. "It might be all a lie," he acknowledged; "but so many fine ladies were going to the devil now-a-days that way, that there was no answering for anybody" (440). Mrs. Price's reaction is typically plaintive. "Indeed, I hope it is not true," she says; "it would be so very shocking." But the shredding of her niece's reputation immediately leads her mind to the shredded patch on the carpet in front of her: "If I have spoke once to Rebecca about that carpet, I am

sure I have spoke at least a dozen times,” she continues. It is easy to judge which torn item—reputation or carpet—worries her the most.

His daughter’s adultery forces Sir Thomas Bertram to re-think the upbringing of his children and makes him “conscious of errors in his own conduct as a parent” (461). The event also causes him to welcome Fanny as a daughter with “joyful consent.” Lady Bertram sheds a few correct tears over her daughter’s crime, but she misses no sleep over the matter. She seems to lose one daughter from her family and gain another with about as much understanding and concern as she gained and lost cards playing *Speculation* (461, 303).

Of all the reactions, one of the most interesting is that of Mrs. Norris. She is, we are told, “the greatest sufferer. Maria was her first favourite, the dearest of all; the match had been her own contriving, as she had been wont with such pride of heart to feel and say, and this conclusion of it almost overpowered her. She was an altered creature, quieted, stupified, indifferent to everything that passed” (448). Mrs. Norris is the only character in the novel to show charity to the disgraced woman. So deeply does she feel for Maria that she gives up her own home, the possibility of future petty thievings at Mansfield Park, and all the claims and importance her position there had given her, to go and live in total seclusion with a niece who barely likes her. Mrs. Norris is like a deflated balloon. Limply, she hovers near her niece, accepting that the loss of the prestige of Mrs. Rushworth has somehow comprehended the loss of the importance of Mrs. Norris. Together they are excommunicated from Mansfield Park.

When Julia follows Henry and Maria around the locked gate at Sotherton, her action foreshadows her own elopement as she follows her sister down the path of sexual misconduct. She elopes to Scotland with Mr. Yates only after hearing of Maria’s adulterous elopement and without previously entertaining any serious thoughts of marriage. “That Julia escaped better than Maria was owing, in some measure, to a favourable difference of disposition and circumstance, but in a greater to her having been less the darling of that very aunt, less flattered, and less spoiled” (466). It is also important that Julia did not act in *Lovers’ Vows*—she did not play a role, and has therefore remained herself. When the attraction of Mr. Crawford again becomes a danger in London, “she had had the merit of withdrawing herself from it, and of chusing that time to pay a visit to her other friends, in order to secure herself from being again too much attracted.” She elopes because she dreads her father’s “severity and restraint,” elements of life at Mansfield Park that she

has always dreaded. She is the Julia she has always been because she has acted no illicit roles to change her character.

The Rushworths, both mother and son, receive little authorial sympathy when his marriage ends so scandalously. “The indignities of stupidity, and the disappointments of selfish passion, can excite little pity,” the narrator tells the reader (464). Mrs. Rushworth is portrayed as vindictive and bitter, her son as stupid and mortified. Jane Austen wastes few words over either of them. Society, too, is treated with harshness. Mary Crawford tells Edmund that if Henry and Maria were to marry, polite society would eventually accept them: “with good dinners, and large parties, there will always be those who will be glad of her acquaintance; and there is, undoubtedly, more liberality and candour on those points than formerly” (457). In other words, a certain degree of respectability can be bought.

The Grants take a “see no evil, hear no evil” approach to the problem and wisely remove themselves from Mansfield. Their attitude, it is implied, is typical of the world at large. Maria will find it harder to gain social acceptance than will Henry, but even she may “recover her footing in society to a certain degree” (457). This inequality in the punishment of the sexes prompts one of Jane Austen’s few direct social criticisms. She comments on the double standards for men and women when it comes to improper behavior. “That punishment, the public punishment of disgrace, should in a just measure attend *his* share of the offence, is, we know, not one of the barriers, which society gives to virtue. In this world, the penalty is less equal than could be wished” (468).

Henry Crawford may continue to mix freely in London society, but he does not go unpunished for his actions. Such “a man of sense” must feel “vexation and regret,” “self-reproach and regret to wretchedness,” and the pain of having “lost the woman whom he had rationally, as well as passionately loved” (468–69). Henry Crawford was too good an actor, too fond of trying out different roles for size.

In a novel as deeply concerned with education as *Mansfield Park* it is appropriate that adultery should have been an important influence in the education of the Crawfords. Adultery is what brings them to Mansfield in the first place. Mrs. Crawford’s death has “obliged her protégée, after some months further trial at her uncle’s house, to find another home. Admiral Crawford was a man of vicious conduct, who chose, instead of retaining his niece, to bring his mistress under his own roof” (41). The marriage of Admiral and Mrs. Crawford was clearly an unhappy one. Able to agree only on

their affection for their niece and nephew and on nothing else, they lived in perpetual disharmony, which suggests that the mistress who moves in has been one of many, or has been of long-standing. For the Admiral to be described as a man of “vicious conduct,” this is very likely to have been the case. Her uncle’s promiscuous behavior has corrupted Mary Crawford. Her dinner table joke about “‘*Rears, and Vices*’” indicates a glancing familiarity with naval sodomy, not an appropriate subject for a young lady, even in the robust age of the Regency (60). Her London friends are trapped in unhappy marriages and Mary would be the last to condemn them for finding consolation in the arms of a lover. Mary Crawford has grown up with such behavior and to her it is food for flippancy.

Adultery plays a major role in *Mansfield Park*, but in the prosaic world of *Emma*’s Highbury, it merely hovers around the edges. There it exists most clearly in Emma’s imagination. Anxious to account in some way for Jane Fairfax’s reserve, Emma dreams up an adulterous passion on Jane’s side for the newly married Mr. Dixon. For Emma, little is needed in the way of evidence. A rescue on a boat, a preference for Jane’s piano performances rather than his fiancée’s, Irish piano music sent with the new instrument—these are the foundations of Emma’s imaginings. It gives her secret pleasure to picture to herself the correct and upright Miss Fairfax, whose “perfections” have long made Emma jealous, “cherishing very reprehensible feelings” for a married man (347, 243).

There is even a faint aura of possible adultery surrounding Harriet Smith. Her father turns out to be a tradesman, “rich enough to afford her the comfortable maintenance which had ever been her’s, and decent enough to have always wished for concealment” (481–82). While her illegitimacy is stated positively in the book, her father’s adultery appears only as highly probable. He may have been a single man at the time of her conception, but a wife would make Harriet’s father particularly desirous of concealing an illegitimate child.

Even when Emma’s eyes have been opened to her own mistakes, adultery cannot be entirely banished from her imagination. On hearing that the Westons have received disagreeable news at Randalls, Emma has to curb her questions as she hurries there with Mr. Weston. She does not, however, curb her thoughts: “Her fancy was very active. Half a dozen natural children, perhaps—and poor Frank cut off!” (393–94). From the little we know of Mr. Churchill he seems to be the last man in the world to commit adultery. There is no *actual* place for adultery in Highbury. Even the deplorable Mrs. Elton

would not cheat on her *caro sposo*, and that is not solely from the undoubted difficulty she would have in finding anyone to cheat with. Highbury is a sunny world and its crimes are more likely to be fanciful than real. By the time she wrote *Emma* Jane Austen had left behind her the very real and “dreadful crime” of adultery which darkens *Mansfield Park*.

Sense and Sensibility is the only other of Jane Austen’s novels to mention adulterous behavior and the reference is a small one. Eliza Brandon, Colonel Brandon’s first love, is forced to marry his older brother. Desperately unhappy, she leaves her husband and runs off with another man—the first of many men who use and abuse her. Colonel Brandon is unable to “trace her beyond her first seducer, and there was every reason to fear that she had removed from him only to sink deeper in a life of sin” (207). Eliza sinks rapidly into prostitution—destitution leads her to a “spunging-house,” and death soon follows. The misfortunes of this Eliza are paralleled in the fate of her daughter who is seduced by Willoughby. The same name for both women emphasizes the similarities: both are seduced, become pregnant, and have their lives ruined by sexual misconduct. Marianne narrowly avoids a similar fate. Seduction, adultery, and elopement were, as Jane Austen vividly illustrates, dangerous activities for women to indulge in.

“Most vices may be committed very genteely,” Dr. Johnson once remarked; “a man may debauch his friend’s wife genteely: he may cheat at cards genteely” (Boswell 543). This is certainly the case in Jane Austen’s world. The debauching which takes place is conducted in as genteel a manner as possible. But still the debauching does occur, and adultery plays a vital role in her fiction. D. H. Lawrence criticized Jane Austen for her prim old-maidishness, disliking her because she left sex out of her novels. She may never have been as explicit as Lawrence was in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (few writers have been), but her work clearly recognizes sexual attraction between men and women and acknowledges that improper sexual behavior is an all too common aspect of human nature. Deplorable it might be—Jane Austen was firmly convinced that strong impulses and intense emotional states should be controlled and kept within the proper boundaries ordained by society—but she does not for that reason ignore its existence. The open keeping of a mistress, several elopements, seduction and attempted seduction, illegal marriages—all have a place in Jane Austen’s world and all are treated by her with a matter-of-factness and lack of prudishness which should have pleased Lawrence, not disgusted him. There is no sentimentality or smirking, no false blushes, and the men and women who, in their weakness, commit moral crimes in her novels

are well-bred, polite people, rather than the monsters of conduct book fiction. However, almost always, they are punished. Those who by-pass the iron gates of respectability must be prepared to pay a heavy price for doing so.

“Thou shalt not commit adultery” insists the Bible. A parson’s daughter needed no reminding of the Ten Commandments. Adultery threatened the established social order, introduced disharmony into the family unit, and broke one of the moral laws of God. But human nature has many frailties, and Jane Austen’s understanding of her fellow men and women included a comprehension of why weakness sometimes led to adulterous relationships. *Mansfield Park* contains both condemnation and sympathy in its superb analysis of this crime.

George Moore, the English novelist, made the following claim in his autobiography of 1936: “I wrote the first serious novels in English. I invented adultery, which didn’t exist in the English novel till I began writing” (Stephens 137). Clearly he had never read *Mansfield Park*.

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