

Theatricality and the Theatricals in *Mansfield Park*

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Julia Bertram may have missed out on the starring role she wanted in *Lovers' Vows*, but her author compensates her with the fine melodramatic entry and speech which bring down the curtain on Volume One of *Mansfield Park*: “the door of the room was thrown open, and Julia appearing at it, with a face all aghast, exclaimed, ‘My father is come! He is in the hall at this moment.’” (172)¹

I begin with this observation of Jane Austen’s brilliant employment of the methods of the drama as I did some years ago in an article about the relation between this novel’s genre and that of the English tradition of the Morality Play.² There I argued that in *Mansfield Park* Austen is deliberately writing against the grain of her audience’s expectations—after the success of *Pride and Prejudice*—that she should produce another “light, and bright, and sparkling” romantic comedy. Instead she placed issues such as sexual attraction, charm, and wit, and their relation to morality, in a different light, writing an anti-romance and using a quasi-allegorical structure to underpin her realistic study of manners and morals in a country house. We are encouraged to think, at least on one level of our reading, of the Crawfords as the World and the Flesh (and possibly the Devil, as I shall explain in a minute), the Bertram family as Pride (Sir Thomas), Sloth (Lady Bertram), Avarice (Mrs. Norris, also Self Conceit), Lust (Maria), Envy (Julia, also Anger). (The minor character Dr. Grant is the incarnation of the least heinous deadly sin, Gluttony.) Tom Bertram embodies Dissipation, or the Prodigal Son, as do his literary ancestors Tom Rakewell and Tom Jones. Against this set of allegorical figures are placed the hero and heroine of a Christian drama, Edmund or Everyman, who consciously tries to do good but is tempted and falls (significantly his home is named Man’s-field), and Fanny, the steadfast woman—or, in Biblical terms, the Pearl of Great Price (Matt. 13:45-46).

All these allegorical figures were to be met with in the English drama of the late Middle Ages, the Morality Plays (*Everyman* being the most famous), and they left their influence on Shakespeare and later dramatists. Cardinal Wolsey’s famous speech from *Henry VIII*, “Farewell, a long farewell to all my greatness,” which Henry Crawford reads aloud to the Mansfield Park family, is a fine example of Shakespeare’s use of this genre, Wolsey representing here the fall of Pride. But most strikingly, Shakespeare took over the character-type of the Vice for his own purposes. Richard III and Iago are characters who are clearly evil, but are also witty, clever tricksters, who enlist the audience’s complicity in their nefarious doings. Richard III is one of the characters that Henry Crawford would be happy to “undertake,” when the putting on of a play at Mansfield is first proposed: to see how naturally he would play it, compare this speech of his to his sister and complicit audience,

Mary, with Richard's planned seduction of Lady Anne, which he announces gleefully to the audience:

“. . . I do not like to eat the bread of idleness.³ No, my plan is to make Fanny Price in love with me.”

“Fanny Price! Nonsense! No, no. You ought to be satisfied with her two cousins.”

“But I cannot be satisfied without Fanny Price, without making a small hole in Fanny Price's heart. . . .” (229)

Henry Crawford is the theatrical “Vice” of this novel, and Austen, like Shakespeare, makes sure that we recognise his ancestry in the biblical figure of Satan. He is a wanderer: “To any thing like a permanence of abode, or limitation of society, Henry Crawford had, unluckily, a great dislike” (41). He is an excellent actor and equally an accomplished card-player and gambler. Only Henry and his sister are fully at home in the game of Speculation: “though it was impossible for Fanny not to feel herself mistress of the rules of the game in three minutes, he had yet to inspirit her play, sharpen her avarice, and harden her heart” (240). In the same episode the conversation turns to the alterations and “improvements” to established houses and their traditions that Henry proposes, first on the eventful trip to Sotherton (“what was done there is not to be told!” says Mary (244)—though it has in fact been told, by the audacious author); and secondly at Edmund's parsonage at Thornton Lacey, which Henry came upon by chance in his wanderings—which elicits the significant comment “I never do wrong without gaining by it” (241).

Like his sister Mary, both rootless and improperly parented (the Admiral who brought them up is specifically associated with Vice through Mary's pointed and improper pun about “*Rears and Vices*” [60]), Henry is happiest when he has persuaded everyone around him to abandon their principles and plunge into the intoxicating world of make-believe, of acting, when anyone may be, or do, anything without reference to the normal restrictions on their behaviour. Henry says (again it is a significant admission; here Austen allows us to see the true springs of his character), “There was such an interest, such an animation, such a spirit diffused! Every body felt it. *We were all alive*. There was employment, hope, solicitude, bustle, for every hour of the day” (225, my italics)—that is, only while acting does Henry feel really alive and purposeful; he has no other “employment.” And Mary, much later, reiterates these sentiments, emphasising the pernicious power that the theatricals gave her: “If I had the power of recalling any one week of my existence, it should be that week, that acting week. . . . I never knew such exquisite happiness in any other. His [Edmund's] sturdy spirit to bend as it did! Oh! it was sweet beyond expression” (358).

Undoubtedly, theatre is the locus of carnival licence⁴ in this novel as it is in our culture in general, but Austen is quite clear in figuring Henry and Mary Crawford as sibling tempters, devils in charming disguise, insinuating themselves into the weak and naive pleasure-seeking community and causing havoc.

Paradoxically, Austen thus uses theatrical forms in order to alert the reader/audience to the dangers of theatricality, of shape-changing, amorality and game-playing in human relations—as Shakespeare and the medieval playwrights had done before her. But theatricality is not confined to the Crawfords and the episode of *Lovers' Vows*: it is, I would argue, one of Austen's most commonly-used methods as a writer.

The “sister novelists” whom Austen most admired, Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth, both wrote plays, mostly witty comedies: Edgeworth's were produced in her lifetime, Burney's not until after her death.⁵ There are passages of sparkling dialogue in the work of both novelists, as well as an interest in the practices of contemporary theatre. The heroines go to the theatre, there are private theatricals and other “performances” by people out to get attention. But in my (as yet incomplete) reading of these writers' works I find little to match Austen's sense of the way theatricality pervades virtually *all* our public intercourse. This is a psychological insight, and the basis, I believe, of much of our admiration of Austen's “realism.” Even the least “theatrical” of us displays ourselves in our action and our speech, and it therefore behoves the writer to represent characters dramatically, i.e., as though their words could be spoken by “real people” on the stage of “real life.” The speeches may be heightened for clarity and point, but they will be *sayable*. (Television dramatisations of Austen's works—of which in my opinion *Mansfield Park* is the best—always work best when they use the maximum of Austen's dialogue and invent as little as possible: the characters then speak as they look, as beings constructed by the social practices of another age.)

Take for example the six pages of Volume One, ch. 3 of *Mansfield Park* which cover two dialogues, the first between Fanny and Edmund over the proposal that Fanny should move to Mrs. Norris's house:

“. . . I cannot like it. I love this house and every thing in it. I shall love nothing there. You know how uncomfortable I feel with her.”

“I can say nothing for her manner to you as a child; but it was the same with all of us, or nearly so. She never knew how to be pleasant to children. But you are now of an age to be treated better; I think she *is* behaving better already; and when you are her only companion, you *must* be important to her.”

“I can never be important to any one.”

“What is to prevent you?”

“Every thing—my situation—my foolishness and awkwardness.”

“As to your foolishness and awkwardness, my dear Fanny, believe me, you never have a shadow of either, but in using the words so improperly. . . .” (26)

—a touching and naturalistic little conversation which nevertheless allows us to see the sense of self which each speaker has: Fanny's feelings of inferiority, but at the same time her need to express her strong feelings of love for the place in which she has grown up; and Edmund's “role” as her mentor.

The second dialogue, which follows that between Fanny and Edmund after a short paragraph of narrative “scene-changing,” is between Mrs.

Norris and Lady Bertram. Mrs. Norris is a comic figure of selfish hypocrisy: "I *must* live within my income, or I shall be miserable; and I own it would give me great satisfaction to be able to do rather more—to lay by a little at the end of the year" (30) just gives the flavour of a rich three pages. And it seems that even Lady Bertram can see through her protestations—"I dare say you will. You always do, don't you?"—though she herself is too slothful to do anything with this perception.

One could analyse every dialogue in the book for its rich revelation of character in naturalistic speech. The point I want to make here is a somewhat simpler one: that Jane Austen, in these six pages of dialogue, inserts only four "stage directions" to the speakers: Fanny blushes (26), sighs (27); "Mrs. Norris almost started" (28), then closes the scene as she wishes by "moving to go" (30). There are not even speech attributions ("said Lady Bertram"): the reader is expected to imagine, to hear each distinctive voice and see each speaker—as though the speeches were being delivered by actors on a stage.

When it comes to courtship dialogues, Austen adds an extra layer of self-awareness on the part of the speakers. The novel which immediately precedes *Mansfield Park*, *Pride and Prejudice*, has a number of spiky, sparkling dialogues between Elizabeth and Darcy, in which it is clear to the reader that they are "performing" for one another, even though their conscious minds do not allow them to recognise their attraction for each other. Elizabeth even concludes their first dancing dialogue with the self-conscious quip, "I must not decide on my own performance" (ch. 18). Further emphasis is given to the importance of self-presentation in Charlotte Lucas's remark apropos Jane's attraction to Bingley: "Jane should . . . make the most of every half hour in which she can command his attention. When she is secure of him, there will be leisure for falling in love as much as she chuses" (ch. 6). Austen has clearly learnt from Shakespeare that the mode of romantic comedy—which, in "real life," we palely imitate in flirtatious games—requires an acknowledgement of the theatricality of self-presentation. Mary Crawford is aware of this, and plays her role of fascinating woman to the hilt. Her problem is that Edmund refuses to play *his* part:

" . . . Come, do change your mind. It is not too late. Go into the law."

"Go into the law! with as much ease as I was told to go into this wilderness."

"Now you are going to say something about law being the worst wilderness of the two, but I forestall you; remember I have forestalled you."

"You need not hurry when the object is only to prevent my saying a bon-mot, for there is not the least wit in my nature. I am a very matter of fact, plain spoken being, and may blunder on the borders of a repartee for half an hour together without striking it out."

A general silence succeeded. (93-94)

It is only when Edmund is seduced into acting in *Lovers' Vows* that he finds a second-hand romantic language and situation which allows him to "perform" the role of the reluctant lover: the character of Anhalt, who is unable to see that Amelia is virtually throwing herself at him, is wonderfully apt for Edmund. But what is the nature of this "seduction"? It is not directly

Mary's work—she is more clever than that. Having seen her direct approach fail—

“If *any* part could tempt *you* to act, I suppose it would be Anhalt,” observed the lady, archly. . . . “—for he is a clergyman you know.” (144-45)

—she enrolls the unwitting Fanny as “straight man” in a performance for Edmund's benefit, so that *he* then adopts the role, in the real world, of preserver of the decorums of his father's house: “Consider what it would be to act Amelia with a stranger,” etc. (154). But this role as representative of order and control is merely a cover for the disruptive drive of his desire to be in an intimate situation with Mary. Hence we have the comic sequence (almost pure farce) in which first Mary, then Edmund, arrives at Fanny's virginal East room to oblige her to be audience to the rehearsal of their love scene.

To prompt them must be enough for her; and it was sometimes *more* than enough; for she could not always pay attention to the book. In watching them she forgot herself; and agitated by the increasing spirit of Edmund's manner, had once closed the page and turned away exactly as he wanted help. (170)

Edmund's role as preserver of decorum—among the duties of a clergyman as he defines them (“the guardianship of religion and morals, and consequently of the manner which result from their influence” [92])—has clearly been transgressed here, not only in regard to his own behaviour but also in so far as he is violating Fanny's virginally pure imagination by playing out the scene. Within hours he is further transgressing in joining with the others to persuade Fanny to read *Cottager's Wife* in the public rehearsal. From this fate worse than death she is only saved by the fortuitous arrival of the true head of the household, Sir Thomas. Even Fanny, that is, is implicated (as “victim” or melodrama heroine) in the novel's wide-ranging use of the discourse of theatre. Edmund's first response to the proposal of the theatricals was an objection on the grounds of its inappropriateness for “gentlemen and ladies, who have all the disadvantages of education and decorum to struggle through” (124). The roles of clergyman and gentleman are indistinguishable here: both should be guardians and policemen of the appropriate behaviours of the classes which make up a society threatened by the sort of revolution that was happening across the Channel. Acting, significantly, is in Edmund's casual colloquial formulation of a “trade”: he is willing (even eager) to acknowledge the “good hardened real” work of those performers who offer controlled fantasy in exchange for the audience's money, but he knows instinctively (he has been “bred” to know) that “as *we* are circumstanced” it would be “very wrong” (125): “It would be taking liberties with my father's house in his absence which could not be justified” (127). In short, it would allow in the sort of carnival disruption of hierarchised society which had been going on in France for the last quarter of a century. *Lovers' Vows*, although it is a German play, partakes of this revolutionary sentiment, in its critique of the corruption of Baron Wildenhaim (chief gentleman of his community and unacknowledged father of the illegitimate hero); and in its insouciant crossing of the class barriers in the happy denouement.⁶ Although

Mansfield Park approaches dangerously close to such radicalism in some elements of its plot (Sir Thomas is shown to be a weak father; Fanny the disregarded quasi-servant becomes a full member of the aristocratic family), Austen's use of the older morality-play structure provides a firm framework for a politically and morally conservative tale.

Fanny, notwithstanding her recruitment into the novel's metadrama, is unique as a heroine at this point in Jane Austen's oeuvre because she is *not* a public "performer." Her desperate declaration, "I could not act any thing if you were to give me the world. No, indeed, I cannot act" (145), with its significant resonances of Christ's temptation on the mount (Luke 4: 5-8), is also a statement (paradoxically public, and therefore, albeit reluctantly, a performance) about how she sees herself in the social world: unlike Elizabeth Bennet, she will not play its games. But in Volume Two of the novel Fanny is obliged, by the coercive power of the social structure in which she lives, to enter upon the social stage.⁷ She is a young, marriageable woman: she cannot escape the role that her class and gender dictate. Austen has prepared us for contemplation of the subtle but pervasive power of these social structures by alerting us in Volume One to the power of *acknowledged* theatricality. The play *Lovers' Vows* itself (and Austen clearly assumes that her contemporary readership is familiar with this immensely popular play), particularly emphasize the rules of the game of courtship, which are spectacularly transgressed by the role-reversals of the Amelia-Anhalt scenes.

As Volume Two begins, the signs of the theatricals at Mansfield Park are all removed—we might say, theatricality is apparently repressed (Sir Thomas even burns every copy of the play he can find), but by chapter 3 it is clear that Fanny cannot, even so, avoid the fate she most fears, of being "looked at." Her father-substitute, Sir Thomas, and the man she loves, Edmund, are conduits for the next narrative event: Fanny's becoming a desirable woman.

"... the truth is, that your uncle never did admire you till now—and now he does. Your complexion is so improved!—and you have gained so much countenance!—and your figure—Nay, Fanny, do not turn away about it—it is but an uncle [and a lover who doesn't know his own mind!]. If you cannot bear an uncle's admiration what is to become of you? You must really begin to harden yourself to the idea of being worth looking at." (197-98)

In the same dialogue we learn that Fanny is beginning to "perform" socially, at least in the safety of the family circle—"I do talk to [Sir Thomas] more than I used. I am sure I do. Did you not hear me ask him about the slave trade last night?" Though she soon loses confidence in her performance—"while my cousins were sitting by without speaking a word, or seeming at all interested in the subject, I did not like—I thought it would appear as if I wanted to set myself off at their expense . . ." (198).

When Maria marries and Julia accompanies her on the wedding trip, Fanny, "[b]ecoming as she then did, the only young woman in the drawing-room . . . it was impossible for her not to be more looked at, more thought of and attended to, than she had ever been before" (205). Henry Crawford is puzzled by her nevertheless, because she does not play the familiar social role:

“I do not quite know what to make of Miss Fanny. I do not understand her. . . . What is her character?—Is she solemn?—Is she queer?—Is she prudish? . . . I could hardly get her to speak. I never was so long in company with a girl in my life—trying to entertain her—and succeed so ill! Never met with a girl who looked so grave on me! . . .” (230)

Fanny never does play the role expected of her, despite Henry Crawford’s most determined efforts: she proves herself a true Christian heroine by using the unavoidable public/performative nature of her courtship by Henry to bear witness. His complaint about her “looking grave” relates to the “speech” she made when he recalled the theatricals with such enthusiasm (“We were all alive,” etc.):

“As far as *I* am concerned, sir, I would not have delayed his return for a day. My uncle disapproved it all so entirely when he did arrive, that in my opinion, every thing had gone quite far enough.”

She had never spoken so much at once to him in her life before, and never so angrily to any one; and when her speech was over, she trembled and blushed at her own daring. (225-26)

This first “speech” to Henry Crawford sets the tone for all her later intercourse with him. The irony is that Crawford’s is such a vitiated mind that her moral fervour simply makes her the more attractive—her performance, that is, has principally novelty value for him:

Fanny’s attractions increased—increased two-fold—for the sensibility which beautified her complexion and illumined her countenance, was an attraction in itself. He was no longer in doubt of the capabilities of her heart. She had feeling, genuine feeling. It would be something to be loved by such a girl, to excite the first ardours of her young, unsophisticated mind! She interested him more than he had foreseen. A fortnight was not enough. His stay became indefinite.

(235-36)

The thought-processes here recorded suggest that we are very close to the world of Richardson’s *Clarissa*, and the destructive sexual amorality of the rapist Lovelace.

Austen’s narrative mode shifts markedly after the final departure of the Crawfords from Mansfield Park: The last eleven chapters of Volume Three, telling of Fanny’s visit to Portsmouth and her final return to Mansfield, are almost all third-person narrative, interspersed with several letters as the story draws to its climax. The only extended dialogues are between Fanny and Henry (ch. 11) and Fanny and Edmund (ch. 16). That is, Austen uses the dramatic mode only in order to continue her presentation of Fanny’s involvement in the social discourse of courtship, though Fanny, true to her nature and principles, re-writes the conventions.

With Henry she is merely polite, roused only to declare, “We have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be. Good bye; I wish you a pleasant journey to-morrow” (412)—a typically Fanny utterance, mixing moral fervour and unflinching good manners. With Edmund she speaks principally to prompt him in the telling of his final dramatic interview with Mary. Austen thereby ultimately “shows” Mary as the stagey and worldly figure of the novel’s morality play, by framing her

within Edmund's moralising re-telling of the event, which is itself framed by Fanny's loving and supportive role as listener.

"... she would have laughed if she could. It was a sort of laugh, as she answered, 'A pretty good lecture upon my word. Was it part of your last sermon? At this rate, you will soon reform every body at Mansfield and Thornton Lacey; and when I hear of you next, it may be as a celebrated preacher in some great society of Methodists, or as a missionary into foreign parts.' She tried to speak carelessly; but she was not so careless as she wanted to appear. I only said in reply, that from my heart I wished her well, and earnestly hoped that she might soon learn to think more justly, and not owe the most valuable knowledge we could any of us acquire—the knowledge of ourselves and of our duty, to the lessons of affliction—and immediately left the room. I had gone a few steps, Fanny, when I heard the door open behind me. 'Mr. Bertram,' said she. I looked back. 'Mr. Bertram,' said she with a smile—but it was a smile ill-suited to the conversation that had passed, a saucy playful smile, seeming to invite, in order to subdue me; at least, it appeared so to me. I resisted; it was the impulse of the moment to resist, and still walked on." (458-59)

This is at once superbly dramatic—the upright hero rejects the fascinating temptress—and deliberately distanced, first through its narrative mode (reported speech), and then through the intrusion of the narrator's voice to finish the chapter, ironising Edmund's great moment of renunciation as a tale to be indulged in the comfort of domesticity:

... such was Fanny's dependance on his words, that for five minutes she thought they *had* done. Then, however, it all came on again, or something very like it, and nothing less than Lady Bertram's rousing thoroughly up, could really close such a conversation. (459)

This foregrounding of the ironic narrator, and consequent de-emphasising of the narrative mode of dramatic realism, is of course most striking in the novel's final chapter, which immediately follows this conversation. This is the point at which Austen disappoints her readers by refusing to give us even the truncated love-scene which she concedes in *Pride and Prejudice*.

I purposely abstain from dates on this occasion, that every one may be at liberty to fix their own, aware that the cure of unconquerable passions, and the transfer of unchanging attachments, must vary much as to time in different people.—I only intreat every body to believe that exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier, Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford, and became as anxious to marry Fanny, as Fanny herself could desire. (470)

Our tendency to be seduced by theatricality, even to the point of theatricalising our own social performances, is here touched on; as is the audience's temptation to treat fiction (whether in the theatre or in novels) as reality. The episode of the theatricals, and its pervasive after-effects, allows us to see why Austen insisted on this deeply undramatic ending.

NOTES

- ¹ All quotations from the text are taken from *The Novels of Jane Austen*, vol. III, *Mansfield Park*, 3rd edn., ed. R. W. Chapman, London: Oxford University Press, 1934 (repr. 1973).
- ² "Theatricals and Theatricality in *Mansfield Park*," *Sydney Studies in English*, 13, 1987-88, 61-73.
- ³ Cf. "I am determined to prove a villain And hate the idle pleasures of these days. Plots have I laid . . ." *Richard III*, 1.1, 30-32.
- ⁴ For an interesting discussion of the "increasing internalization in fiction of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" of "the impulses embodied in the carnivalesque," which in passing mentions the Mansfield Park theatricals, see Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization*, London: Methuen, 1986.
- ⁵ Ellen Donkin's *Getting into the Act: Women Playwrights in London 1776-1829* (London: Routledge, 1995) discusses the details of Fanny Burney's "failed career" as a dramatist, despite persistent efforts to have her plays produced (*Eúwy and Elgiva* was given one disastrous performance at Drury Lane in 1795).
- ⁶ It is interesting to observe Austen's literary chauvinism: Shakespeare is deliberately set on another plane in the novel's discourse of drama. Henry Crawford, reading Shakespeare around the domestic hearth, is performing at his most admirable:
- . . . in Mr. Crawford's reading there was a variety of excellence beyond what she had ever met with . . . 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.—His acting had first taught Fanny what pleasure a play might give, and his reading brought all his acting before her again. . . . (387)
- Shakespeare ("part of an Englishman's constitution") escapes the taint of transgression that Mrs. Inchbald's play provided (though it is amusing to reflect what Maria and Mr. Crawford or Edmund and Mary might have made of the courtship scenes in *As You Like It*).
- ⁷ Austen's clear and ironical view of the whole social structure is neatly indicated in her narratorial comment, "Miss Price had not been brought up to the trade of *coming out* (267). Nothing really differentiates the society lady's "trade" from that of the actress. (I am indebted to Elaine Bander for pointing out this comment.) This aspect of the novel is also discussed in a subtle and provocative argument by Joseph Litvak in *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-century English Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 1-27. "Whatever taint we may detect in Henry's tendency to see theatricality in everything . . . turns out to color the authoritarian vision of *Mansfield Park* as a whole, especially as that vision is entrusted to Sir Thomas" (21).