

Jane Austen and the Power of the Spoken Word

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“Even in my profession”—said Edmund with a smile—“how little the art of reading has been studied! how little a clear manner, and a good delivery, have been attended to! I speak rather of the past, however, than the present.—There is now a spirit of improvement abroad; but among these who were ordained twenty, thirty, forty years ago, the larger number, to judge by their performance, must have thought reading was reading, and preaching was preaching.”¹ (p. 339)

Jane Austen, both in her life and in her literature, was interested in how the spoken word affected the listener. Because of her personal experience listening to church services from her father and other preachers, she was certainly aware of the importance of adequate (at least) delivery of sermons and readings.

The “spirit of improvement” mentioned by Edmund was evidenced by the institution of the early eighteenth-century schools of elocution. Elocution is “the art of public speaking emphasizing gestures, vocal production, and other aspects of delivery.”² Two of the most famous schools were begun by Thomas Sheridan and John Walker, featuring the Natural and Mechanical approaches, respectively. These systems of training and others like them were the result of observing many examples of good oral expression, analyzing the most effective uses of face, voice, and body, and developing a system of learning and application for ideal oral performance of a written text. The written texts studied and performed were usually from literature. Elocution became such a popular branch of study that not only prospective ministers but also many others who wished to improve their poise and powers of address were signing up for training.

Reading aloud during Jane Austen’s time was a form of home entertainment. Evenings in the Austen family circle would feature readings from Shakespeare, Addison, Johnson, or the novels of Richardson, Sterne, Fielding, or Fanny Burney, just to mention a few, for the enjoyment and enrichment of the family members.³ This literature was performed well enough for references and quotations to spice the daily conversations of the family members. Jane’s father, George Austen, not only provided an example or oral reading from the pulpit weekly but also read often to his family in the evenings, thereby influencing Jane’s understanding and taste in literature. Jane also describes the reading of *Pride and Prejudice* by her mother, Cassandra Austen:

Our second evening’s reading to Miss B. had not pleased me so well, but I believe something must be attributed to my mother’s too rapid way of getting on: and though she perfectly understands the characters herself, she cannot speak as they ought.⁴ (Letter 77, p. 299)

Jane’s brothers and sister also participated in readings and even dramatizations of the little parodies that Jane wrote for their amusement. *Love and Friendship* is the most mature of those early “Juvenilia.” Jane could probably say of her family what Fanny Price said of the Bertram family: “To good reading, however, she (Jane) had been long used; her uncle (father) read

well—her cousins (brothers) all—and Edmund (Cassandra) very well”; (334)

Jane not only enjoyed hearing proficient reading from others but was herself an excellent performer of literature. According to her brother Henry: “She read aloud with very great taste and effect. Her own works probably were never heard to so much advantage as from her own mouth, for she partook largely in all the best gifts of the comic muse.”⁵ Fulwar William Fowle reminisced about her reading of “Marmion” transporting him so that “when Mr. W. Digweed was announced it was like the interruption of some pleasing dream.”⁶ Jane discussed and read her novels freely in “the bosom of her own family.” Reading them aloud first to her sister Cassandra and then to the rest of the family was not only for their entertainment but also for her revision process. Once when reading to Cassandra a draft of *Pride and Prejudice* in their room, Jane overlooked her little niece Anna who was later found downstairs doing imitations of the characters and had to be stopped since the novel was, at this time at least, to be kept secret from the rest of the family. Jane had a much higher opinion of Cassandra’s critical taste than her own and probably incorporated many of her suggestions.

What elocutionary training Jane received can only be surmised. In her correspondence, she mentions reading Hugh Blair’s *Sermons*; this same Mr. Blair also wrote one of the most famous elocutionary texts of his day called *Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783). Jane made a present of another book to her niece Marianne entitled, *Elegant Abstracts or Useful and Entertaining Passages in Prose Selected for the Improvement of Scholars at Classical and Other Schools in the Art of Speaking, in Reading, Thinking, Composing and in the Conduct of Life*, found now at the Jane Austen Museum at Chawton. This title probably expresses as well as anything could the interdependence of reading, writing, and speaking eloquently for the civilized life. The Austen family, noted for its wit, vivacity, and family unity, would surely provide an excellent example of reading aloud for family sharing and improvement. As was so often the case with Jane Austen, she took an aspect which she knew well from her own life, refined it through her genius, and used it within her novels to illumine aspects of character and values.

In *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen uses the ability to read aloud to delineate character and to contrast moral and immoral ends of persuasion. The first incidence of importance stemming from the spoken word is the infamous play *Lover’s Vows*, but, since elocution centres on the individual reader with a text, we will bypass the much-written-about theatricals and pause at a quiet evening at home with Fanny reading Shakespeare to the indolent Lady Bertram and Pug. Just before Henry Crawford enters the room, Fanny puts the book aside, preferring not to read in front of him. He picks it up and begins to read.

... She could not abstract her mind five minutes; she was forced to listen; his reading was capital, and her pleasure in good reading extreme... but in Mr. Crawford’s reading there was a variety of excellence beyond what she had ever met with. The King, the Queen, Buckingham, Wolsey, Cromwell, all were given in turn; for with the happiest knack, the happiest power of jumping and guessing, he could always light at will, on the best scene, or the best speeches of each; and whether it were dignity or pride, or tenderness or remorse, or whatever were to be expressed, he could do it with equal beauty.—It was truly dramatic. (p. 337)

At this time in the novel's progress, Crawford is extending all his arts of pleasing to persuade Fanny to become his wife. She has withstood all his wiles except his kindness in helping William get "made" and now comes this almost enchanting effect of his oral reading. Just as Plato had philosophized, in the presence of truly effective performance, reason is temporarily deposed.

Edmund watched the progress of her attention, and was amused and gratified by seeing how she gradually slackened in the needle-work, which, at the beginning, seemed to occupy her totally; how it fell from her hand while she sat motionless over it—and at last, how the eyes which had appeared so studiously to avoid him throughout the day, were turned and fixed on Crawford, fixed on him for minutes, fixed on him in short till the attraction drew Crawford's upon her, and the book was closed, and the charm was broken. Then, she was shrinking again into herself, and blushing and working as hard as ever; (p. 337)

Although training in elocution was part of the education of every gentleman, Henry Crawford's talent with Shakespeare is far in excess of the customary elocutionary exercises which fell to the lot of most young men.⁷ Edmund comments "To know him (Shakespeare) in bits and scraps, is common enough; to know him pretty thoroughly, is, perhaps, not common; but to read him well aloud, is no every-day talent" (p. 336). Jane Austen's heroes are usually not adept at acting. Edmund compares very poorly with the eloquence of Henry Crawford. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Edward Ferrars, who cannot be animated even by reading Cowper, compares very unfavourably with Willoughby who sings, dances, and recites with éclat. The expressive conversationalist such as Wickham or Frank Churchill is shown in contrast to the pedantry of Mr. Collins' monotonic reading of sermons to the Bennet girls or Mr. Knightley's kind gestures but few words. There seems to be a motif developed of the discrepancy between sounding good and moral, thereby receiving immediate public approbation, and possessing worth which is only proven on a day to day basis by actions. Elocutionary excellence is presented as somewhat suspect since it may mislead the listener as to the true moral character of the speaker. Jane Austen's heroines are often misled initially (Fanny is the exception) but later they are given a truer perspective after observing actions over a period of time.

In contrast to Crawford's use of elocution for courtship, he and Edmund later discuss the need for the clergy to preach with effective delivery. Edmund reflects on how "distinctness and energy may have weight in recommending the most solid truths; and besides there is more general observation and taste, a more critical knowledge diffused than formerly" (p. 337). His concern is for the clear expression of the content and the education of the listener in those elocutionary principles. But for Henry Crawford, obviously, this will not be enough.

'Our liturgy,' observed Crawford, 'has beauties, which not even a careless, slovenly, style of reading can destroy; but it has also redundancies and repetitions, which require good reading not to be felt... A sermon, well delivered, is more uncommon even than prayers well read. A sermon, good in itself, is no rare thing. It is more difficult to speak well than to compose well... There is something in the eloquence of the pulpit, when it is really eloquence, which is entitled to the highest praise and honour. The preacher who can touch and affect such an heterogeneous mass of hearers, on subjects limited, and long worn thread-bare in all common hands; who can say

any thing new or striking, any thing that arouses the attention, without offending the taste, or wearing out the feelings of his hearers, is a man whom one could not, (in his public capacity) honour enough. I should like to be such a man. (pp. 340-41)

There is an insidious change in emphasis here from Edmund's concern for the "most solid truths" to Crawford's interest in the power of the speaker to emotionally move the listeners. There is a subtle shift away from the humbling of the human element in the presence of the Divine to the exultation of the power of one human being over others. On the other hand Jane Austen was hardly against interesting and forceful delivery from the pulpit.

In her typical fashion, after having set up a contrast of character perspectives on the spoken word used for entertainment or enlightenment, Jane Austen has Sir Thomas Bertram put the matter in its true light. He is explaining to Henry Crawford Edmund's decision regarding residency when he becomes ordained.

Edmund might, in the common phrase, do the duty of Thornton, that is, he might read prayers and preach, without giving up Mansfield Park; he might ride over every Sunday, to a house nominally inhabited, and go through divine service; he might be the clergyman of Thornton Lacey every seventh day, for three or four hours, if that would content him. But it will not. He knows that human nature needs more lessons than a weekly sermon can convey, and that if he does not live among his parishioners and prove himself by constant attention their well-wisher and friend, he does very little for their good or his own. (pp. 247-48)

Jane Austen, daughter of a clergyman who took his position seriously and discharged it honourably, knew about the power and the limitation of the spoken word.

NOTES

¹ References are to the Chapman edition of *Mansfield Park* (Oxford University Press, 1933).

² "Elocution" is defined *The American Heritage Dictionary*.

³ David Cecil, *A Portrait of Jane Austen* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), 35.

⁴ Letter of Jane to Cassandra Austen February 4, 1813 reprinted in J. E. Austen-Leigh's *Memoir in Persuasion* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), 341.

⁵ Henry Austen, "Biographical Notice of the Author," reprinted in *Persuasion with a Memoir of Jane Austen* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), 32.

⁶ Austen-Leigh, Mary Augusta, a *Personal Aspects of Jane Austen* (London: J. Murray, 1920), 61-62.

⁷ Tom Bertram speaks of his early life "... Nobody is fonder of the exercise of talent in young people, or promotes it more, than my father; and for anything of the acting, spouting, reciting kind, I think he has always had a decided taste. I am sure he encouraged it in us as boys. How many times we mourned over the dead body of Julius Caesar, and to be'd and not to be'd in this very room, for his amusement! And I'm sure, my name was *Noval*, every evening of my life through one Christmas holidays." (pp. 126-27)