

Master of Arts Thesis

“We always know when we are acting wrong”:  
Performance and Theatricality in  
Jane Austen’s Works

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## TO MUM

In the hopes that this makes up for me taking ten years  
to get around to *Pride and Prejudice*.

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# Introduction

“No, indeed, I cannot act” (*MP*, 102). Fanny Price’s famous declaration is often considered by readers to be Jane Austen’s final words against the theatre. Fanny asserts her refusal to engage in the performance of *Lovers’ Vows*, and coupled with her utter disapproval of the entire theatrical scheme, her opposition to performing is taken as Austen’s own disapproval of the theatre. Some critics have followed this line of thinking. It falls neatly alongside Henry Austen’s canonising of his sister as an idealised paragon of Christian virtue—what Claudia L. Johnson describes as “a homely songbird indifferent to her art” (Johnson 1992, x). Yet in 1809, when Austen was discussing Hannah More’s *Cælebs in Search of a Wife* with sister Cassandra, she wrote that her “disinclination for [the book] before was affected, but now it is real; I do not like the Evangelicals” (*Letters*, 24 January 1809). The comment is all the more pertinent considering More’s about-turn from playwright to Evangelical writer: Austen seems to suggest that she prefers the author of *Percy* to the author of *Cælebs*.

Scholarship of the last several decades has eroded the image of Austen as a sequestered spinster and asserted her as an author who was engaged with and aware of the world around her—including the world of the theatre. This thesis aims to further complicate the out-dated image of Austen, and expand on the historicist scholarship already published about Jane Austen’s relationship to the theatre and its place in her novels. In this introductory section, I want to provide an overview of Austen’s experiences with the theatre, the state of English theatre during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, and examine the recent scholarship about Austen’s personal and literary relationship with the theatre. Austen understood the finer details of performance and theatricality, and she used

her knowledge of the theatre to construct her own novels. Austen knew what Fanny Price discovers—that her society relies on performance to such an extent that there is no avoiding it, only navigating through it.

### AUSTEN AT THE THEATRE

It is unsurprising that Austen, a voracious reader of novels and poetry, was also a voracious reader of plays. She knew playwrights and their works intimately. Shakespeare features prominently in her novels—her novels often contain “transformations” of his themes (Harris 1989, 188)—and he is referenced explicitly to imply parallels between Austen’s own works and the plays mentioned. When it is revealed that the Dashwoods were reading *Hamlet* with Willoughby right before his unceremonious departure, one is tempted to draw comparisons between Marianne and the spurned, hysterical Ophelia. In *Mansfield Park*, Henry Crawford flexes his acting prowess by reading a speech by Wolsey from *Henry VIII* in which Wolsey represents “the fall of Pride” (Gay 2002, 99). Even more pertinent are Crawford’s declarations that he could play any number of Shakespeare’s antagonists, from Richard III to Iago to Shylock. Yet Shakespeare is by no means the only playwright to have had an influence on Austen’s work. Elizabeth Inchbald is possibly the second most prominent example, given the use of her play *Lovers’ Vows* in *Mansfield Park*. The play itself was adapted from the German play *Das Kind der Liebe* by August von Kotzebue and it was not the only Kotzebue work Austen knew: she mentions seeing a performance of *The Birth-Day* in a letter to her sister Cassandra (*Letters*, 19 June 1799). In another letter to Cassandra she alludes to *The Belle’s Stratagem*—“Mr Doricourt has travelled; he knows best”—when discussing an acquaintance who is traveling, thus showing her awareness of Hannah Cowley’s writings (*Letters*, 14–16 January, 1801). Returning again to *Mansfield Park*, we should also consider the intense discussion over which play will be performed at Mansfield. As Paula Byrne lays out, the various suggestions made by Thomas Bertram reflect humorously upon his character’s position and psychology in a way that is only clear when a reader is familiar with the plays discussed. His choices—including Richard Brinsley

Sheridan's *The Rivals* and *The School for Scandal*—are “a cross-section of some of the best works” by comic playwrights of the era (Byrne 2002, 188). Byrne writes that George Coleman's *The Heir at Law* in particular, which Tom suggests five times, provides “significant insight into his character, which is wholly lost on a reader today” (Byrne 2002, 188). Not only was Austen widely-read when it came to plays, but she expected her readers to understand the various allusions as well.

Austen also had a wealth of practical experience with the theatre to draw upon. From a young age, she was privy to the many private theatrical productions the Austen family hosted. Her older brothers Henry and James both had a flair for the theatrical and used Sheridan's plays often; their influence can be seen in Austen's own inclination for Sheridan, whose “presence can be felt most strongly in her mature works” (Byrne 2002, 6). James Austen was even in the habit of writing prologues and epilogues for plays the family performed, and some of these additions have survived. The plays performed by the Austen family are laid out in both Penny Gay's and Paula Byrne's studies, and the catalogue of plays offers a far more liberal disposition for Austen than tradition has dictated. The family clearly preferred comedies to tragedies, and had little objection to plays that were considered to have controversial messages (Byrne 2002, 9).

The family also frequented public performances at both legitimate and illegitimate playhouses. The most successful playhouse outside London was the Orchard Theatre in Bath. In 1767 it became the first licensed theatre beyond London, and the increasing popularity of Bath as a fashionable city contributed to the theatre's success and expansion over time (Gay 2002, 7). There is very little doubt that Austen would have attended the theatre in Bath. She was clearly familiar with the interior of the theatre—in *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland is seemingly snubbed by the Tilneys during a visit to the Orchard Theatre. The theatre itself is easily inferred from the details of Catherine's experience; it is small enough that she catches “the sudden view of Mr Henry Tilney and his father joining a party in the opposite box” (NA, 82–83). As Penny Gay writes, if they are at the 40-foot-wide Orchard, “Catherine and Henry are opposite each other at a distance of perhaps 32 feet” (Gay 2002,

9). Educated guesses have been made about what plays Austen might have seen during her time in Bath, and many of the plays mentioned in *Mansfield Park* were performed during Austen's residency in the city (Gay 2002, 9–10). Trips to London were also occasions for theatre-going. Austen mentions several legitimate and illegitimate playhouses across her letters and novels, and her letters indicate she was often accompanied to the theatre by her niece Fanny Knight. Across a series of letters written during a trip to London in 1814, just a few months before the publication of *Mansfield Park*, Austen describes both her own theatre experiences and her brother's experience of reading *Mansfield Park*. In the same week that Austen attended a performance by Edmund Kean, her brother Henry finished his first reading of *Mansfield Park*. Austen wrote that Henry's "approbation has not lessened. He found the last half of the last volume *extremely interesting*" (*Letters*, 9 March 1814; emphasis original). It seems hardly fair, then, to call *Mansfield Park* the absolute disavowal of the theatre that it has been charged as by critics such as Joseph Barish.

Being an admirer of live theatre, Austen was also knowledgeable about the popular actors of the day. It has been suggested in recent years that Austen's description of Henry Crawford was inspired by actors David Garrick and Edmund Kean. Crawford is described as both "undersized" and "considerably the best actor of all" (*MP*, 115); both Garrick and Kean were short men whose acting was "versatile and electrifying" (Harris 2011, 45). They were known in particular for their performances of Richard III and Shylock, parts that Crawford claims he could take up at a moment (*MP*, 87). Austen had the pleasure of seeing Kean perform his critically acclaimed Shylock in 1814; she wrote that they "were quite satisfied with Kean. I could not imagine better acting.... I shall like to see Kean again excessively" (*Letters*, 5–8 March, 1814). Austen also expressed disappointment at missing her opportunity to see Sarah Siddons in 1811, though she had little doubt she would enjoy her talent (*Letters*, 25 April 1811). Scholars have also deduced that Austen saw famed comic actress and royal mistress Dorothy Jordan in *The Devil to Pay* (Gay 2002, 20).

Austen was discerning when it came to acting. Her comment that "acting seldom satisfies me" (*Letters*, 29 November 1814) should be taken as a critique on the quality of

acting that she had been seeing rather than as an expression of distaste for acting altogether. By this time she had become an intelligent critic of the theatre who had an appreciation for theatre craft and performance. Such was the result of Austen's early and frequent exposure to acting and the theatre from a young age; she continued to pursue her interest in performance through her adult life.

### **A HISTORY OF GEORGIAN THEATRE**

Jane Austen came of age at a remarkable period in the history of British theatre. The Licensing Act of 1737 shaped the landscape of theatre in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Briefly, the Act divided the theatrical world into two broad factions: legitimate and illegitimate theatres. Only legitimate theatres were licensed by the Crown to perform spoken drama. Any unlicensed (i.e., 'illegitimate') theatres found to be performing spoken drama could be shut down by authorities. The consequences the Licensing Act had upon the culture of so-called illegitimate theatre will be discussed in Chapter One, but it also had a profound effect upon the larger, legitimate theatres of London, Covent Garden and Drury Lane. Under the Licensing Act, the Lord Chamberlain had to approve the script of any play due to be performed at licenced theatres before it went into production. The Act legitimised censorship of the theatre in the period, so much so that the era is "characterised by various kinds of theatrical censorship as well as some direct and indirect forms of resistance to censorship" (Moody & O'Quinn 2007, xiv). The censorship imposed on the legitimate theatres did not allow for drastic deviation from traditional forms of theatre. As a result, burlesque, pantomime, and musical theatre all flourished in the underground, illegitimate theatres.

Despite restrictions to form, legitimate theatre of the period was home to some of the greatest and most dynamic actors of the age. The period saw the rise of the modern celebrity cult, with London stage actors becoming distinct personalities in the popular conscience. David Garrick developed what was considered a naturalistic style of acting that audiences found striking compared to the static old style. Garrick became known not only as a lively

actor, but also as a protégé of Dr Johnson's. His spiritual successor, Edmund Kean, enjoyed similar success and fame; as mentioned, Jane Austen thought highly of his acting abilities. Kean's first performance of Shylock at Drury Lane was reviewed effusively by William Hazlitt, and Kean became so popular that tickets to his shows had to be booked weeks in advance (Gay 2002, 19). Sarah Siddons famously transformed perceptions of Lady Macbeth from "harpy" to a sympathetic and arresting tragic figure (Cox 2001, 37). Siddons was considered the great tragic actress of her time and "queen of the London stage" (Cox 2001, 37). She was the eldest in the Kemble family, a family that became known in the eighteenth century for its strong connections to the theatre. Of the six Kemble children, five performed on stage, often opposite one another. John Philip Kemble in particular was a famous actor in his own right and later rose to manager of Covent Garden during the time of the Old Price Riots.

Unsurprisingly, there were those in the British public who were troubled by the moral implications of the rise of theatre. Theatre had been outlawed during Oliver Cromwell's rule in the middle of the seventeenth century only to be restored during the reign of Charles II. It continued to be a site of contention from both religious and secular perspectives. As Jonas Barish has noted, the theatre has always been under fire from critics in a "nearly universal dimension" (Barish 1981, 2). However, the broadening of public media throughout the eighteenth century allowed for new and broader platforms to accommodate the theatre's opponents (Moody & O'Quinn 2007, xiv). In 1806, the Methodist Reverend John Styles wrote that "the effects of the Stage on MORALS and HAPPINESS if clearly pointed out, would, in my opinion, go far towards establishing the conclusion, that it is an evil of awful magnitude, the abolition of which the well-being of society demands" (Styles 1806, 19). Though Styles conceded that literature had greatly benefitted from dramatic writings, he wrote that the theatre promoted the vices of "Luxury, Idleness, and Dissipation" and the stage was the "channel through which the higher classes of society pour forth their contaminating influence upon the humbler walks of life" (Styles 1806, 22–23). The stage was seen as a corrupting, immoral force that 'poisoned' both actors and audience.

Playwright Hannah More, in her late Evangelism, became completely disillusioned with the stage. More once believed that the stage could be used for didactic purposes, but she gradually grew concerned with the moral implications of theatre. Anna Lott writes that More became “afraid that the elevation of potentially dangerous passions through dramatisation ... would have a damaging effect on women’s place within the existing social order” (Lott 2006, 276). Others offered more secular criticisms of the stage. In the 1800 preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth spoke with derision of the “sickly and stupid German tragedies” (Wordsworth 1931, 231) that were in vogue with the London theatre-going public. Essayist Charles Lamb declared Shakespeare “unfit for the stage” due to Lamb’s personal disgust and dissatisfaction with the style of stage productions of his time (Barish 1981, 328–29). Moreover, the public, performative nature of the theatre was in direct opposition to the popular Romantic ideal of the artist as a solitary, spontaneous creator. There were few attempts by writers to reconcile Romanticism with the theatre; many plays written by major Romantic authors were written to be read rather than performed.

Yet despite the strict censorship and the myriad of voices that decried the stage, there were equally as many writers, women among them, who defended the stage as a didactic resource. Scottish playwright Joanna Baillie, who was renowned in the period for both her dramatic and critical writing, described theatre as “a school in which much good or evil may be learned” (Baillie 2001, 57). Contrary to the belief that the theatre promoted vice, Baillie believed that the theatre was an excellent platform to instruct people in the detection of vice in those around them and in exercising the natural human instinct towards sympathy. “Above all,” she wrote, “to be well-exercised in this study will fit a man more particularly for the most important situations of life” (Baillie 2001, 76). To Baillie, viewing plays made people better judges of character and more sympathetic and empathic towards others. Elizabeth Inchbald, notable in this instance for being the translator and adaptor of *Lovers’ Vows*, questions the logic that plays are not allowed to teach the same doctrine as scriptures. After all, if “the pulpit has not had the eloquence to eradicate the crime of seduction, the stage may be allowed an humble endeavour to prevent its most fatal effects” (quoted in

Barish 1981, 302). Baillie's writings on the theatre were widely discussed, and they shaped the opinions of the play-going public. It is not unreasonable to suppose that Austen, herself an avid follower of the theatre world, was familiar with both Baillie's plays and her criticism.

### THE THEATRE IN AUSTEN SCHOLARSHIP

There is a long and sustained record of scholarship examining Austen's relationship to the theatre. Scholars often relied heavily on *Mansfield Park*, and given that the novel leaves debates about the theatre open and ambiguous, it is unsurprising that there has been a lack of consensus. Jonas Barish's 1981 work, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, studies anti-theatricality from Plato to the aftermath of World War II, but he devotes an entire chapter to such attitudes in Austen's era. He provides a wealth of information on both religious attitudes towards the theatre and how the Romantic ideal of the solitary artist contributed to a decline in the popularity of theatre through the early nineteenth century. The events of *Mansfield Park* seem to serve his argument that "suspicion" of the theatrical occasionally burst out in a "sudden and disconcerting blaze" (Barish 1981, 299). Building on the work of mid-twentieth-century critics such as Lionel Trilling, Barish argues that *Mansfield Park* is decidedly antitheatrical: "all the right-thinking characters in the story" regard the private theatricals as morally dangerous, while the "fatuous aristocrat" and "blackguard" of the piece are its primary supporters (Barish 1981, 299–300). Barish astutely notes the shaky and ambiguous reasons Fanny, Edmund, and Sir Thomas seem to have for opposing the theatre and correctly cites the confusion as a source of difficulty for readers. Yet rather than identifying this as an intentional choice on Austen's part, Barish sees this as a weakness of the novel, a decision that belies "the stubborn puritanism that seems to lodge in the marrow of even the most independent of spirits" (Barish 1981, 304). *Mansfield Park* is a novel rife with contradictions, too numerous not to be intentional. Ultimately, Barish—and the criticism he drew from—focused too closely on the overt treatment and discussion of theatre. He missed taking a broader view of how theatricality was treated in the novel, and Austen's work, as a whole.

Joseph Litvak's work takes the broader approach to Austen that Barish misses. His 1992 book, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, examines how theatricality is utilised in the works of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Henry James. His aim is to challenge the idea that the novels examined are non-theatrical or anti-theatrical, and he argues that the authors' inclusion of theatrical themes is intentional. In his chapter on *Mansfield Park*, Litvak argues against Barish and other scholars who find *Mansfield Park* decidedly anti-theatrical and struggle to reason out Austen's abruptly conservative turn. Litvak treats the text more complexly, writing that "the question ... is not so much 'What motivated Austen's anti-theatricalism?' as 'What motivated her to create the impression of anti-theatricalism?'" (Litvak 1992, 4; emphasis original). For Litvak the novel deals with the "theatricality of everyday life" and shows how futile Sir Thomas' attempts to eradicate the theatre are (Litvak 1992, 5). Sir Thomas might be opposed to the theatre, but the authority he wields to tear down the private theatricals is only in place because of the theatrical nature his society rests upon (Litvak 1992, 13–14). Yet the tone Litvak uses to discuss theatricality is far from neutral. The younger Thomas Bertram describes acting as an "infection" (*MP*, 127), and Litvak unhelpfully extends this metaphor to its logical extreme, speaking of contamination, overdose, disease, symptoms, and a "medicinal project" (Litvak 1992, 23). Litvak's terminology is negative, obscuring the possibility that Austen's framing of theatricality is neutral. Perhaps inadvertently, Litvak suggests theatricality is a necessary evil, used by both protagonists and antagonists. Such a tendentious reading is then frustrated by the final chapter of *Mansfield Park*, where the tone relies on a playfulness that resists attempts to pin down whether Austen is advocating or denouncing performance.

Nora Nachumi's 2001 article "Theatricality and Spectatorship in *Mansfield Park*" anticipates a more complex engagement with Austen's relationship to theatre. Nachumi reframes Austen's use of *Lovers' Vows* by suggesting that her use of the play "reflects her engagement in a debate about the effect of the drama on the emotions of eighteenth-century theatre goers" (Nachumi 2001, 233). Part of the controversy surrounding the theatre was the idea that it had a corrupting influence on spectators; women were considered the most

vulnerable because “they lacked the emotional detachment necessary to reason” (Nachumi 2001, 234). Nachumi suggests that Austen was undercutting this notion by presenting a model for spectatorship in a female character who is both emotionally affected by performance but who also retains a critical capacity to analyse the technical aspects. She argues that it is not the play that corrupts the actors, but their refusal to learn the lessons the play is promoting (Nachumi 2001, 240). Nachumi’s argument places Fanny as the example of good spectatorship and shows that Austen’s interactions with the theatre are far more complex than simply promoting Evangelical or liberal doctrine. It is not engaging with theatre that corrupts the spectators and actors, but the inability of the individual to learn from the lessons laid out in plays and performances.

Early historicist critics focused largely on *Mansfield Park*, but more recent critics have widened the view to include all of Austen’s works. The most prominent examples are the ground-breaking works by scholars Penny Gay and Paula Byrne. Both writers aim to deconstruct the persistent myth that Austen was anti-theatrical and show that the theatre was a major influence on Austen as a writer. Penny Gay’s approach in *Jane Austen and the Theatre* is to focus on each novel in turn, discussing the various theatrical genres they descend from and even, at times, pinpointing plays that provide parallels to Austen’s work. Most interestingly, Gay raises the idea of Austen’s society being “inescapably theatrical” and suggests that Austen is dealing with this concept head-on rather than trying to circumvent or suppress it (Gay 2002, ix). Paula Byrne, whose book is also called *Jane Austen and the Theatre*, places Austen in the context of contemporary playwrights such as Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Fanny Burney, and Elizabeth Inchbald. She also highlights Austen’s relationship to Shakespeare, reminding readers that for much of the nineteenth century, Austen was considered the “Prose Shakespeare” because of her dramatic rendering of characters (Byrne 2002, ix). In contrast to Gay, Byrne focuses more on the technical aspects of the theatrical influences in Austen’s work. She examines how Austen constructs scenes with entrances and exits and tableaux, as well as the use of classically theatrical plot devices such as comic misunderstandings and ironic reversals (Byrne 2002, xii). Thus Austen’s novels are informed

not only by plays working as intertexts, but by a technical understanding of how plays are structured to achieve the right dramatic tension.

Gay and Byrne's works have become touchstones for understanding how theatricality is at play in Austen's novels. Daniel O'Quinn credits Gay and Byrne with successfully demonstrating Austen's "deep and abiding interest in theatrical representation and theatrical sociability" (O'Quinn 2009, 377). Both texts appear in the bibliography to Deirdre Le Faye's fourth edition of *Jane Austen's Letters*, but in fact, they appear in the bibliographies of most recent studies on Austen, showing how central the theatre has become to understanding various aspects of Austen's work and biography. Nevertheless, the nature of Gay and Byrne's studies necessitates a limited scope, and the simultaneous revival of Romantic theatre studies suggests new areas of literary exploration. It is important to broaden our examination of the interplay of Austen's work and the theatre to include the findings of recent Romantic theatre scholarship.

Jane Moody's study *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840* provides a wealth of information that has been little touched upon in relation to Jane Austen. As noted by Byrne, Austen was familiar with unpatented theatres of London—the first professional theatre mentioned in her letters is an illegitimate theatre, Astley's Amphitheatre (Byrne 2002, 30–32). One could hardly be involved in theatre culture of the era without being aware of the legitimate/illegitimate dichotomy and the controversies that it fuelled. Moody's broad study of the culture of illegitimate theatre provides a new framework for thinking about theatre as a whole in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. She deposes the idea that Shakespeare was considered a "politically conservative playwright" and that the theatre itself was a generally "apolitical" arena (Moody 2000, 1–2). Her view of playhouses and audiences "as the makers, consumers, and critics of contemporary theatrical culture" reflects the influence the theatre had on Austen (Moody 2000, 3). Furthermore, Moody discusses how the late-eighteenth-century cult of gesture—that is, using wordless physical iconography as a method of communication—was tied to the theatre, and especially to the pantomime that illegitimate theatre fostered (Moody 2002, 83). Gesture is used extensively by Marianne

Dashwood as part of her repertoire of sensibility. The connections that can be made between Marianne's performances and illegitimate theatre are numerous, serving to illustrate the scope of influence the theatre had on Austen's work.

However, acting is not the only type of performance to appear in Austen's work; musical performance also features prominently, though it has rarely been brought into focus in discussions about Austen and theatre. Yet music could be crucial to stage performances, especially in illegitimate theatres. Gillen D'Arcy Wood's work on Austen in *Romanticism and Music Culture in Britain, 1770–1840* rejects the notion that she was “attacking” accomplishments (Wood 2010, 156). Examination of Austen's novels suggests rather that she is opposing the misuse of accomplishment rather than accomplishment itself. Wood writes that the penchant for critics towards an “anti-accomplishment” style of reading is destructive and diminishes the opportunities for professionalism in music women could pursue (Wood 2010, 158). We know Austen herself was a pianist who had an extensive collection of sheet music and enjoyed playing regularly. Linking Austen's writing to Beethoven's sonata form, Wood argues that both styles rely on a ‘realness’ achieved through “temporalisation” that encourages the reader or listener to experience the characters or work “phenomenally” rather than as a structured development (Wood 2010, 176). While Wood focuses on how the philosophy behind the music Austen absorbed was “consistent with, not opposed to, the Romantic project of interiority she advanced” (Wood 2010, 178), his comments about Austen and female accomplishment strike a chord with work on Austen and theatrical performance.

While Gay asserts that Austen's taste for drama is “clearly conservative” and resists the generic collisions of illegitimate theatre, we will see in Chapter One how various elements of illegitimate theatre described by Moody are present as flourishes in Austen's writing. A revived interest in theatre of the period has brought to the fore the numerous female playwrights of the period—and there is little doubt Austen was aware of these works. Meta-theatrical writings by authors such as Joanna Baillie and Elizabeth Inchbald propose ideas about the effects of spectatorship that we can see Austen extending and examining in her own work. Underpinning all of Austen's work, however, is an understanding that her social

world is a stage. With such an understanding in mind, arguments about Austen's anti-theatricality become dangerously shaky. Austen supports a theatrical reading of her work by using the dramatic conventions and structures that Byrne identifies—her characters are presented in ways that remind readers of stage plays. Her script-like dialogue allows for ease of adaptation, something that has been vigorously seized upon in the last two decades. There is no longer any denying that Austen is a thoroughly dramatic writer.

### OVERVIEW

This thesis builds on Gay and Byrne by including contemporary or later scholarly works on Romantic theatre history. I have chosen to focus on Austen's first three published works that were released in relatively rapid succession in the early 1810s. Despite similarities in overall plot, each novel focuses on dramatically different protagonists and deals with theatricality in widely different ways. However, they all examine ideas about performance in society and how the characters are to navigate social situations without straying into the morals possessed by their antagonists. By showing both protagonists and antagonists using similar, if not the same, performative techniques to navigate society, Austen takes an ambivalent view towards performance. Rather than presenting theatricality and performance as inherently moral or immoral, Austen illustrates that they are neutral tools and impresses that the intention behind the performance is far more significant than the performance itself.

The performative focus of *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) is the young Marianne Dashwood. Marianne has committed herself to the sensibility movement and as such believes in expressing her feelings honestly. While this is admirable in some ways, it means that Marianne finds it "impossible for her to say what she [does] not feel" (*S&S*, 89), and she often causes offence to social acquaintances. In contrast, her elder sister Elinor has a much better sense of politesse, and understands the necessity of performance in society. Marianne, who performs her emotions to everyone, finds Elinor's approach hypocritical. In Marianne's forms of expression—such as music, pose, and mime—we can find parallels to the theatrical techniques of the illegitimate theatres operating in London during Austen's lifetime. At

times, Austen takes an ironic approach to Marianne's sensibility, portraying her as an actor who is moving through the poses that express her doctrine. However, at other times, there is real pathos in Marianne's behaviour which, though still rooted in sensibility, is validated by the author. Most importantly, Marianne's epiphany at the end of the novel focuses on how her thoughtlessness has harmed those around her. She does not decry her sensibility—within pages, we see that she is still reacting with the same emotional spontaneity she always has been. What she learns is the value of concealment in social performances, but she does not denounce her performativity in order to do so. Despite Austen's preference for legitimate performances, the use of these hallmarks of illegitimate theatre and the validation of Marianne's performativity suggests a more liberal, less conservative portrait of Austen than has traditionally been rendered.

Austen's second published novel, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), takes an even more decided stance in favour of social performances and judgment based on intention. While *Sense and Sensibility* focuses on the public performances of one or two individuals, *Pride and Prejudice* uses an ensemble cast to explore the complexities of social performance. Austen uses music as a motif to reflect and clarify attitudes towards aspects of social performance; in several cases, the line between musical and social performance is intentionally blurred. The comparison is made overt during a scene at Rosings that revolves around Elizabeth's musical talent. Elizabeth explicitly draws the comparison between her lack of musical skills and Mr Darcy's lack of social skills. When Darcy comments that he has never been comfortable in society, Elizabeth replies that though her musical talents are inferior, "I have always supposed that to be my own fault—because I would not take the trouble of practicing" (*P&P*, 117). When we apply this analogy of music and social performance to other passages within the text, we find that many characters engage with music in the same way that they engage with society. Such readings then reveal the myriad of intentions behind social behaviours. The question of intention is crucial to *Pride and Prejudice*, as both protagonists and antagonists use or avoid social performance to varying degrees of success. Thus, the ability to discern the intent of an actor becomes the key to

understanding some of the major figures in the novel. The assumptions Elizabeth makes about characters such as George Wickham and Mr Darcy drive the conflict in the novel; she must develop her ability to understand intention behind social performances before she can grow as a protagonist.

In the final chapter we turn from the actor to the audience. *Mansfield Park* (1814) is an intentional departure in tone from Austen's other work. In contrast to other Austen heroines, Fanny Price is introverted and painfully shy; her dramatic skills are tied to observation rather than performance. There is no shortage of scholarship on *Mansfield Park* and its relationship to theatre due to the private theatricals that take place in volume one. Yet it is only recently that critics have begun to closely examine how the theatrical is operating in the rest of the novel. Fanny is a reluctant performer, she "cannot act" (*MP*, 102) and suffers from stage fright—but by the end of the novel, she is successfully assimilated into a performative society. That her assimilation into this society is framed as a victory suggests that Fanny's acceptance of performativity and the theatrical is beneficial to her. Thus, the real danger in *Mansfield Park* is not performance itself, but the failure to understand how performance is being used by others in social situations. We know from early on in the novel that Henry Crawford is a protean cad, but Fanny is the only character who has the observational skills to detect it. She has the perception to understand intent and sincerity; more importantly, she retains the memory of her observations. Examination of Fanny's position in the text reveals that her judgments are based on the morality of the characters around her, not any preconceptions about the dangers of performing. Thus she is able to eventually embrace performance and even direct her own protégée—but she refuses to do so at the expense of her perception.

Austen was unquestionably a fan of theatre and critically engaged with plays and performances. By examining these three texts I hope to collate and extend the most valuable scholarly insights into Austen's work and her relationship with the theatre. I draw on recent research into Romantic-era theatre in order to further our understanding of how Austen's work was influenced by theatre, performance, and dramatic theory. Though my work is of a

limited scope, it would be possible to explore how these new revelations on Romantic-era theatre could be applied to Austen's later novels, *Emma* and *Persuasion*.

# Legitimising Marianne Dashwood

## *Sense and Sensibility* and Illegitimate Theatre

In Jane Austen's time, the London theatrescape was divided into two broad factions: legitimate playhouses that staged productions approved for performance by the Lord Chamberlain, and illegitimate playhouses that had sprung up in opposition to the legal theatres of Drury Lane and Covent Garden. Illegitimate theatres worked outside the strict censorship of the Lord Chamberlain, and were able to stage socially and politically provocative productions that would have been rejected for performance in the legitimate theatre circuit (Moody 2000, 16–17). Working outside the jurisdiction of the Lord Chamberlain meant that illegitimate theatres were considered socially transgressive spaces that pushed the boundaries of decency and social respectability. The term 'illegitimate theatre' simply denotes theatres not licensed by the Crown, but it is a particularly loaded choice of words. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* makes clear, 'illegitimate' is not only linked to the idea of being unauthorised or illegal, but also to the idea of being "improper." 'Illegitimate theatre' carries connotations of poor quality and a lack of cultural respectability. There is also the close association to adulterous affairs, which would cast illegitimate theatre as a misbegotten venture born from censorship. The more innocuous and less common 'unlicensed theatre' carries the same legal implications, yet has none of the connotations relating to quality. Despite the disparaging terms used for unlicensed theatres, they proved to be fierce competition for the licensed theatres, meaning that the licensed theatres eventually began to "appropriate" techniques from illegitimate productions "even into their productions of more serious drama" (Burwick 2011, 105). Moves to incorporate styles such as pantomime into legitimate productions blurred the line between legitimate and illegitimate

productions, lending more and more cultural legitimacy to forms that had originally been considered lower class, transgressive, and illegitimate.

Similarly, Marianne Dashwood's behaviour in *Sense and Sensibility* is gradually legitimised over the course of the novel. The novel itself follows the development of two sisters, each of whom is, on the surface, defined by one of the two titular qualities. Typically of Austen, the dichotomy she proposes in the title is not as clear-cut as it suggests, and throughout the novel we see Elinor and Marianne learning to reconcile their disparate approaches. Both sisters can be linked to the theatre in subtly different ways, and both engage in acting in one form or another. For Marianne, her effusive behaviour is an expression of her sensibility. However, her imprudent public actions go against the standards of decorum and cause offence among the Dashwoods' acquaintances. Yet it is difficult to deny the sincerity of Marianne's actions, and the legitimacy that the narrative gives to her mode of expression. Not only that, the form of her behaviour and performance mimics tropes and techniques used by actors in illegitimate productions. In particular, her tendency towards melodrama and her reliance on music mark her as coming from a tradition of illegitimate theatre practices.

This chapter will briefly examine the culture of the illegitimate theatres of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, Austen's knowledge of these theatres, and how this knowledge in turn affected her writing of *Sense and Sensibility*. Interpreting the novel in the context of contemporary theatre provides us with new insights into how to understand both the characters themselves and Austen's own views on the theatre. Marianne provides us with an ultimately sympathetic view of theatre and performance—her actions are unquestionably sincere. Her performances are contrasted with Willoughby's, who uses similar techniques in order to deceive those around him. Though both Marianne and Willoughby delve into melodrama, only Willoughby's acting is shown as truly dangerous. Considered together, Marianne and Willoughby give us a rather ambivalent presentation of performance. Even Elinor can be understood in theatre terms; not as a critic or censor, but as a stage manager and even, at times, a performer herself.

### **ILLEGITIMATE THEATRE**

The early decades of the eighteenth century were fraught with anxieties over unlicensed theatres that were established without a royal patent. The Theatre Licensing Act of 1737 aimed at shutting down the illegitimate theatres by reinstating the Renaissance-era definition of actors as vagrants. Doing so meant that actors who were found to be performing any type of “entertainment of the Stage” that had not been licenced by the Lord Chamberlain could be tried and punished (Moody 2000, 16). Clearly, it was hoped that the strict punishments handed down to vagrants would act as a deterrent to actors playing outside the sanctioned Drury Lane and Covent Garden theatres. The Licensing Act also imposed strict textual censorship dictating that all plays to be performed at legitimate theatres had to be read and approved by the Lord Chamberlain (Moody 2000, 16). However, the Act was geographically limited to Westminster, meaning that the Lord Chamberlain had no jurisdiction over the unpatented theatres that were later established outside this area of London (Moody 2000, 16). These limitations of legislation allowed for the establishment of many unpatented theatres and undoubtedly contributed to the growing sub-culture of illegitimate theatre.

After only a few years, cunning theatre managers began to find workarounds in the Act that allowed them to stage theatrical productions in unpatented playhouses. Henry Giffard charged patrons for enjoying musical performances alongside ‘free’ performances of comedic plays (Moody 2000, 17). A second Act in 1752 was addressed with the aim of cracking down on such practices, but its ill-thought parameters as to what constituted theatre entertainment fuelled the development of the already eclectic offerings of illegitimate theatre. The Act assumed that the entertainment performed at unlicensed theatres “represented a non-dramatic sphere of bodily work utterly distinct from the drama staged at Drury Lane and Covent Garden” (Moody 2000, 18)—music, dancing, and even acrobatics were common types of performance at illegitimate theatres. The system of censorship, concerned more with censoring “moral and social pollution” than any kind of anarchic

notions, did not specify precisely how to censor performance texts—and as Jane Moody rightly points out, many of the performances did not have physical scripts (Moody 2000, 18), making any kind of meaningful censorship difficult to achieve. In retrospect, the 1752 Act appears to have been instated at the behest of moral guardians and, due to vague specifications, did more to fuel the development of illegitimate culture than dismantle it.

By the 1790s, the idea of theatre legitimacy—and terms associated with theatre legitimacy—had entered the popular conscience. A public understanding of the distinction between what constituted legitimate and illegitimate theatre reflected the starkly different types of drama that were being performed in each faction. Legitimate theatre was seen as the canon of English drama—a distinction that lent authenticity to plays that were performed by legitimate companies. There was also an element of patriotism encompassed by such a definition, facilitated by the plays being approved by the Lord Chamberlain and thus creating a platform for propaganda (Moody 2000, 51). With legitimate theatre monopolising ‘serious drama’, inventive and spontaneous genres flourished under illegitimate roofs. Shunned by legitimate theatre practices, burletta, pantomime, and melodrama became staples of the illegitimate theatrescape. These forms of theatre were further encouraged by the prohibition of spoken drama in illegitimate playhouses (Moody 2000, 83), meaning that music and the physical language of poses, mime, and attitude became the primary forms of communication in illegitimate theatre productions. This movement towards using the body as a means of expression reflected a broader cultural movement that placed value on the use of gesture in rhetoric—in fact, physical gesture and expression became “indispensable parts of rhetoric” (Moody 2000, 83). Intentionally using the body as a stage for personal emotions was also popularised by the rise of the Sensibility movement in novels and even legitimate drama; the enormous theatres at the legitimate Drury Lane and Covent Garden playhouses necessitated the use of clear gestures and a powerful voice. However, in the 1790s, English society, still reeling in the aftermath of the French Revolution, conformed to conservative manners and behaviours. The atmosphere of fear resulted in increasingly stringent censorship of free

speech and the abolishment of *habeas corpus* from the legal canon. The upper classes in particular would be eager to maintain the established order through propriety.

We know that Austen visited illegitimate playhouses. Paula Byrne makes an extensive study of Astley's Amphitheatre, an illegitimate theatre mentioned in a letter of Austen's dated 1796. Byrne writes that the importance of Astley's in the "growth of the illegitimate stage" has been little considered by Austen scholars (Byrne 2002, 30). As Byrne notes, Austen uses Astley's "as the location for a major turning point in *Emma*" (Byrne 2002, 32). The theatre had clearly left an impression on Austen. We must also consider that over time, illegitimate theatre practices were increasingly adopted by legitimate productions in order to compete, meaning that even legitimate theatre-goers became familiar with techniques used by illegitimate productions. Austen mentions several plays by name that give us an indication of the genres and tropes she was familiar with. In a September 1813 letter to her sister Cassandra, she mentions both *The Clandestine Marriage* and *Midas: An English Burletta*, plays written in the eighteenth century that were often revived (*Letters*, 15–16 September 1813). Paula Byrne determines from both the letter and Austen's earlier works that she was familiar with both plays at the time the letter was written in 1813 (Byrne 2003, 51–52). The same letter also mentions the pantomime *Don Juan; or, A Libertine Destroyed*. In 1814 she wrote to Cassandra mentioning they were to see *The Devil to Pay*, a comedy starring Dorothy Jordan, by which Austen expected "to be very much amused" (*Letters*, 5–8 March 1814). The playbill for the performance included another pantomime, *Harlequin and the Swans* (Le Faye 2011, 436). We cannot say definitively that these plays were seen by Austen in illegitimate theatres. However, it is certain that she was familiar with both burletta and pantomime, styles that were popular in illegitimate playhouses. Given that Austen visited both legitimate and illegitimate theatres, we can reasonably conclude that both styles of performance had an effect on her writing.

As mentioned above, legitimate theatres began to adopt illegitimate practices in order to compete in the market, and Austen seems to have enjoyed playing with the results of this necessary fusion. Marilyn Butler suggests that Austen actually alludes to the "hard-fought

contemporary controversy” between the legitimate and illegitimate playhouses in *Mansfield Park*, showing that Austen’s work was not untouched by illegitimate theatre (Butler 1990, xxv). “The play at Mansfield Park,” Butler writes, “mirrors what is being staged at Drury Lane, images of carnival and riot in what should be the home of ideal order” (Butler 1990, xxvii). The impression Butler creates is one that Penny Gay outright states: that “Austen’s tastes in drama are clearly conservative,” resisting the innovations of illegitimate theatre (Gay 2003, 171). However, Gay qualifies this assertion with the counterpoint that Austen “responded enthusiastically” to the performances of Edmund Kean, an actor whose revolutionary styles paralleled developments within illegitimate theatre (Gay 2003, 171). Above all, Austen encourages conscious engagement and intent behind the performances of her characters—those who practice gilded spectacle, particularly for their own benefit, are the subject of derision and distaste.

Regardless of Austen’s personal taste, I would argue that an understanding of illegitimate theatre informs her first published novel. Discussing illegitimate theatre in relation to *Sense and Sensibility* opens up more dynamic readings of the characters and even Austen’s own attitudes towards the theatre of her time. An examination of *Sense and Sensibility*, and particularly of Marianne’s character, suggests that Austen was at least sympathetic towards illegitimate theatre and certainly theatre in general. Understood in this light, Elinor reads not as a conservative censor attempting to suppress performance but as a stage manager attempting to guide Marianne’s performance towards its zenith. This interpretation in turn opens up a more liberal view of Austen herself, separating her from her conservative contemporaries who denounced the theatre as immoral and destructive.

#### **STYLE AND INTENT: MARIANNE AND WILLOUGHBY**

An avid devotee of the Sensibility movement, Marianne Dashwood only acts with reference to her own emotions and whims. In this way she is unfailingly sincere—it is “impossible for her to say what she [does] not feel” (*S&S*, 89). Not only that, at times she is rendered mute by her overflowing of emotions and can only express herself silently through her body language

and expression. She is also a character who connects strongly with music, which becomes another mode of expression for her. Marianne's behaviour, her manners, and her accomplishments are all inherently performative, and at times even theatrical. She is centre stage in the drama of her life—and is determined to “cast other people” in her play (Gay 2002, 36). Penny Gay points directly to what she calls the “Siddonian model” of acting, linking Marianne with the popular actress Sarah Siddons who was well known for her “complete embodiment” of characters—that is, Siddons was able to really *show* an audience the suffering of her characters through her physical performance (Gay 2002, 35). Yet there also seems to be a link between Marianne's character and the dramatic forms of illegitimate theatre. Judith Pascoe reminds us that Siddons was as well-known for her acting as she was for her voice—and a powerful voice was a necessity in the large and spacious licensed theatres of London (Pascoe 2011, x). Siddons was linked with, and at least partially defined by, the use of her voice in her performances. In contrast, Marianne is linked more directly with music and often an *inability* to speak in moments of intense emotions—something closely associated with illegitimate theatre. While Gay's comparison to Siddons is valid, we can extend Marianne's links to theatre by considering how much her character mirrors the techniques and culture of illegitimate theatre. Her posing and pantomime, her heavy reliance on music when her voice is cut off by her emotions, and her socially transgressive behaviour distinctly links Marianne with the culture of illegitimate theatre.

Moody explains that though the shift towards gesture and expression was part of a wider cultural movement in rhetoric as well as theatre, “hyperbolic iconography” flourished in illegitimate theatre (Moody 2000, 83). In the same way that illegitimate genres took advantage of poses and gestures when speech was restricted, Marianne takes advantage of poses and gestures to speak for her when words fail her. When Willoughby first abandons Marianne at Barton cottage, she takes the opportunity to stage her grief. The narrator keeps an ironic distance and highlights Marianne's behaviour as intentionally performative: she “would have thought herself inexcusable had she been able to sleep at all the first night after parting from Willoughby” (S&S, 61–62). Her grief manifests itself physiologically—she is

unable to sleep, suffers from headaches, and cannot eat (*S&S*, 62). Even when she is not in the throes of heartache, Marianne's looks are described as "expressive" and "communicative" (*S&S*, 55, 73) when she does not speak. When she sees Willoughby at the ball in London, her feelings are "instantly expressed" as she blushes and exclaims; his resulting rejection of her causes Marianne to turn "dreadfully white" and sink into a chair from physical weakness (*S&S*, 125–26). The tendency to express herself through her physical form remains even after recovering from her sickness. News of Edward's marriage causes her to fall into a faint, and when Elinor announces her engagement to her mother and sisters, we are told that "Marianne could speak *her* happiness only by tears" (*S&S*, 250, 256). Marianne expresses her emotions physically throughout the novel, even after her epiphanic illness. The violence of her emotions mimics the "violent gestures of melodrama" (Moody 2000, 84) and defines her character.

Yet gesture was not the only way that illegitimate genres circumvented the ban on dialogue. From the early stages of illegitimate theatre, musical performances had also been incorporated as part of the entertainment on offer. Jane Moody points to the way that illegitimate pantomimes and melodramas utilised music to stand in for speech as an "important feature of what we might tentatively call an illegitimate aesthetic" (Moody 2000, 86). Likewise, Marianne has a strong connection with music. It is her primary form of accomplishment and she considers the appreciation of music as a "connoisseur" a vital quality in a lover (*S&S*, 15). When Willoughby first leaves, she takes comfort in her music by playing "every favourite song that she had been used to play with Willoughby" (*S&S*, 62). Even more significantly for our purposes, we are told "[s]he spent whole hours at the piano-forte alternately singing and crying; her voice often totally suspended by tears" (*S&S*, 62)—the implication being that the music is standing in for her voice. Moody writes that the "questionably effeminate dissolution of language into music" was one of the controversial aspects of melodrama and pantomime, which would link Marianne with a socially subversive form of performance. The technique itself "imbued the dramatisation of extreme psychological states with ... power and quasi-supernatural intensity" (Moody 2000, 86, 87).

Thus Marianne is presented to us as a solitary figure, cut off from her family as she pours her intense emotions into her musical performance, to the point of being rendered speechless.

Willoughby's character offers an interesting foil to Marianne's; like Marianne, he is presented as a subscriber to sensibility and a great performer. His affinity with dramatic and manipulative acting can be read as a caution against the dangers of theatre. The confrontation scene between Marianne and Willoughby in London is both theatrical and public—Willoughby is able to 'out act' Marianne here, presenting himself as cool and in control while Marianne becomes a desperate picture of the "seduced and abandoned" tragic heroine (Gay 2000, 38–39). Willoughby's performance is effective and convincing enough to throw Marianne into a downward spiral that results in her grave illness. Elinor is deeply angered by Willoughby's actions, and she tries to refuse hearing him out when he appears unexpectedly at Cleveland. The scene itself is intensely melodramatic, taking place on a "cold and stormy" night as the narrator drastically subverts Elinor's expectations about who has arrived (S&S, 224). Even Willoughby's exit from the room at the completion of his narrative is done with a self-consciously dramatic flourish: "I will not stay to rob myself of all your compassionate goodwill, by shewing that where I have most injured I can least forgive. Good bye,—God bless you!" And with these words, he almost ran out of the room" (S&S, 236). The Gothic tropes that Austen takes such delight in cutting down in *Northanger Abbey* are here deployed straight with relish.

Despite this melodramatic framing and Elinor's observation that he is "in liquor" (S&S, 225), Willoughby is able to give an extended account that affects Elinor acutely. She is "softened" towards him, "hardened" against him, reproaches him, pities him, all in the space of a few pages (S&S, 227–31). At the beginning of the conversation she "abhorred him as the most worthless of men" (S&S, 236), yet his ability to play the tragic and sympathetic lover shakes her to such a degree that she needs time to reflect upon his spoken words to give "calmness to her judgement" so that she is able "to declare only the simple truth" (S&S, 247). It is even acknowledged that had Mrs Dashwood been the one to hear his account, "her compassion would have been greater," and she would have been won back over to her former

favourite (S&S, 247). His acting is seductive and has an element of sexual danger. Despite knowing all the danger and harm that Willoughby has brought on her sister, even the level-headed Elinor is still able to be swayed by his superior acting and convincing tragedy.

### **MANAGING THE ILLEGITIMATE: ELINOR DASHWOOD**

The role that Elinor fills and her relationship to theatre is far more ambiguous than Marianne's. Elinor most explicitly falls into the role of spectator, but even this is more complex than it first appears. At various times she is an observer, a performer, a critic, and even a director of Marianne. If Marianne is the centre of her personal stage, Elinor is the consummate spectator, both to Marianne and the rest of their acquaintances. In fact, perceptive observation of the characters and situations throughout the novel are a necessity because of the tropes and situations that Austen uses. Paula Byrne discusses several instances where miscommunication of information becomes a plot point (Byrne 2003, 126–27), and Daragh Downes writes that “narrative unreliability ... looms large in *Sense and Sensibility*” (Downes 2012). Downes continues that “Elinor must constantly work hard to evaluate the questionable or competing claims coming her way” (Downes 2012); thus, Elinor is framed as the most adept observer of the cast. Austen's decision to make Elinor one of the shrewdest characters in the novel and the primary focaliser helps to temper the presumptuous and often hyperbolic gossip spread around by other members of the cast. While many other characters base their information on what they perceive as certain evidence, time and again the information gathered in this way is proven to be false and based on extrapolation. Marianne, for instance, assumes that Elinor is engaged to Edward on the slenderest of proofs, and is “astonished to find how much the imagination of her mother and herself had outstripped the truth” (S&S, 18). In contrast, Elinor is incredibly reluctant to accept the possibility of Marianne and Willoughby being engaged. Though to many their behaviour speaks for itself, Elinor becomes increasingly suspicious as time passes with no announcement from either Willoughby or Marianne:

As this silence continued, every day made it appear more strange and more incompatible with the disposition of both. Why they should not openly acknowledge to her mother and herself, what their constant behaviour to each other declared to have taken place, Elinor could not imagine. (*S&S*, 54)

Despite the evident intimacy between Willoughby and Marianne, Elinor remains suspicious of their intentions to marry. Rather than reading their behaviour as certain proof of their engagement, it only serves to fuel Elinor's suspicions—why would they hide an engagement by making no announcement, when their actions “concealed nothing at all” (*S&S*, 54)? Elinor finds their conduct contradictory enough to doubt any engagement, a doubt that is not shared by any of the other characters.

With Marianne so clearly demonstrating theatrics as a valid mode of expression, it is tempting to cast Elinor alongside the Puritanical decriers of theatre as Marianne's chief censor. However, this would be a disservice to Elinor's intentions and her character. Censors of the theatre, particularly illegitimate theatre, were chiefly concerned with the immorality promoted by the theatre contaminating society at large; the same cannot be said of Elinor. When Marianne's character is under examination by Edward and Elinor, Marianne seizes the opportunity to take a dig at Elinor's constant scolding: “I thought our judgments were given us merely to be subservient to those of our neighbours. This has always been your doctrine, I am sure” (*S&S*, 69). Marianne sees her sister as a familial Lord Chamberlain, censoring her opinions and judgments and altering them for a polite audience. However, Elinor is quick to correct Marianne on this point, replying “My doctrine has never aimed at the subjection of understanding. All I have ever attempted to influence has been the behaviour. ...I am guilty, I confess, of having often wished you to treat our acquaintances in general with greater attention; but when have I advised you to adopt their sentiments or conform to their judgment in serious matters?” (*S&S*, 69). It is clear that Elinor does not want to alter or influence what Marianne's opinions are or how she expresses them. Rather, she wishes Marianne would be more aware of when she is causing offence to other people by

intentionally shirking propriety. She does not find Marianne's feelings, or even her sensibility-driven behaviour, immoral. What she objects to is Marianne's rejection of social mores that reflects poorly on Marianne herself, and on the Dashwood family.

The moments where Elinor is most embarrassed by Marianne's conduct are moments where Marianne gives away too much, particularly of Elinor's own feelings, which are not Marianne's to divulge. When dining one evening at Barton Park, the conversation turns to the prospect of Elinor having a beau, and youngest sister Margaret drops hints that Elinor politely shakes off. Marianne tries to scold Margaret for her comments, however—

...she did more harm than good to the cause, by turning very red and saying in an angry manner to Margaret,

“Remember that whatever your conjectures may be, you have no right to repeat them.”

“I never had any conjectures about it,” replied Margaret; “it was you who told me of it yourself.”

This increased the mirth of the company, and Margaret was eagerly pressed to say something more. (*S&S*, 46–47)

Marianne empathises with Elinor's masked pain, but in trying to reprimand Margaret as Elinor often does Marianne, Marianne only serves to cause more grief and embarrassment. Though she has noble intentions to act as Elinor might, the public setting of the reprimand causes Margaret to retaliate and aggravate the situation.

To Elinor's credit, she refrains from ever reprimanding Marianne in such a public setting. Though Elinor certainly works to critique Marianne's behaviour, her instruction is far more that of a director or manager than of a censor. As a stage manager, Elinor is aiming to gently guide those around her. Jeffrey Cox reminds us that women working in managerial roles in the theatre was not quite as uncommon as we might think, particularly in “private theatricals and even private theatres” (Cox 2000, 39). To a long list of examples he adds

Elizabeth Inchbald, who was a “successful negotiator for herself with several theatre managers” and “had enough clout to arbitrate Kemble’s share in Covent Garden” (Cox 2000, 39). We know that Austen was familiar with Inchbald’s work, and that she herself was an active advocate and manager of her own career, so it is unsurprising she would place Elinor in a similar position. Elinor does not shame Marianne’s behaviour publically, as we might expect from someone decrying the evils of theatre, but talks to her quietly and privately, correcting her performance rather than censoring it. The scene discussed above, where Elinor scolds Marianne for her behaviour with Willoughby, is conducted only after everyone else has left the room and the sisters have a private moment (S&S, 51). Elinor’s managerial position also extends beyond Marianne’s behaviour. Early in the novel, we are told that Elinor is guiding and moderating Mrs Dashwood as well. Their extended stay at Norland is because they are unable to find a house that meets Mrs Dashwood’s ideas of “comfort and ease” as well as Elinor’s “prudence.” Elinor’s “steadier judgement rejected several houses as too large for their income, which her mother would have approved” (S&S, 13). In both cases, Elinor’s management is necessary to guide her sister away from social infamy and her mother away from destitution.

Yet Elinor is by no means restricted to ‘backstage’ positions; she also makes use of performance, albeit in a completely different way and for completely different reasons to Marianne. For Marianne, performance is a way she can display her emotions to the world around her, and she does so in dramatic, attention grabbing ways. For Elinor, however, performance is a way for her to conceal and mask her feelings. As I will discuss more substantially in my second chapter, the society Austen presents requires a large amount of acting in order to maintain social harmony. Elinor recognises the necessity of the polite social behaviour that Marianne finds duplicitous, and her ability to smooth away offences allows her to screen Marianne’s impropriety. When it comes to tête-à-têtes including Elinor, the “narrative emphasis” falls on what is being said, rather than the “less controllable behaviour of the body” that typifies Marianne’s interactions with the world (Gay 2003, 46). Thus, the emphasis is on Elinor’s deft and subtle navigation of social situations despite

personal inner turmoil. Scholars have pointed to the conversations between Elinor and Lucy Steele in particular as an example of a scene where “hints, evasions and insinuations” dominate the conversation as Elinor and Lucy each maintains a mask of social politesse while trying to achieve their own ends (Byrne 2003, 119). Elinor is so adept at putting on her social performance that Marianne is shocked when she realises she has so profoundly misread her own sister. Marianne completely misses that “sincere feeling is not always so clearly manifest” as she expects, believing that overt displays are the only valid way to experience intense emotions (Nigro 2011). Both Elinor and Marianne are motivated to perform by their emotions—Elinor to conceal her feelings and protect the feelings of others, and Marianne to express her feelings in a sincere way. Both uses of performance are validated by the text, as the sisters learn to moderate rather than abandon their behaviours.

#### **A LICENSE FOR ILLEGITIMACY**

Yet the benign portrayal of Marianne’s acting and performances complicates this reading. There is certainly something to be said for the fact that Willoughby’s acting is dangerous and manipulative. If Austen wished to present her novel as a critique of all theatrical endeavours, she would not have validated Marianne’s acting as a form of expression. Marianne is certainly over dramatic, even melodramatic, but her acting is never dangerous—her casual disregard for other people and even her own health are what throws her into danger. Rather than advocating the dangers and immorality of performance, Austen shows us that acting is a neutral tool. The inclination to perform is not corrupting in itself; it is the morals and choices that inform the performances that act as the danger. *Sense and Sensibility* subtly asserts the neutrality of performance, a theme that Austen carried through more overtly into her next published novel, *Pride and Prejudice*.

Thomas Keymer writes that Marianne’s propensity to cause scenes “works to disrupt the serenity of social mechanisms that empower rank and wealth at the expense of both sisters” and thus her “histrionics” are a way of “fighting back” (Keymer 2011, 36). Critics attempting to suppress illegitimate theatre were similarly motivated by the perceived danger

and immorality of “riotous pleasures” of the lower classes (Moody 2000, 17). Marianne, thrust into a lower economic position than she has been accustomed to, uses the key techniques of a plebeian form of theatre to resist the oppressive constraints of genteel society. Keymer’s interpretation comes from a socio-economic reading, but the proposal is equally valid when we apply a gendered reading to the text. The strictly patriarchal society works to deny women a voice, to dismiss their protests as histrionics and their emotions and opinions as invalid. The attempted systemic silencing of Marianne throughout the text parallels the criticisms of illegitimate theatre, on a similar basis of impropriety. Marianne finds a way to push out against those attempting to deny her a voice by performing her emotions through techniques used within illegitimate theatre, particularly pantomime and music. Marianne’s theatrics—though self-centred—are a way for her to express herself in a suffocating society.

Considered in the broader context of theatre in general, Marianne’s character might be seen as exposing the dangers of theatre so many critics were concerned with. Emily Allen writes that the theatre’s close ties to prostitution fuelled anxieties that the stage was a “threat” to “the nation’s womanhood” (Allen 2003, 16), reflecting a cultural obsession with the danger of active female sexuality. Navigating the theatrical world was a difficult business for women. Jeffery Cox remarks that part of Sarah Siddons’ popularity “arose from depicting women as lacking the power to act”—that is, women who conformed to gendered expectations of behaviour (Cox 2000, 38). Marianne is clearly not acting with any kind of perceived passivity, nor in line with cultural gender norms. A character like Marianne, who is an unabashed performer and actively pursues Willoughby in London, might be rendered as a critique of active and theatrical behaviour in a woman. However, Austen provides us with a much more sympathetic reading of Marianne’s character. The active, theatrical aspects of her character do not change. Austen is not seeking to critique Marianne’s form of expression, but to show that her failure to be polite and accommodating to other people is detrimental to her reputation and the happiness of those close to her.

The critique of her propriety is made clearest when Elinor tries to reprimand Marianne for visiting Willoughby’s home alone with him. Marianne defensively replies that

“if there had been any real impropriety in what I did, I should have been sensible of it at the time, for we always know when we are acting wrong” (S&S, 52). It is necessary to be vigilant of the word ‘sensible’ in the novel; it is intentionally used to describe both Elinor’s sense and Marianne’s sensibility. The dual understanding of “sensible” in conjunction with Marianne’s use of the word “acting” can link acting with sensibility. Rendered thus, her comment would be a defence of sensibility, as her sensibility would alert her to improper acting rather than encouraging it. It is equally valid to take sensible to mean “sense”; such a reading would suggest Marianne is reacting to the implication that she has little sense. Either way, it is a spirited rebuff that defends Marianne’s world view. However, her lack of propriety leaves her vulnerable to “impertinent remarks” that concern Elinor. Marianne finds propriety and social performance to be duplicitous and immoral; learning that it is in fact necessary is central to her development. Elinor’s comments about Marianne’s behaviour and her motivations for critiquing her sister clarify that Austen is not using Marianne as a critique of the theatre at all. Instead, Austen shows Marianne’s active theatricality as a valid expression of her sensibility.

We are explicitly told in the novel that “the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it” always falls to Elinor (S&S, 89). Marianne’s sincerity is admirable, but her thoughtlessness is damaging and self-centred. It is not Marianne’s sensibility or form of expression that Elinor is criticising, but her egocentricity and lack of perspective. Thus, Austen is not criticising performativity or the theatre, but an untamed and clumsy wielding of theatrical techniques. Contrary to what we would expect from a critique of the theatre, Marianne’s character development does not come from an acknowledgment of her actions as socially transgressive and immoral. Rather, her development stems from the revelation that, despite any good intentions, she has been behaving in a thoughtless way that has hurt the people close to her. Marianne is in fact the one who expresses these necessary changes herself, telling Elinor that during her illness she “considered the past” and realised the impropriety in her behaviour towards others.

The kindness, the unceasing kindness of Mrs. Jennings, I had repaid with ungrateful contempt. To the Middletons, to the Palmers, the Steeles, to every common acquaintance even, I had been insolent and unjust; with a heart hardened against their merits, and a temper irritated by their very attention.—To John, to Fanny,—yes, even to them, little as they deserve, I had given less than their due. But you,—you above all, above my mother, had been wronged by me. (S&S, 244—45)

Marianne does not cite her sensibility as her flaw, but her egotistical insolence. Austen may, at times, satirise Marianne's dramatics for comedic effect, but there are equally as many times where we are supposed to take her actions seriously and empathise with her through her theatrical behaviour.

It is made explicit that Marianne does not alter reactions to her extreme emotions. To change for the better, Marianne must be aware of what is acceptable behaviour before her current audience. A familial setting will allow for a more candid reaction than a public setting. When they hear that Edward Ferrars has supposedly married, Marianne “gave a violent start, fixed her eyes upon Elinor, saw her turning pale, and fell back in her chair in hysterics” (S&S, 250). We have seen Marianne react this violently to Elinor's injured feelings before—the difference here is that this scene is not public. There is no one outside the family circle present. One chapter later, when someone outside the family circle is present, Marianne is more mindful of her behaviour. The occasion is Edward's visit to Barton Cottage, and rather than fainting away and making a scene, we are told that “Marianne had retreated as much as possible out of sight, to conceal her distress” (S&S, 254). She still has the visceral, sensibility-laden reactions to her emotions and events around her, but she has become more conscious of when it is appropriate for people to see these reactions and how they might embarrass or offend others. Austen is neither criticising Marianne's theatrical behaviour, nor the theatre in general. Rather, she is critiquing a lack of awareness on the

part of the performer, showing that any failings come from the actor themselves, and not their mode of expression.

Marianne uses her musical abilities to indulge her grief over Willoughby even when she is in polite company. One evening at Barton Park she affronts Lady Middleton by assertively declining to play cards so that she might play on the newly-tuned piano (*S&S*, 103). She is perfectly content with flouting social convention to set herself apart from everyone else as a solo performer in order to, once again, indulge her own emotions. The change in such behaviour comes after she suffers through her illness. Her sickness and recovery, in giving Marianne so much time to reflect on her past behaviour, has a cathartic effect upon her that indulging her sorrows through music and books was unable to provide. However, when she first sits down to her piano after her illness, she finds she is unable to play:

She went to it; but the music on which her eye first rested was an opera, procured for her by Willoughby, containing some of their favourite duets, and bearing on its outward leaf her own name in his hand-writing.—That would not do.—She shook her head, put the music aside, and after running over the keys for a minute, complained of feebleness in her fingers, and closed the instrument again; declaring however with firmness as she did so, that she should in future practice much. (*S&S*, 242)

Purged of the intense emotions that have always fuelled her performances, and struck by memories she no longer wishes to dwell on, Marianne chooses to forego musical performance. It is not explicitly mentioned in the remaining chapters of the novel when she takes music back up again. However, the match between Colonel Brandon and Marianne is foreshadowed near the beginning of the novel when Brandon alone shows a deep appreciation for her musical talent during her first performance at Barton Park (*S&S*, 28). We are also told of Marianne's explicit devotion to him; that "her whole heart became, in time, as

much devoted to her husband as it had once been to Willoughby” (*S&S*, 268). If music is a motif of Marianne’s emotional expression, Brandon’s appreciation of her musical talent becomes a way of showing his appreciation for who Marianne is as a person. Thus, Marianne is ultimately matched with someone who values her for her emotions, her sincerity, and her sensibility. A lack of moderation brings her to death’s door, but she is ultimately rewarded for her sensibility and her theatricality rather than condemned.

It is difficult to know Austen’s exact opinions on the illegitimate theatres. Nevertheless, the hallmarks of illegitimate theatre resonate with Marianne’s behaviour throughout *Sense and Sensibility*. Acknowledging the parallels between Marianne’s theatricality and the techniques employed by unlicensed theatres provides us with a way of understanding of Marianne’s character and Austen’s approach to theatre. Though both Marianne and Willoughby are performers, it is only Willoughby’s behaviour that is considered harmful. There is a crucial distinction between their intentions—though Willoughby means to deceive and later to harm Marianne, the harm in Marianne’s behaviour is in her thoughtlessness. Her dramatics, though sometimes satirised, are also Austen’s way of illustrating the intensity of Marianne’s pain and eliciting sympathy from the readers. It is Marianne’s thoughtlessness and self-centred focus on her own feelings that she rightly recognises as her character flaw. She maintains her theatrical mode of expression, but becomes more mindful of how her behaviour may impact on others. By validating Marianne’s method of expressing her feelings, Austen validates theatricality—and by extension, illegitimate theatre.

## “Of music! Then pray speak aloud”

### Performative words and music in *Pride and Prejudice*

We find in Chapter Eight of *Pride and Prejudice* a list, given by Caroline Bingley, that details the skills considered essential for an accomplished woman:

[N]o one can be really esteemed accomplished who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half-deserved. (P&P, 27)

Significantly, three of the five skills Caroline lists—music, singing, and dancing—relate to performance, and all of them are tied to music. Meanwhile, the criteria that define a “certain something” focus on a woman’s public presentation. Though Austen is clearly satirising the lengths women were expected to go in order to be considered accomplished, Caroline’s list is also indicative of the reality of living in a performative society.

It is surprisingly easy to forget how important music could be to a theatrical performance. In Chapter One, we saw how music and musical theatre became key components and features of illegitimate theatre during Austen’s time. Illegitimate theatres used music in their performances to distinguish their shows from legitimate productions and avoid prosecution. However, the link between performance and music was not restricted to opera and burletta—after all, any public musical performance will have a theatrical element,

whether it is on a London stage or in a country drawing room. When we consider that musical prowess was encouraged in young women as a mark of accomplishment that contributed to their social image, music becomes a part of social performance. As a novel that is highly concerned with themes of social performance, *Pride and Prejudice* offers fertile ground for investigating the link between music and social performance. Unlike *Sense and Sensibility*, the novel does not focus on a single performer using the world as her audience. *Pride and Prejudice* concerns itself with the intertwining performances of an ensemble cast, where every character is role-playing and performing. Jane Austen presents performance as a social necessity and uses musical performance as a motif to highlight various attitudes towards social performance.

In his book *Romanticism and Music Culture in Britain, 1770–1840* Gillen D'Arcy Wood encourages us to look to Austen's biography to determine her position on musical performance. Though Austen offers a subtle critique on female accomplishment in most of her novels, she practiced piano "most mornings" from age twelve and played for family in the evenings (Wood 2010, 153). Wood writes that Austen's catalogue of sheet music when she died "amounts to nearly fifteen hundred pages" (Wood 2010, 153). Thus, Wood suggests that it is the misapplication of accomplishment that Austen is deriding, and the kind of facetious attachment to music that is used only to advance one's position (Wood 2010, 159). So it is with social performances. Acting and performing in society are regarded as necessities to ease social interaction—these skills do not automatically make someone a hypocrite or false. Rather, Austen shows that it is the hollow, deceptive intentions—the *misapplication* of performance—that is the danger. Not only does Austen show the need for these skills in *Pride and Prejudice*, the refusal to perform can have a detrimental effect upon a person's ambitions and reputation. She uses musical performance as a motif to highlight attitudes towards social performance. Frequently, we find that an individual's approach to the common accomplishment of piano playing reveals a more focused image of their general attitude towards social performance. Thus, misapplication of accomplishment also reveals a misapplication of performance.

In this chapter I will examine the performative elements of *Pride and Prejudice's* major characters, paying close attention to Austen's use of music in elaborating on the personalities of her characters. I argue that the combination of characters who utilise social performance—including Elizabeth Bennet, Caroline Bingley, and George Wickham—give us a decidedly ambivalent image of acting. Rather than acting itself being perceived as corrupting, it is the intentions and motivations behind the choice to perform that separate these characters as genial or antagonistic. These issues all come together during a conversation between Elizabeth and Mr Darcy at Rosings where Austen explicitly draws a comparison between social performance and musical performance. Through the conversation, we gain insight into how characters view and use social performance. Thus, my first section lays out in detail various characters of the ensemble and their relationship to one another and performance. My second section turns to the effect of music in the novel, and at the heart of it is the scene at Rosings. I also argue that by looking at the story arcs of characters who do not use social performance, we can see that Austen is supporting the use of (well-intentioned) acting. Characters who choose not to conform to social behaviours—for example, Darcy, Jane Bennet, and Georgiana Darcy—primarily suffer loss and disconnection from those around them. While performance-based set-pieces are used less and less as the novel progresses, the theatricality and drama inherent in the scenes is heightened and becomes the primary focus of the last third of the narrative.

### **AN ENSEMBLE OF PLAYERS**

Penny Gay suggests that Elizabeth Bennet was created as a heroine who is “complex, intelligent, witty, and virtuous, despite social disadvantages” in response to a “perceived lack” of these types of heroines in Austen's time (Gay 2002, 78). Elizabeth has an astute understanding of how the society around her functions. She is often one of the only two members of her family who is able to perform social graces willingly and believably, and she is painfully aware of how poorly the other members of her family conduct themselves within society. Byrne writes that Elizabeth “has a highly developed sense of social protocol” (Byrne

2002, 140), and she feels any transgressions of that protocol acutely. She is generally happy to be polite and courteous to those around her, and she is more than willing to “take her place on the stage of society” rather than shrink away or stand aloof from social performance (Gay 2002, 86). She is a character who is both willing to and comfortable socially performing when the situation demands.

Not only does Elizabeth refuse to shy away from her own performed behaviour, she also actively attempts to direct her entire family in their own social performances. At the Netherfield ball, she observes that “had her family made an agreement to expose themselves as much as they could during the evening, it would have been impossible for them to play their parts with more spirit or finer success” (*P&P*, 70). She spends her time trying to direct her family to behave with decorum and respect to social structures, though to little effect. Mr Collins decides to introduce himself to Mr Darcy despite Elizabeth’s assurances that it would be “an impertinent freedom, rather than a compliment to his aunt [Lady Catherine]” (*P&P*, 66). Mrs Bennet, in raptures over the developing relationship between Mr Bingley and Jane, speaks “freely, openly, and of nothing else” to Lady Lucas (*P&P*, 68). Her assumptions and self-congratulations are easily overheard by those around her, particularly Mr Darcy. Elizabeth tries to direct and control her mother’s behaviour, but to no avail—Mrs Bennet continues to “talk of her views in the same intelligible tone” (*P&P*, 68). Elizabeth correctly assesses that her mother’s disregard for propriety in front of Mr Darcy will harm Jane’s chances with Mr Bingley. Mary, whose “voice [is] weak, and her manner affected,” plays piano for the party and puts Elizabeth in “agonies” (*P&P*, 69). Mary’s technical precision yet complete lack of sensitivity reflects her understanding of social performance. She understands that young women exhibit their accomplishments in public, yet she lacks the subtlety to attend to gentle hints and directions towards pleasing behaviour. Elizabeth’s successful entreaties for her father’s interference only aggravates her own embarrassment—his speech is so blunt that there can be no question of its irony. Elizabeth is entirely unsuccessful in directing her family’s performances. Their general—and often vehement—

refusal to perform as she directs has a damaging effect on their reputations and is the impetus for Mr Darcy's interference with Jane and Mr Bingley.

Elizabeth is an absolute believer in using performance, particularly in society. Yet she is also an inherently moral character, and actively refuses to perform when there is a "higher moral imperative" at stake (Gay 2002, 86). In Elizabeth, Austen clearly shows that a tendency towards performance is not indicative of a corrupted character. Elizabeth rejects Charlotte's advice that Jane should show more affection to Bingley than she feels; that is, that Jane should perform feelings she does not have. Elizabeth judges this advice "not sound" (*P&P*, 15) unless marriage is the only object; she does not believe in using performance with morally grey intentions. For Gay, Elizabeth's reply to Mrs Bennet's protests that she "will not be fit to be seen" if she walks the three miles to Netherfield is particularly illustrative of her dedication to a moral imperative: "I shall be very fit to see Jane—which is all I want" (*P&P*, 22). Gay cites this as Elizabeth prioritising the "higher demands of a Christian and a sister's duty" over expected societal behaviour (Gay 2002, 86).

Elizabeth's adherence to her sense of morality, however, is illustrated most memorably in her confrontations with both Mr Darcy and Lady Catherine. In both scenes, Elizabeth's social betters expect that she will act according to established codes of performance—for Darcy this means she will accept his proposal, and for Lady Catherine this means she will break under coercion. Elizabeth defies them both: they both offend her deeply, particularly with regards to her family and social status. Elizabeth refuses to let their rank excuse their moral transgressions. In doing so, she illustrates that "true propriety and delicacy are indicative of manners rather than rank" (Byrne 2002, 144). She responds to Lady Catherine's bullying and lack of respect with strength and eventually excuses her forcefully with "You have insulted me in every possible method. I must beg to return to the house" (*P&P*, 233). Elizabeth also cites Mr Darcy's lack of performance as a reason why she has no qualms with rejecting him. His behaviour towards her, devoid of any inclination towards performance, has been arrogant and presumptuous. Her words "had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner" (*P&P*, 127) resonate with Mr Darcy to such an extent that he

concedes the point and begins to conduct himself with gentility. As neither Mr Darcy nor Lady Catherine conduct themselves with any real respect towards Elizabeth, she feels no compulsion to perform for them.

Elizabeth is always willing to be blunt about her own failings, particularly with regards to her musical talents—though of course, it is because she has such a nonchalant attitude towards rehearsing that she is so much easier to listen to. The few times she does play piano it is at the behest of others. We are told that Elizabeth's "performance was pleasing, though by no means capital," yet when compared to her sister Mary she was "easy and unaffected" despite lacking Mary's technical skill (*P&P*, 17). As Wood notes, it is her "relaxed attitude" that makes her so much more appealing in contrast with other female pianists in the novel (Wood 2010, 155). The description also reflects her generally "lively, playful disposition" that allows her to brush off Mr Darcy's early criticism so easily (*P&P*, 9).

Elizabeth's most prominent foil, Caroline Bingley, is more than willing to put on a show and boost her own performances in her attempts to draw the eye of Mr Darcy. Her behaviour is far more theatrical than Elizabeth's. She supports Darcy's opinions about what constitutes true accomplishment, yet she is unable to engender any intelligent discussion by challenging his opinion or taking a more active role in conversation. She aims to please Darcy in superficial, performative ways, and does not listen when he clearly outlines the quality he most admires in women is something much more internal and based on active and critical intelligence. Her attempts to slander Elizabeth once she leaves the room are thwarted by Darcy's reply that "there is a meanness in *all* the arts which ladies sometimes condescend to employ for captivation" (*P&P*, 28). His use of the words 'arts' highlights the performative nature of Caroline's behaviour and emphasises her shallow motivations. Her eagerness to win Darcy's approval is demonstrated again when Darcy makes a request for music and she moves "with some alacrity" to the piano (*P&P*, 35). By contrast, Elizabeth "earnestly" rejects the request; unlike Caroline, she has no wish to please Darcy and thus chooses not to perform.

The apex of Caroline's theatrical behaviour is her attempt to direct a scene herself to her own advantage. There are numerous instances in the novel of characters directing one another: Elizabeth's (failed) attempts to direct her family and Darcy adeptly influencing Bingley's decision to distance himself from Jane are the two most prominent examples. Direction also plays a key role in Austen's other novels: as we saw in *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor tries to direct Marianne into social performance, while *Mansfield Park* contains Sir Thomas Bertram's attempts to order the cast around him to his liking. The crowning example of a director in Austen's work is Emma Woodhouse, whose determination to see her neighbours paired off according to her liking drives the plot of the novel *Emma*. When directing, as when performing, Austen's characters meet with varying degrees of success. Caroline Bingley's intention in the scene is clear—to direct Darcy's attention towards herself and present herself as the kind of insightful and perceptive woman he likes. Caroline begins the scene by blocking Mr Hurst's petition for card players.

Mr. Hurst reminded his sister-in-law [Caroline] of the card-table—but in vain. She had obtained private intelligence that Mr. Darcy did not wish for cards; and Mr. Hurst soon found even his open petition rejected. She assured him that no one intended to play, and the silence of the whole party on the subject seemed to justify her. (*P&P*, 37)

Her "private intelligence" of Mr Darcy's wishes allows her to manipulate the setting of the scene, while her assurance that no one intends "to play" is an ironic paronomasia—she spends the rest of the scene as a director and player in her own farce. The amusing narrative use of the phrase "private intelligence" reflects Caroline's desire to off-set Darcy and herself as a self-contained pair, foreshadowing Darcy's own explicit attempt to do the same between himself and Elizabeth at Rosings. The scene set, Caroline takes up a book as her prop, selected because it is the second volume of Darcy's text, and begins to quiz him on his book more than pay any attention to her own. However, her attempts to direct Darcy's attention towards her and create an exclusive scene between them are thwarted by Darcy deliberately

blocking her. He is unamused by her and aware that she is unable to provide him with any truly stimulating discussion—all she ever seeks to do is agree with and flatter him. Darcy is wary of and able to cut through her theatrical farce.

Unable to “win” Darcy to her play, Caroline tires of a book that she has no intellectual investment in.

... she gave a great yawn and said, “How pleasant it is to spend an evening in this way! I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading! How much sooner one tires of anything than of a book! When I have a house of my own, I shall be miserable if I have not an excellent library.”

No one made any reply. She then yawned again, threw aside her book, and cast her eyes round the room in quest for some amusement ... . (*P&P*, 37–38)

The irony is clear, as is her intention to impress upon Darcy the value she supposedly places on reading. Caroline’s act, however, suffers from telling rather than showing. She is eager to tell Darcy that she meets his criteria of an accomplished woman, but it is ultimately a shallow act that focuses on appearing suitable rather than being suitable. When Caroline joins conversation with her brother, she gives opinions that are clearly not her own and once again centre on echoing Darcy’s preferences and habits. Her designs are particularly noticeable when she states that balls would be “much more rational if conversation instead of dancing were made the order of the day” (*P&P*, 38)—this, despite the fact that Caroline is musically accomplished and clearly considers the performative arts of music, dancing and singing to be some of the foremost markers of an accomplished woman. It is particularly ironic that she decries the performing arts as irrational in the middle of a conspicuous performance for Darcy’s benefit. Given we have heard much of Darcy’s general dislike of dancing (and his eagerness to make an exception for Elizabeth), this comment is clearly another attempt aimed at improving his opinion of Caroline rather than Caroline expressing her personal opinion.

Her final attempt to draw Darcy's attention to her is a literal presentation of her "elegant" figure as she walks around the room—Darcy is again unmoved until Caroline invites Elizabeth to join her. This invitation is what finally grants Caroline success in catching Darcy's attention. However, his attention is drawn to Elizabeth rather than to Caroline. Once again, Darcy ignores Caroline's act in favour of precipitating another battle of wits between Elizabeth and himself. Unwilling to risk Darcy's good opinion and being ultimately "incapable of disappointing Mr Darcy," Caroline's only contribution is to raise Darcy's character above everyone else in yet another attempt to flatter him. As we will later see, her transparently theatrical behaviour is part of what makes her unpalatable to Darcy as a romantic interest. When it becomes clear to Caroline that she has facilitated a scene between Darcy and Elizabeth rather than Darcy and herself, she blocks it from continuing by suggesting music and taking up at the piano. Her suggestion contrasts with the earlier comment that she would prefer conversation to dancing, once again illustrating her preference for the performing arts and her desire to maintain the appearance of being an accomplished woman. She explicitly uses her musical talents to direct the attention to herself. The cultivation of piano playing for the purpose of performance over intellectual benefits is often satirised in Austen's work; Lady Middleton of *Sense and Sensibility* is a recent bride who is introduced as an accomplished pianist that "refuses to play" (Wood 2010, 159). We can easily imagine Caroline's interest in music lapsing if she ever married. She tires "of a conversation in which she had no share," and blocks the conversation with a flashier show of accomplishment that sets her as a centrepiece for attention and creates enough noise that her audience is unable to converse.

After Elizabeth and Darcy become engaged, Elizabeth points directly to the behaviour that Caroline exhibits as being disagreeable to Darcy: "The fact is, that you were sick of civility, of deference, of officious attention. You were disgusted with the women who were always speaking, and looking, and thinking for *your* approbation alone. I roused, and interested you, because I was so unlike *them*" (P&P, 248; emphasis original). Caroline is not mentioned explicitly by name, but as Elizabeth's romantic foil she is the key example of the

behaviour that Darcy abhors. She intends to present a façade and mould her own identity to suit the tastes of whomever she wishes to please. There is an insidiousness in her actions, but they are nevertheless harmless. Jocelyn Harris points to Darcy as a character who is “wary of theatricality in daily life,” and who is “not deceived” by Caroline’s attempts to be civil or captivating (Harris, 41). We are meant to dislike Caroline for her hypocrisy and artifice, and as she does harm to no one but herself, her attempts to act are played for comedy to the amusement of the reader and Elizabeth.

Caroline’s behaviour may be theatrically comic, but the parallel behaviour in the character of Mr Wickham is a much more destructive force. When we consider the disparity between Elizabeth’s use of performance and Wickham’s performativity, we can see that Austen is presenting performance as a neutral tool used by a variety of people. Wickham is set up as a foil to Darcy from his first meeting with Elizabeth—like Darcy, he is found to be handsome and fine, but with a “happy readiness of conversation” (*P&P*, 49) that Darcy so crucially lacks. In contrast to Darcy, Wickham makes frequent use of social performance to present himself as polite and amiable. However, like Caroline, he uses performance to serve his own ends rather than as a representation of his real character. Though he behaves with the same charm and courtesy as Elizabeth, Wickham is less well-intentioned than she is. As we learn through Darcy’s letter halfway through the novel, Wickham is a con-man who beguiles others in order to siphon a living off them. Equal to his desire for money is his desire to be seen and admired. Even when searching for a new living, he pursues careers that are all “roles on the public stage where he can earn a living and admiration” (Gay 2002, 97). The occupations that he pursues—lawyer, clergyman, and military officer—are all middle-class careers that would in theory offer a comfortable living and the respect of the community.

Austen’s descriptions of Wickham focus on appearance—his “appearance “ is “greatly in his favour” (*P&P*, 49); he is far beyond the other officers “in person, countenance, air, and walk” (*P&P*, 52); Elizabeth insists that “there was truth in his looks” (*P&P*, 59). It is thanks to his amiable appearance that he is able to win Elizabeth’s favour. Wickham is a skilled actor

because theatrical illusion and deceit are what he has relied on to survive for several years. Even Darcy, wanting to both believe Wickham was a changed man and honour his own deceased father, granted Wickham the benefit of the doubt on more than one occasion (*P&P*, 132–33). In a close analysis of his behaviour, Jennifer Preston Wilson remarks that Wickham's method is to circumvent "the usual rational process of measuring a character by creating a strong first impression" (Wilson 2004). He is charming and appeals to Elizabeth's vanity and prejudices, and thus he is able to deceive her by side-stepping her rational judgement. Harris writes that Elizabeth is "deceived through the eye, through theatrical illusion" (Harris 2011, 42), which she ironically prides herself on being able to detect. Even after his attentions have shifted from her, Elizabeth considers him a "model of the amiable and pleasing" (*P&P*, 101). It is only when Wickham's character is revealed to her that she notices the impropriety in his forwardness.

With Caroline and Wickham twisting social performance to their own needs, it would be tempting to conclude that Austen is moralising against the dangers of performance within society. Yet Austen is able to show that there is a cost to underperforming socially as both Darcy and Jane Bennet do. Darcy, despite a promising beginning, quickly turns popular opinion against himself when he behaves aloofly towards everyone at the Meryton assembly. Jocelyn Harris is right to warn us off trusting the opinions of "everyone" in Austen's novels (Harris 2011, 42)—popular opinion is often used ironically in Austen's writing, particularly as a sleight of hand to misdirect the reader. However, Darcy's disregard for politesse is stressed when he speaks critically of Elizabeth while she is clearly within earshot (*P&P*, 9). Given that this is the first scene he appears in, it is a character-establishing moment that shows he has no intention of engaging in social performance. He does not even lower his voice, though Elizabeth is obviously near enough to hear the slight. In the first half of the novel Darcy is content with performing only the bare minimum of social graces. While at a social gathering at the Lucas', Darcy spends the evening alone with his indignant thoughts at "the exclusion of all conversation" (*P&P*, 18). When the Bennets visit Jane while she is sick at Netherfield, he engages in minimum conversation, and when he does, he restricts himself to

replying to comments that Elizabeth makes (*P&P*, 29–31). Upon meeting the Bennets in Meryton, he gives no address other than to confirm Bingley's addresses (*P&P*, 49–50). These situations are presented as conscious decisions not to engage with people on Darcy's part. He uses his introversion and pride to justify his hauteur—he is not a natural performer and his status allows him to believe he has the privilege of choosing not to perform.

### **A MUSICAL MEETING**

The justification of Darcy's public behaviour comes during one of Elizabeth's visits to Rosings Park. Here, Austen uses the prominent music motif to introduce a theatrical scene. The spirited discussion between Elizabeth and Colonel Fitzwilliam "of Kent and Hertfordshire, of travelling and staying at home, of new books and music" draws the audience of both Darcy and Lady Catherine. In the conversation between Elizabeth and Colonel Fitzwilliam, an understanding of music is "an indispensable shorthand of taste and character" (Wood 2010, 154). When Lady Catherine demands to know what they are talking about, and Colonel Fitzwilliam replies that they are speaking of music, the motif is flipped to reflect on Lady Catherine. She espouses her beliefs on music for the benefit of the company:

Of music! Then pray speak aloud. It is of all subjects my delight. I must have my share in the conversation if you are speaking of music. There are few people in England, I suppose, who have more true enjoyment of music than myself, or a better natural taste. If I had ever learnt, I should have been a great proficient. And so would Anne, if her health had allowed her to apply. I am confident that she would have performed delightfully. ...

...I often tell young ladies that no excellence in music is to be acquired without constant practice. I have told Miss Bennet several times, that she will never play really well unless she practises more; and though Mrs. Collins has no instrument, she is very welcome, as I have often told her, to come to

Rosings every day, and play on the pianoforte in Mrs. Jenkinson's room. She would be in nobody's way, you know, in that part of the house. (P&P, 115)

Despite a personal lack of skill, Lady Catherine sets herself up as an expert of music. From the beginning of her speech, music is linked with spoken performance—her entreaty for them to “speak aloud” brings to mind images of staged speech. Lady Catherine holds court with a monologue about her reputed taste in music, despite a lack of technical ability. Her booming authority typically subdues any contradictions, making her a domineering prima donna. She must be party to every conversation and direct everyone around her in her attempts to command centre stage. It is clear she uses music as a way to advance her own reputation and give orders to others—we have no evidence of either her enjoyment or natural taste. The admission to her lack of skill here only serves to heighten her hypocrisy and the over-performative nature of her monologues. Lady Catherine’s pretensions to taste harken back to Caroline’s pretensions to cultivated intelligence earlier in the novel. Her offer for Elizabeth to practice at Rosings seems generous, but any generosity is immediately revealed as spurious. She no doubt intends to highlight her own sense of charity while undermining Elizabeth’s social position by placing her in the servants’ quarters. As with Caroline, Darcy is aware of the impropriety of Lady Catherine’s comments and performance, and looks “a little ashamed of his aunt's ill-breeding.” He may not utilise social performance, but it is clear he has an understanding of it.

Colonel Fitzwilliam then reminds Elizabeth of her promise “to play to him”; the explicit meaning is of course that Elizabeth has promised to play piano for him. However, Austen is once again punning on the multiple meanings of the word ‘play’, as the scene that ensues is theatrical and hinges on social play. It is also constructed from similar moments and motifs to the scene at Netherfield that Caroline attempts to direct. Austen once again makes use of the overtly theatrical device of pairing characters who then have an audience to watch their scene, uses interruption as a device to break scenes, and for the first time makes the overt analogy between musical performance and social performance. Elizabeth plays and

performs throughout the scene—both on the piano and in her speech, and both primarily for Colonel Fitzwilliam's benefit.

In contrast with her earlier claims of taking great delight in music, Lady Catherine listens to “half a song,” before focusing her attentions back on Darcy. Pleasure in music is a mark of taste in Austen's novels—one thinks of *Sense and Sensibility*, where Colonel Brandon is one of the only characters who displays real enjoyment in Marianne's performing. Lady Catherine thus reveals her lack of taste and respect by turning away from a performance. Darcy ignores his aunt's attempts at conversation and, as in the earlier scene with Caroline Bingley, he is instead drawn to Elizabeth. His approach creates an interesting three-way dynamic between Elizabeth, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and himself. Elizabeth is a character who “links laughter with closeness” (Casal 2001), and her conversation with Colonel Fitzwilliam about Darcy sets Darcy as the object for Elizabeth and Colonel Fitzwilliam's observation—and the object of their mutual amusement. However, Darcy's defence of his own character and verbal banter with Elizabeth then has the effect of setting Elizabeth and himself as the central actors in the scene, with Colonel Fitzwilliam as their more passive audience. Elizabeth is keen to keep Darcy at arm's length and her comments and mood light and teasing—she even strays into the tone of a melodramatic courtroom speech when levelling her accusation at Darcy's character:

You shall hear then—but prepare yourself for something very dreadful. The first time of my ever seeing him in Hertfordshire, you must know, was at a ball—and at this ball, what do you think he did? He danced only four dances! I am sorry to pain you—but so it was. He danced only four dances, though gentlemen were scarce; and, to my certain knowledge, more than one young lady was sitting down in want of a partner. Mr. Darcy, you cannot deny the fact. (*P&P*, 116)

By presenting the facts in a consciously melodramatic way, Elizabeth is going through a similar process to the one she goes through when Darcy first rejects her: denying the pain of rejection and claiming the support of others through laughing at Darcy's pompous manner (Casal 2001). By applying to Colonel Fitzwilliam, she seeks an even stronger validation than before, as she gains the acknowledgment of Darcy's impropriety from someone who knows and understands Darcy intimately, right in front of Darcy's own eyes. When Darcy's defence of himself ("I had not at that time the honour of knowing any lady in the assembly beyond my own party") elicits a biting sarcastic response from Elizabeth, she interrupts the flow of conversation herself, aware that things are becoming inappropriately heated for a public stage, and defers to Colonel Fitzwilliam, asking "what do I play next? My fingers wait your orders." Like Caroline in the scene at Netherfield, Elizabeth's aim is to use music as a way of refocusing her audience's attentions, conscious that she is losing control over the direction of the scene. Yet the intentions differ—Caroline wishes to refocus attention on herself, while Elizabeth wishes to diffuse tension and maintain social harmony. When Darcy claims he is "ill-qualified to recommend [himself] to strangers," Elizabeth again addresses Colonel Fitzwilliam instead of Darcy. Addressing Colonel Fitzwilliam allows her the benefit of a co-conspirator against Darcy, places her once again in the position of an audience member rather than a performer, and diffuses personal tensions between Darcy and herself. She has regained control of the scene, but unlike Caroline, she does so by projecting attention away from herself rather than towards herself. Her sleight of hand marks her once again as an adept social performer.

Elizabeth also makes the explicit analogy between musical performance and social performance. Darcy informs her that he lacks a natural talent for engaging in conversation with people he hardly knows. However, as Elizabeth points out, natural introversion is not an iron-clad reason for not engaging in society:

"My fingers," said Elizabeth, "do not move over this instrument in the masterly manner which I see so many women's do. They have not the same

force or rapidity, and do not produce the same expression. But then I have always supposed it to be my own fault—because I will not take the trouble of practising. It is not that I do not believe *my* fingers as capable as any other woman's of superior execution.” (P&P, 116–17; emphasis original)

Elizabeth acknowledges that a lack of natural talent for performance can be a hindrance. Yet she rightly blames her own lack of motivation as the real reason that she is not a skilled pianist, thus supporting Colonel Fitzwilliam's assertion that Darcy does not perform well socially “because he will not give himself the trouble” (P&P, 116). Darcy seems to assume he will automatically command respect because of his status, and there are hints that he even sees social performance as beneath him. Elizabeth, however, seeks to place the responsibility of his reputation and prestige squarely upon his own shoulders. To her, respect is earned through action and behaviour rather than automatically bestowed based on rank. Such a notion is reinforced by Elizabeth's self-effacing attitude and pragmatism that contrasts subtly with Lady Catherine's earlier announcements about her own excellent taste despite her lack of musical skill.

Darcy's final rebuttal, “We neither of us perform to strangers” (P&P, 117), is his explicit attempt to link himself with Elizabeth as like-minded people. Here he presents both himself and Elizabeth as people who are disinclined towards pleasing strangers, preferring to employ their time with other concerns. Elvira Casal believes he is successful in drawing a comparison between them, but Gay writes that it reflects Darcy's “love-induced desire to create an exclusive self-reflexive domain consisting solely of Elizabeth and himself” and that it “simply flies in the face of facts” (Gay 2002, 85). Certainly his attempts to elevate Elizabeth and himself above other people who do perform socially illustrate the affinity he feels towards Elizabeth. Whether this is based on a true sketch of her character or ideas he has projected onto her is ambiguous. In itself, his comment suggests that he sees social performance as beneath him and assumes that Elizabeth feels similarly. However, as Gay points out, Elizabeth *does* perform socially (Gay 2002, 85–86), though her intentions have a

higher moral ground than those of characters such as Wickham or Caroline. Casal highlights the pun on “perform” here, and writes that Darcy “accepts the analogy ... and turns it around” to focus on their similarities (Casal 2001). Yet if Darcy were maintaining the analogy rather than commenting on Elizabeth’s social performances, he is implying that she does not give musical performances for the pleasure of strangers. But this interpretation does not sit right either; Elizabeth *is* performing, musically, to relative strangers, at the request of Colonel Fitzwilliam. She does not try to use her lack of skill as an excuse not to perform, and places the blame consciously on herself for lacking the motivation to practice her skills. Darcy’s fumble reveals more about how he understands Elizabeth’s character—and what he is projecting onto her as an object of observation—than it reveals about her actual behaviour.

Elizabeth does not have an opportunity to reply to Darcy’s most perplexing comment; they are interrupted a final time by Lady Catherine. Elizabeth once again takes the chance to redirect the focus of the scene and “immediately [begins] playing again.” Doing so allows Lady Catherine to condescend to give her advice, but she talks of Elizabeth in third person, as if she could not hear Lady Catherine’s comment. Lady Catherine’s choice to speak about Elizabeth rather than to her pushes Elizabeth into the position of a performer or object to be observed and emphasises the theatricality of the moment. It also separates Lady Catherine and Darcy from Elizabeth and Colonel Fitzwilliam. However, she does so in a way that affords none of the dynamic reversal that has been playing out between Elizabeth, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Darcy. She also uses the potential accomplishments of her daughter to recommend her to Darcy. The absurdity of her actions is clear, particularly given Darcy’s dislike of performative accomplishments and behaviour. It comes as no surprise that Darcy is as uninterested in his aunt’s attentions as he was in Caroline’s—Lady Catherine is using the same techniques as Caroline did to woo Darcy on behalf of her daughter.

#### **THE PERILS OF UNDERPERFORMANCE**

Darcy is described as “constantly giving offense” despite “well-bred” manners because he is so uninviting (*P&P*, 12). He is ultimately punished for underperforming in society when

Elizabeth rejects his proposal by informing him directly that his manners—showing conceit, arrogance, and disdain for others—formed the basis of her “immovable” dislike of him (*P&P*, 127–28). It is his behaviour towards Elizabeth—and more particularly, the Gardiners—at Pemberley that begins to alter Elizabeth’s opinion of him, and show her that her “reproofs [have] been attended to” (*P&P*, 241). Jennifer Preston Wilson notes that details such as Darcy’s compliment to Mrs Bennet’s cooking—before he is even engaged to Elizabeth—show that “he is trying to be agreeable” (Wilson 2004). Over the course of the novel, Darcy comes to understand and appreciate that social performance does not necessitate deception or immorality, and that softening his manner and appearing more agreeable actually works to his advantage within society.

Jane is the other major non-performer in the novel, but unlike Darcy, it is not because she feels she is above performance. Regardless, she still suffers as a result of her lack of social performativity. Jane is a reserved creature, and Gay writes that her femininity is “insufficiently theatrical” when compared with the variety of accomplishments expected of young women (Gay 2002, 92). Jane does not exhibit any accomplishments in the novel. A lack of accomplishment does not mean she is insufficiently feminine—Jane is in fact one of the most traditionally feminine characters in the novel—however, there is a need in her society for an “overt display” of affection and attention from women towards their beaux (Gay 2002, 92). The need for displays is highlighted by Charlotte early on in the novel. To Elizabeth it is obvious that Jane is interested in Bingley, but Charlotte astutely points out that Jane is actually quite guarded. She tells Elizabeth that “a woman had better shew *more* than she feels” (*P&P*, 15; emphasis original), a practice Elizabeth finds deceptive and immoral. Austen restricts our perception of Jane’s actions and feelings to Elizabeth’s point of view so that as readers, we believe whole-heartedly that Jane is in love with Bingley. Yet a lack of perceived regard is one of the reasons Darcy later gives for separating Jane and Bingley. He writes to Elizabeth that even after an evening’s “scrutiny,” he found “that though she received his attentions with pleasure, she did not invite them by any participation of sentiment. ...that...her heart was not likely to be easily touched” (*P&P*, 130). The irony here,

of course, is that through a failure to show any particular feeling towards Elizabeth, Darcy is rejected as much as he ensures that Jane is, and for the same reasons.

Though Darcy makes a conscious effort to alter his behaviour, it is unclear whether Jane does the same. Darcy is later able to perceive Jane's regard for Bingley and direct him towards an engagement (*P&P*, 242), but there is no narrative mention of Jane behaving noticeably differently compared to the beginning of the novel. Rather, we are told during her first encounter with Bingley after their separation that though Jane is "persuaded that she talked as much as ever....she did not always know when she was silent" (*P&P*, 219), implying that she comes across as more reserved than before. Therefore, it is unclear whether Jane alters her behaviour, Darcy is able to understand her actions better due to Elizabeth explaining Jane's conduct to him, or he is more open to the idea of her love for Bingley. Darcy only really reconsiders Bingley's relationship with Jane because of Elizabeth's interference—if she had not stepped in, it is likely that Jane would never have married Bingley. Though it is unclear if Jane alters her behaviour, it is certain that she is allowed a happy ending because Elizabeth—a performative character—acts as her vocal advocate.

Darcy's sister and ward, the musically inclined Georgiana Darcy, is the last character we meet who underperforms. Georgiana is a minor character whose defining trait is her musicality and she brings together the themes of underperformance and musical performance. The cost to her for underperforming is not as severe as Jane or Darcy's, but there is a cost nevertheless. Like her brother, Georgiana's reserve perpetuates an unjust image of her as proud and conceited. Set up by Caroline Bingley as Jane's rival, we are told by Wickham that Georgiana is "very, very proud" and he is unable to call her "amiable" (*P&P*, 56). However, it only takes "the observation of a very few minutes" for Elizabeth to conclude that Georgiana is not proud, "only exceedingly shy" (*P&P*, 169). Georgiana is a silent character in the novel; though we are told that she speaks, none of her speech is quoted directly. To her credit her shyness stems from a "fear of doing wrong" rather than conceit, and we are told "she wished for enough courage to join in" conversation with Elizabeth (*P&P*, 173). Georgiana's most notable quality is her musical talents: she sings along with playing

both piano and harp. Wood reads this as a “sequestration” and self-inflicted punishment after Wickham’s attempted elopement (Wood 2010, 155). If so, Georgiana would be reminiscent of Marianne Dashwood during her period of emotional recovery. Georgiana’s passion for music seems to be a way for her to connect with the world around her rather than retreat from it. In her case, proficiency in musical performance would stand in almost entirely for social performance.

### CODA

In this chapter I have shown how music and performance are prevalent motifs through most of the novel. The exploration of the scenes at Netherfield and Rosings illustrate Austen’s awareness of social performance and highlight the importance of music. How characters utilise behaviour and music offers us valuable insight into their personalities and opinions. However, in the last third of the novel there is an apparent move away from the artifice of the stage. Instead of taking place within confined social spaces, key scenes shift into natural settings. As the misconceptions between Elizabeth and Darcy begin to break down, their two most significant scenes together take place out of doors, in moments where they are most themselves. These two scenes are complemented by a third scene outside—the confrontation between Elizabeth and Lady Catherine.

Yet all of these scenes are inherently theatrical in their dramatic power. The performance-heavy set-pieces that are so important early in the novel are noticeably absent in the final chapters. However, rather than diffusing the theatricality, it is heightened by the lack of performance. The surprise meeting on the grounds of Pemberley between Elizabeth and Darcy disconcerts them both enough that “the cheeks of both were overspread with the deepest blush” (*P&P*, 163). Blushing, as a physiological impulse, is almost impossible for actors to recreate on cue. Darcy is “immoveable from surprise” and Elizabeth “instinctively [turns] away”—their reactions are completely unmasked and unperformed. Elizabeth shows none of her characteristic social ease as she is too distracted by shock and the feeling of impropriety to smooth over her discomfort. It takes her some time after Darcy’s departure to

feel “the necessity of appearing more like herself” (*P&P*, 164). Gay writes that Austen here “takes her hitherto very articulate hero and heroine into a world of instinctual communication through unconscious body-language,” creating a scene that would be impossible to accurately recreate on-stage (Gay 2002, 87–88). In the natural environment, Elizabeth and Darcy are stripped of all social façades.

The theatricality of the scene lies in its deployment; placed as it is, the scene becomes the climax of Elizabeth’s tour of Pemberley. Austen has spent the better part of a chapter building up the tension of Elizabeth’s anxieties over visiting Pemberley, and her astonishing discovery that his house and servants reveal Darcy as a totally different character to what Elizabeth herself had observed. It is a moment of intense drama, where our leads are thrown together unexpectedly and made to rely on whatever wit they can muster. The interaction between Elizabeth and Darcy is even subtly presented as a minor set-piece in-text:

Elizabeth’s aunt and uncle, the Gardiners, stand aside observing while Elizabeth and Darcy talk and only approach after Darcy leaves. The conversation triggers Elizabeth’s inner turmoil on an internal stage that the reader is privy to. When Darcy rejoins the party sometime later, both he and Elizabeth are able to compose themselves suitably to perform introductions. Elizabeth is still disarmed by what she observes as “altered” manners on Darcy’s part, though she is able to “imitate” his politeness (*P&P*, 165). Overall, the scene is presented with both a theatricality and a naturalness that constantly undercut one another, frustrating the reader’s attempts to settle on an unambiguous note.

Following Jane and Bingley’s engagement, Lady Catherine makes an unanticipated visit to Longbourn in order to warn Elizabeth off marrying her nephew. The setting of the scene reflects the candid nature of the discussion between Elizabeth and Lady Catherine—there is no pretence of social behaviour here. Indeed, the theatricality of the scene paradoxically derives from the lack of mannerly behaviour. Elizabeth escorts Lady Catherine outside the house and around the garden; symbolically, it is when they enter the copse that Lady Catherine begins her tirade. Outside the house and into the “prettyish kind of little wilderness” at the edge of the Bennets’ garden (*P&P*, 229), they are similarly outside the

confines of performative society. Lady Catherine immediately drops any notion of politesse and announces that Elizabeth “can be at no loss ... to understand the reason for [her] journey,” but Elizabeth can only respond with “unaffected astonishment” (*P&P*, 230). Lady Catherine nevertheless chastises Elizabeth for insincerity, and boasts of her own “sincerity and frankness” and her intention to act accordingly. Neither of them make any attempts to speak politely, and they are equally shocked by the other’s apparent lack of respect. Lady Catherine demands respect and subservience because of her rank, but Elizabeth is unwilling to act pleasingly to someone who is bent on insulting her “in every possible method” (*P&P*, 233). The unmasked behaviour of both characters drives the theatricality of the scene more effectively than restrained performance would have.

Yet the most critical scene that takes place beyond the physical stage of society and without any kind of social performance is the final confession and proposal between Elizabeth and Darcy. It is fitting that this scene is the least performative and the least theatrical, as Austen has slowly stripped away their prejudices against and impressions of each another throughout the course of the novel. The drama comes from Elizabeth and Darcy choosing to unmask themselves before one another. Elizabeth, “while her courage was high,” thanks Darcy sincerely for coming to the aid of her sister Lydia (*P&P*, 238). Darcy responds “in a tone of surprise and emotion,” and confesses that he was thinking only of Elizabeth. His comment renders her “too much embarrassed to say a word.” As with the earlier scene at Pemberley, Austen has stripped away Elizabeth’s characteristic eloquence and ease. Her behaviour here is dictated by immediate emotions rather than astute performance. Darcy then takes the opportunity to offer a renewal of his wishes to marry her. Elizabeth feels the “awkwardness and anxiety” of the moment acutely, and “force[s] herself to speak” (*P&P*, 239). We are told she replies “immediately, though not very fluently,” and confesses how her own feelings have altered. Austen pulls back from repeating their speeches; rather, she describes their body language. Elizabeth is so affected with feeling she cannot meet his eye, but his tone conveys to her whatever warmth and “heartfelt delight” his expression might have shown.

With their masks stripped away, Elizabeth and Darcy continue to walk “without knowing in what direction” (*P&P*, 239). The setting reflects their current disconnection from society; as the most candid of the three scenes, it is set in the most unrestrained natural environment. Where the awkward scene at Pemberley was on manicured grounds, and the confrontation in a private copse, the setting for this scene is the wide-open countryside. Yet it provides the resolution to the entire plot of the novel. Elizabeth and Darcy do not need to be acting for the scene to be dramatic; paradoxically, their lack of acting fuels the drama of the moment. Removing their social masks is as theatrically effective as performing them. Austen makes liberal use of theatrical elements throughout *Pride and Prejudice*. Even when she deconstructs the physical and social trappings of theatricality, her sense of dramatic timing and structure creates an inescapable sense of the theatrical throughout.

# Breaking the Fourth Wall

## Didactic spectatorship in *Mansfield Park*

More so than any of Jane Austen's other works, *Mansfield Park* foregrounds issues surrounding performance and makes them the crux of both the plot and morality of the text. Historically, *Mansfield Park* has also been the most divisive of Austen's works, as readers fail to produce any kind of "critical unanimity" about how we are supposed to read Austen's most internal and complex novel (Litvak 1992, 1). It is only in the last twenty years of Austen criticism that the novel has been rehabilitated from the idea that it was written as a cathartic balm for Austen in reaction to an incident between her brother Henry and cousin Eliza de Feuillide. In what some critics see as a parallel to Edmund Bertram and Mary Crawford, Henry was destined for the church, only to be wooed away by Eliza, "[abandoning] his higher calling as a result of private theatricals" (Barish 1981, 304). In *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, Jonas Barish describes Austen's defection from the theatre in fervent terms: "The former believer is not merely giving up her childhood diversions in the barn, she is disavowing them, burning them in effigy, setting them down as forbidden games" (Barish 1981, 304). Interestingly, Barish remains silent on any suggestions as to how we are to read Austen's next novel, *Emma*, if she had so absolutely disavowed the theatricality that is also clearly present in Emma Woodhouse's world. While it is possible, even likely, that Austen was influenced by events in her own life, to call *Mansfield Park* her "disavowal" of the theatre seems extreme.

Recent critics have been kinder, or at least more cautious, in their approaches to *Mansfield Park*. To Joseph Litvak the novel is "neither unequivocally conservative nor

unequivocally progressive, but rather ... it is governed by a conservatism so riddled with internal contradictions as to trouble the authoritarian temperament” (Litvak 1992, 1–2). He represents acting as an “infection” as it is described in the text, and argues that *Mansfield Park* is equally about the “theatricality of everyday life” (Litvak 1992, 5). Austen only creates “the *impression* of anti-theatricalism,” when really she is placing the theatre in parallel with “the inescapable context of all social existence” (Litvak 1992, 4–5)—that is, aspects of the theatre, performance, and theatricality are omnipresent in Austen’s worlds. We have already seen in both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* that Austen has a particular interest in interrogating the shades of morality in socially necessary performances. Paula Byrne illustrates how the text is deeply embedded with knowledge of eighteenth-century drama and theatre practices, while Penny Gay argues that *Mansfield Park* recognises how pervasive theatricality actually is, and that the text does not shy away from grappling with the complicated morality resulting from this recognition. *Mansfield Park* is not a disavowal of the theatre—even Sir Thomas Bertram’s violent and apparently righteous reaction against the private theatricals is undercut by the fact that his judgments and predictions are so consistently wrong. But it is an internal novel, one of reflection, observation, and interrogation, that relies on the reader staying close to the introverted Fanny Price who watches the drama play out before her, rather than being pulled into the performance as they are with Elizabeth Bennet.

Yet Austen maintains the morally ambiguous nature of theatricality that she presents in her previous two published works—sincerity is Austen’s key concern. This concern appears in Thomas Bertram’s anecdote about a girl whose behaviour changed wildly before and after she entered society. Tom derives immense pleasure from the apparent hypocrisy. The girl in question, Miss Anderson, behaved to such exaggerated extremes—first so taciturn that Tom “could hardly get a word or look” from her, and then so talkative and personable that he did not recognise her at all—that the sincerity of her performance is thrown into question (*MP*, 37). The themes of sincerity and hypocrisy are also present in Austen’s treatment of the Bertram sisters. Maria and Julia Bertram both learn to “repress their

spirits” in the presence of their father, and play their parts as daughters of a baron so adeptly that their moral failings come as a complete shock to him (*MP*, 314). The decision to perform their parts as daughters is made in self-interest rather than a desire to be sincere.

Meanwhile, the seductive and protean Crawford siblings, and Henry Crawford in particular, have such flexible moral codes they are able to appear agreeable to everyone they encounter.

All of Austen's heroines require at least some level of perspicacity to read the characters around them, but this requirement is nowhere more necessary than in *Mansfield Park*. The focus of the novel is not so much the morality of theatricality as it is the necessity of being a competent spectator. The ability to cut through the masks of the performative society and understand the morality of the characters beneath is paramount. In this chapter we will examine Fanny Price's position in the text, both as a spectator and critic of performance and theatre, showing her judgments of character are based on her close observation of the characters around her, not on any preconceptions about the dangers of performing. In *Mansfield Park*, danger arises when there is no moral base to a character, and when there is a failure to recognise this lack of inner morality. By looking at theoretical writings on the responsibilities of the spectator, we can see that Austen is presenting Fanny as an intelligent and engaged spectator who is able to detect deception in characters around her. Her skill is illustrated in numerous scenes throughout the novel, including a prominent moment at Sotherton Court. However, as we will see, her gradual assimilation into Mansfield society seems to necessitate that she relinquish her insights in favour of performing.

### **MODELS OF SPECTATORSHIP**

To those who decried the theatre, viewing a play was almost as dangerous as performing in one—by viewing what was being performed, members of the audience have become complicit in the actions themselves, endorsing actions they would find abhorrent in real life. This argument tends to collapse when presented with experience, and Jonas Barish extends the counter-point by arguing that “painful and upsetting events which we would indeed shudder to witness ... please us precisely because they are taking place on stage, within a charmed

circle that exempts them from the fatal and irreversible consequences of daily life” (Barish 1981, 201). This slant is not original to Barish—for those in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who believed that theatre was seductive and morally dangerous, there were also those who argued that being spectator to a play was beneficial and didactic. Scottish playwright Joanna Baillie (1762–1851) was a prolific contemporary of Austen’s who wrote both plays and theatre criticism. Jeffery Cox calls her “the most respected playwright, male or female, of the Romantic era” (Cox 2000, 27). Baillie’s popularity and reputation means it is likely that Austen would have known and read her work. She builds on older ideas about the role of the spectator found in the work of Scottish philosopher Adam Smith by applying them to the stage. Baillie writes that the art of spectatorship is a natural impulse in humans, and that “every person ... is more or less occupied in tracing amongst individuals he converses with the varieties of understanding and temper which constitute the character of men” (Baillie, 2001; 67–68). She describes spectatorship as a sympathetic compulsion that we are drawn to in order to better understand both those around us and ourselves. Most critically, Baillie believes that “we cannot exercise this disposition without becoming more just, more merciful, more compassionate” (Baillie, 2001; 74)—that by studying the human condition we become better, more rounded humans ourselves. Yet this is not generally a cultivated skill so much as a natural impulse; therefore, Baillie argues, theatre “improves us” because it exercises “the natural desire we have to look into the thoughts, and observe the behaviour of others” (Baillie, 2001; 90). The lessons we learn from watching a natural performance of vices and virtues improve us far more than the lessons “from the pages of the poet or the moralist” (Baillie, 2001; 91). Being a spectator to theatrical performances is far more instructive in helping us recognise immorality in those around us and in cultivating our own compassionate character than the lessons learnt by rote from moral writings.

The qualities that Baillie describes in the spectator are qualities that our heroine Fanny Price is imbued with. Fanny is an incredibly discerning spectator, and she is often able to silently perceive and empathise with the other characters in the novel. Thus, through the character of Fanny Prince, Austen posits that there is an advantage in being an intelligent

and engaged spectator. Nora Nachumi suggests that Austen encourages a kind of “divided perspective” when viewing a play, one that allows emotional reactions without losing the ability to be objectively critical (Nachumi 2001, 238–39). Nachumi argues that this applies particularly to *Mansfield Park*. Elizabeth Bennet, though typically an intelligent and engaged spectator, allows prejudice to cloud her observations and render her judgments faulty. In *Mansfield Park*, however, our spectator is Fanny Price who, despite her introversion and meek manner, is an intelligent and engaged spectator who is able to be both emotionally reactive and critically objective throughout the novel. Fanny’s hindrance is not internal, as with Elizabeth, but external: her social position means that she is used to not being asked to give her opinions or have them taken seriously if she does give them. People ignoring Fanny, or distrusting her perceptions, is what ultimately holds Fanny back. Fanny is by no means the only spectator of the novel—Austen’s free indirect style allows her to deviate from Fanny’s point of view to illustrate how other characters are observing those around them. Yet we are presented with the observations of other characters to illustrate how their techniques hinder their understanding of one another.

### FANNY AS SPECTATOR

Fanny’s position in relation to the performances in the novel can be a confusing one. Her moral reaction against the private theatricals have led readers to deem her ‘priggish’, but we are told “for her own gratification she could have wished that something might be acted” (*MP*, 93). Despite her reservations about the play and her cousins’ involvement, she is genuinely interested in seeing a performance. Closer examination of Fanny’s judgments reveal that she does not object to performing itself—she in fact has a great appreciation for acting—but rather she objects to immoral and deceptive uses of acting. Sir Thomas’ violent reaction against the private theatricals, coupled with the moral objections of Fanny and Edmund, gives enough of an impression that Austen disapproved of private theatricals to cause contention between readers. Yet not only is Fanny’s position on the private theatricals far more complex than Sir Thomas’ or Edmund’s, the theatricality present in society remains

as apparent as it does in Austen's other works, thus undermining any objections to the theatrical. Litvak argues that protests against theatricality in the novel are "futile" because "the political order of *Mansfield Park* depends upon a certain theatricality" (Litvak 1992, 5). Social performances are necessary to maintain order and harmony within society, and *Mansfield* is not an exception. Mary Crawford's confusion over whether Fanny has entered society is a reflection of the confusion between Fanny's simultaneous rejection of and fascination with the theatrical. But while Mary determines a secure answer to her enquiry—"then the point is clear. Miss Price is *not* out" (*MP*, 38; emphasis original)—our enquiries about Fanny's position on performance are not so easy to answer.

From the first, Fanny is positioned as an outsider to the society and family she is brought up in. Mrs Norris, with far more of a hand in running *Mansfield Park* than her sister who is the actual Baroness, positions Fanny "in the little white attic, near the old nurseries" (*MP*, 9). The room is geographically nearer to the governess and the housemaids than to her cousins, reinforcing the class distinction between Fanny and her cousins. Mrs Norris also comments on the convenience of being so near the housemaids "who could either of them help to dress her, you know, and take care of her clothes, for I suppose you would not think it fair to expect Ellis to wait on her as well as the others" (*MP*, 9–10). Though Sir Thomas agrees with Mrs Norris that they should "make her remember that she is not a *Miss Bertram*" (*MP*, 10; emphasis original), Mrs Norris takes this to its logical extreme when she reminds Fanny that "wherever you are, you must be the lowest and the last" (*MP*, 151–52). Like a servant, Fanny is expected to be silent and unseen. As we have explored in the previous two chapters, Austen makes an analogy between the polite society of the landed gentry and theatre, which she also carries through into *Mansfield Park*. Fanny's constant exclusion from the theatrical society of *Mansfield* is an exclusion from performance. Fanny is not only aware of this boundary, she has internalised it and is anxious not to overstep it.

Fanny's position thus becomes that of an audience member—her upper-class relations become the actors on stage leaving the lower-class Fanny a silent spectator. Examined in this light, acting becomes a mark of the class boundaries Fanny refuses to cross

for fear of being chastised and put down as a hypocrite. In “A Modest Question about *Mansfield Park*,” Jenny Davidson analyses how types of hypocrisy operate in the novel as “not only necessary, but eminently forgivable” (Davidson 2004, 246), and examines Fanny’s difficult position as a heroine in the novel and in the context of eighteenth-century fiction. Davidson writes that Fanny’s position as a lower-class woman in an upper-class society recalls eighteenth-century heroines who were “sexual entrepreneurs” and used their sentimental behaviour to generate sympathy and thus social advancement (Davidson 2004, 247). Fanny, of course, “has the body of a sentimental heroine,” and often her perfectly sincere physiological reactions to emotions are construed as hypocritical tools she is manipulating for her own advantage (Davidson 2004, 253). Yet Fanny is anxious not to appear hypocritical or as someone who is trying to “ingratiate” herself into a society she was not born into—because she “cannot act” without appearing to overstep that boundary, “she refrains from acting at all” (Davidson 2004, 254). Thus, Fanny is acutely aware that her place in the theatrical scheme is as a spectator, not as a performer—she is not in a position to break the ‘fourth wall’ between performance and audience. Her famous entreaty, “I cannot act” (*MP*, 102), epitomises her inability to surmount the boundary that stands between her and the upper-class, performative society of her relatives.

Fanny’s dislike of performing herself is clearly separate from her opinion of the theatre. Her desire to see a play suggest she is not opposed to the theatre or acting as many have supposed, though she is very aware of the precarious morality of those involved in performing. Her desire to see—and technical appreciation for—fine acting appears most prominently when Henry Crawford takes up a copy of *Henry VIII* Fanny has been reading to Lady Bertram one evening. She tries to keep her focus on her work, but as the narrator tells us, “taste was too strong in her” (*MP*, 228). Edmund, observing and yet misunderstanding her, believes that her attentiveness to Mr Crawford’s performance is a mark of regard for the person rather than the performance. Fanny, however, is perfectly able to separate Mr Crawford’s acting talent from his moral character, and can appreciate one while disliking the other. She illustrates this herself soon after Mr Crawford expressing a sudden desire to

become an enthralling preacher when she tells him “perhaps, Sir, I thought it was a pity you did not always know yourself as well as you seemed to do in that moment” (*MP*, 233).

### THE DRAMA OF SOTHERTON

During the day trip to Sotherton, we find a key episode in which Fanny is put into the position of spectator more overtly than in the rest of the text. The events that unfold in the small woods at Sotherton have been examined by Paula Byrne for links and allusions to other works of the period, particularly plays, in order to illustrate how the Sotherton episode works as “a prelude to the mainpiece of *Lovers' Vows*” (Byrne 2003, 178). The behaviour of each of the characters foreshadows their conduct during the private theatricals: Mary Crawford attempts to woo Edmund away from his moral calling, Henry Crawford and Maria talk and flirt to the exclusion of everyone else, Rushworth is offended and embarrassed by his fiancée's flirtations, Julia is vexed at being pushed around by her companions, while Fanny alone sees and understands the complexities in relationships before her, though she is virtually powerless to do anything to alter them. Fanny, exhausted from exercise, is left to sit in solitude on a small bench in the woods. Byrne points to *As You Like It* as an intertext here, and the wooded setting, pairs of characters, and theatrical interplay also have echoes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Byrne 2003, 178). The small clearing before Fanny and the gate becomes a natural stage where a series of short ‘character pieces’ are performed in front of Fanny and the reader.

Fanny is left alone by Mary and Edmund to rest, to her own disappointment. Exhausted and pressed by Edmund to stay seated, she watches them until they are out of sight; the moment both shows her attentiveness to Edmund and foreshadows her inability to act as a serious rival to Mary for Edmund's affections. Fanny can only watch as Mary lures Edmund farther and farther away from her. Frustration is to come later, however; for now, Fanny eagerly anticipates their return, and listens anxiously. Maria, Henry Crawford, and Rushworth enter the scene. Maria gives the appearance of caring that Fanny has been left all alone, and tells her that “You had better have staid with us,” yet almost instantly the trio fall

back into conversation that does not include Fanny (*MP*, 69). Despite the pretence of inviting Fanny to join her upper-class companions, she is still carefully held in the position as spectator. Maria is not the only Bertram guilty of this charade—even Edmund, who is the most attentive towards Fanny of everyone at Mansfield Park, becomes increasingly negligent towards her as his relationship with Mary develops. The negligent attitude they take—whether it is towards Fanny’s presence, opinions, or feelings—makes Fanny practically invisible to them, keeping her in the role of spectator as someone who is occasionally seen and never heard.

Austen then blurs the line between Fanny’s point of view and the narrative voice, encouraging even the reader to forget about Fanny’s presence in the scene. The conversation between Maria and Mr Crawford is flirtatious to the point of dangerous intimacy, given Maria’s status as an engaged woman and that they are visiting her fiancé’s estate. The scene is emotionally charged—Maria feels spurned by Mr Crawford’s behaviour towards Julia, and here he attempts to reassure her that she is still his particular favourite. His comments about her “fine prospects” encourage her to reveal how unhappy she is with her engagement: “the sun shines, and the park looks very cheerful. But unluckily that iron gate, that ha-ha, give me a feeling of restraint and hardship. ‘I cannot get out,’ as the starling said” (*MP*, 71). Maria quotes from *A Sentimental Journey*, but one does not need to be familiar with Laurence Sterne’s work for the allusion to be poignant. It is one of the few times we hear Maria speak candidly and sympathetically—for most of the novel, she behaves with a barely-concealed vindictive self-interest. Her sincerity reveals her desire to step out of the role she feels she is bound to by society, but it also reveals her investment in the character Mr Crawford has been playing. Mr Crawford’s reply heavily foreshadows their later involvement—“And for the world you would not get out without the key and without Mr Rushworth’s authority and protection, or I think you might with little difficulty pass round the edge of the gate, here, with my assistance” (*MP*, 71). The metaphor is clear: with Mr Crawford’s assistance, Maria will “pass round” the “gate” of civilised society and into the wilderness.

It is only now that Austen reminds us of Fanny's presence and shows her reactions to such an intimate conversation. Fanny tries to act as the moral conscience as Maria climbs the gate—"you will certainly hurt yourself against those spikes; you will tear your gown; you will be in danger of slipping into the ha-ha. You had better not go"—but she is once again ignored (*MP*, 71). As spectator she cannot have any significant influence on the decisions and actions of the people she watches. Fanny is "astonished" by Maria's behaviour and "angry" with Mr Crawford; the conversation has revealed to Fanny his moral failings that form the basis of her dislike of him. Yet while Fanny is unable to dissuade Maria from her reckless behaviour, her position of spectator has given her unique insight into the character of Henry Crawford. She is exercising spectatorship in the way that Baillie recommends; that is, to learn "much good and evil" through close observation of performances (Baillie 2001, 104). Fanny is afforded the kind of omniscience typically limited to the reader; by structuring the scene as she does, Austen places Fanny in the position of the reader. Mr Crawford's conduct in this scene informs all of his behaviour in Fanny's—and the reader's—eyes for the remainder of the novel. Crucially, Fanny's reaction to and understanding of Mr Crawford's behaviour shows that she is an active spectator and the knowledge she gains from viewing the scene aids her later in the text.

It is at Sotherton where Fanny is also spectator to Mary's discovery about Edmund's intentions to seek ordination in the church, and to Mary's incessant wheedling to make him change his mind. Mary's initial reaction to hearing that Edmund is to be ordained is to say "If I had known this before, I would have spoken of the cloth with more respect" (*MP*, 64), but in the very next conversation with him she expresses disbelief in the profession and Edmund's decision to go into it. Her disrespect towards Edmund's decision and the clergy in general seems to belie a moral fault—certainly it is motivated by her own avarice to see Edmund well settled and thus a financially suitable husband. There is even the subtle suggestion of the Crawfords' immorality when Edmund says that "We do not look in great cities for our best morality" (*MP*, 66). If the city is linked to immorality, then the metropolitan Crawfords are automatically implicated in immorality—and they do very little

throughout the text to contradict this link. Edmund struggles to reconcile his perception of Mary to her actual behaviour throughout the novel—at first, he is even able to see that there is something “very wrong—very indecorous” in her speeches (*MP*, 46). He is optimistic about the possibility of Mansfield being a more positive influence on Mary, but Fanny is always cautious. She understands that the Crawfords are not “wanting to be cured” (*MP*, 35). Despite Mary’s initial ‘promise’ to speak of the cloth more respectfully, her comments, insinuations, and criticisms of the clergy only become more and more vicious throughout the novel. She is too preoccupied with social rank and financial status to subscribe to the intelligent morality that Edmund admires.

The scenes at Sotherton allow us to see a more comprehensive picture of the characters—and particularly the Crawfords—than we have before in the novel. It is also one of the earliest episodes in the novel that places Fanny explicitly in a spectator role. Her apparent invisibility to the other characters gives her valuable insight into their personalities. Though she is unable influence them and their actions, she retains the insights gathered from her observations and uses the information to inform her opinions and actions throughout the rest of the novel. While her understanding of Mary Crawford causes her increasing pain as she watches Edmund fall more and more in love with Mary, her insights into Mr Crawford’s character serve as valuable knowledge and protection against his insidious behaviour.

### **FANNY AND THE STAGE**

Fanny’s distrust of the Crawfords is only exacerbated during the theatricals, when she observes the many supposedly private moments between Maria and Mr Crawford that indicate a level of familiarity inappropriate for their relationship. Despite her refusal to act, Fanny is nevertheless drawn into the theatricals by acting as a prompter for the other characters. We are told that after Maria and Mr Crawford’s first rehearsals, “Fanny began to be their only audience—and sometimes as prompter, sometimes as spectator—was often useful” (*MP*, 115). As in the scene at Sotherton, Fanny is the primary witness to the increased

closeness between Maria and Mr Crawford. She notes how Mr Crawford is “considerably the best actor” of the party, though she still “did not like him as a man” (*MP*, 115). Fanny has ample opportunities to study Mr Crawford’s acting and behaviour during the theatricals, meaning she is later able to detect instances of his attempts to seduce her.

During the rehearsals, Fanny notices how Maria continually avoids her fiancé and rehearses her scenes with Mr Crawford “so needlessly often” that it causes Fanny consternation on Mr Rushworth’s behalf. She also becomes anxious for Maria, who acts “too well” (*MP*, 115); Maria veers towards confusing the line between self and character, as we might expect from an amateur. Mr Crawford, however, maintains a professional distance from his own identity when he is acting; as Jocelyn Harris notes, “actors like Henry exist only in their current roles” (Harris 2011, 47). Daniel O’Quinn explores why Maria slips into her role with such ease while Mr Rushworth struggles to remember his part, and his conclusions also reflect on Mr Crawford’s position. Acting relies on the right balance of memory—one must remember one’s part, but forget one’s own identity sufficiently to be convincing in character. O’Quinn writes that Rushworth struggles to remember his lines because “he cannot let go of who he is”—he cannot distance himself from his own life and sense of self (O’Quinn 2009, 381). This also explains Maria’s “remarkable ability to forget her engagement”—she is not invested in the match emotionally (O’Quinn 2009, 382).

In light of these comments Fanny’s observation of Mr Crawford’s superior acting ability belies a fluidity in his identity that critics have highlighted as key to understanding his character. Evidence of his unsettled identity is present in the text beyond the theatricals; he forever “adopts” new roles and professions before discarding them (Harris 2011, 47). He even has a “great dislike” for “anything like a permanence of abode” (*MP*, 31). His affected charm makes him agreeable to many, but Fanny is too close and careful an observer to miss his unsteadiness. She rejects his proposal based on “observations” of his character and principles, though she cannot explain this to Sir Thomas as his daughters are too “closely implicated in Mr Crawford’s misconduct” (*MP*, 215). The choice not to offer Sir Thomas an explanation serves to reinforce her spectator role: an audience member cannot communicate

with the actors. Mr Crawford explicitly adopts the role of lover in order to “make” Fanny in love with him and “amuse” himself (*MP*, 157), and though he eventually endeavours to marry her, he cannot be constant. Fanny may occupy his every thought while her affections are the biggest challenge before him, but for all his talk of constancy his core remains fluid and shifting. He is received by Maria Rushworth “with a coldness which ought to have been repulsive,” almost immediately resolves to “command” her smiles once again, and begins to “attack” her to satisfy his vanity (*MP*, 316–17). The ‘constant lover’ is simply another identity he forgets when he is not called on to perform it, and the ease with which he slips out of that role and into a new one suggests a similar lack of emotional investment to Maria’s lack of investment in Rushworth earlier in the text.

Despite Fanny’s aversion to performing in society, as the novel unfolds she is pulled more and more into the theatrical upper class. However, Fanny’s resistance to performance comes from her own personal dislike of being looked at rather than any fear that acting and performing are corrupting influences. Immediately after Maria and Julia depart for London, Fanny’s “consequence” increases. With her cousins away from Mansfield, Fanny is called on to play the part of the genteel daughter—“Becoming, 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 ever had been before” (*MP*, 141). She is effectively their understudy, and now she is being asked to stand-in for them. The absence of her cousins increases her social “value,” and her social visibility. Mrs Norris maintains that Fanny is still “the lowest and last”; however, Sir Thomas begins more and more to treat Fanny as one of his daughters by allowing her to go dining and offering her the use of the carriage (*MP*, 150–52).

Sir Thomas’ efforts to direct Fanny in the role of daughter culminate in his decision to host a ball in her honour. In doing so he officially presents Fanny to society for the first time, implying she is at least an honorary member of the gentry. The episode is one where Fanny swings between being honoured and delighted to nervous and anxious. She is honoured by Sir Thomas’ treatment of her—he has finally begun to show the affection and regard for her

that she had longed for. However Fanny is still afraid “of doing wrong and being looked at”—the issues discussed earlier in this chapter about Fanny being integrated into upper class society still loom over her behaviour. Her anxiety and stage fright are triggered by her natural reserve, but also by the sense that she is transgressing socially. She is being asked to cross through the ‘fourth wall’ that has always existed between herself and her upper-class relatives. She can hardly believe that she is expected to open the ball, and feels that “The distinction [from the other ladies] was too great. It was treating her like her cousins!” (*MP*, ). It is clear that her concerns about performing herself do not stem from any moral objections.

### **SIR THOMAS’ DIRECTION**

Fanny, by trusting what she has observed with her own eyes, rather than allowing herself to be seduced by Mr Crawford’s acting, becomes Austen’s ultimate example of an intelligent, critical spectator. However, she is not the only example of a spectator in the text—Austen slips freely between characters to show that everyone is perpetually performing their roles as they observe one another. As the patriarch of Mansfield Park, it is Sir Thomas’ duty to be observant to the point of omniscience about what is happening in his estate. Yet in an ironic twist, Austen demonstrates that Sir Thomas is out-stripped in this regard by the lower-class Fanny Price. As Baillie notes, spectatorship tends to erase class boundaries rather than reinforce them—given the opportunity, “a peasant will very clearly perceive in the character of a peer those native peculiarities that belong to him as a man” (Baillie 2001, 99). Through observation, people of separate classes may see the basic humanity in one another. Fanny demonstrates this herself when she empathises with Julia during the theatricals. But Sir Thomas does not exercise his empathy or attentiveness in the way that Fanny does. Time and again, Sir Thomas demonstrates his ineptitude and obliviousness to the morality and motivation of those around him, and his presumed social authority is subverted by his own actions and opinions that arise from inept observation.

Throughout the text, Sir Thomas becomes a foil to Fanny; less obvious than Mary Crawford but no less important. He is a male patriarch of the landed gentry while Fanny is a female dependent of the working class. They are social opposites, and more than once they unconsciously adopt one another's roles with varying degrees of success. As we have discussed, Fanny is an exemplary spectator who takes full advantage of the lessons she learns from observing the character of those around her. Sir Thomas is not so engaged—though he fancies himself discerning—and suffers because of it. We are told that Maria and Julia were “instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice” and thus learnt by rote how to behave so as to give their father the impression of good morals (*MP*, 314). Misunderstanding the moral characters of his own daughters becomes one of Sir Thomas' greatest regrets. In burning the remaining copies of *Lovers' Vows*, he hopes to eradicate all traces of the theatre from Mansfield, but in doing so he seals his own fate. His overt rejection of performance becomes an implied rejection of spectatorship as well. In refusing to understand the inherently performative nature of his society, Sir Thomas blinds himself to the myriad of moral deceptions people perform around him. The most significant attempt he makes to break through appearances comes when he questions Maria about her engagement to Rushworth. Despite a moment's struggle, she is “able to give her answer immediately, decidedly, and with no apparent agitation” (*MP*, 138). Having experimentally tapped the social façade, Sir Thomas almost immediately draws back, “too glad to be satisfied, perhaps, to urge the matter quite so far as his judgment might have dictated to others” (*MP*, 138). Paradoxically, he accepts the performance by refusing to acknowledge that it is a performance.

In a second twist, Austen subverts Sir Thomas' decision to destroy the private theatricals by showing his own use of the theatrical throughout the text. Joseph Litvak explores this extensively in his work on *Mansfield Park*. In an uncomfortable moment, Sir Thomas explicitly puts Fanny on display for Mr Crawford. Sir Thomas advises her with “the advice of absolute power” to go to bed; in doing so he hopes “to recommend her as a wife by shewing her persuadableness” (*MP*, 192–93). Here he intentionally “puts Fanny on stage,

exhibiting her just as Henry exhibits himself, deploying theatrical technique as craftily as his younger collaborator .... manipulating both actress (Fanny) and audience (Henry)” (Litvak 1992, 22). It is important to note, however, that Fanny is being put into the position of actress against her consent—she still shies away from conscious performance. Later, Sir Thomas manipulates Fanny again by directing her to Portsmouth in the hopes “that a little abstinence from the elegancies and luxuries of Mansfield Park, would bring her mind into a sober state, and incline her to a juster estimate of the value of that home of greater permanence, and equal comfort, of which she had the offer” (*MP*, 250). In other words, he hopes to endear her to Mansfield by depriving her of its performativity. Thus part of the reason theatricality becomes so ambivalent in the novel is because it is shown to both disrupt and reinforce authority—“theatricality-as-conventionality replaces theatricality-as-subversion” to such a degree that Sir Thomas begins to look hypocritical and untrustworthy (Litvak 1992, 24). As quickly as Sir Thomas works to expunge the influence of the theatricals and particularly Mr Yates, he invites the Crawfords to Mansfield with open arms. Fanny and the reader are well aware that the Crawfords are the primary source of the seductive immorality that Sir Thomas is so concerned about. Sir Thomas may be blind to any kind of moral façade, but he is also invested in theatricality to a degree, both passively and actively.

The major conflict between Fanny and Sir Thomas arises over Henry Crawford’s proposal to Fanny. For the weeks that Maria and Julia have been away, Fanny has been gradually assimilated into the society of Mansfield, including the ball hosted in her honour. The proposal from Mr Crawford is framed as the final step that would raise her into the upper class and onto stage. Sir Thomas supports the match, treating Fanny’s potential marriage as a return on his investment. In a remarkable display of courage, Fanny refuses the proposal on moral grounds, angering Sir Thomas. He lays heavy charges against her, telling her she is “wilful and perverse,” and shows no “consideration or deference” to those he believes have a right to guide and advise her. (*MP*, 216) Fanny, however, has seen Mr Crawford’s corrupt principles in action, and cannot forget how he has conducted himself—here it seems her entrance into the upper class requires her to relinquish the intelligence she

has gained as a spectator. To become an actor on the social stage she is required to 'forget' her previous role, and unlike Mr Crawford, that is impossible for her—she is still not an actress. Similarly, Sir Thomas is not a spectator—ironically, he sees Fanny's adherence to moral standards as wilful disobedience and ingratitude. He lacks the sensitivity to understand Fanny's body language and behaviour and so he misunderstands Fanny. Not only that, if she *were* to solicit his advice, it would be bad advice, because he has misread Mr Crawford's character and believes Fanny should marry him out of feelings of obligation rather than respect. Later, Fanny reflects that "romantic delicacy" cannot be expected from "he who had married a daughter to Mr. Rushworth" (*MP*, 224). Nor can any kind of spectatorial sensitivity be expected from the man who has tried to drive the theatrical out of his home and thus fails to understand the application of theatrical skills in society. It is only at the end of the novel when Mr Crawford and Maria's actions destroy Maria's reputation that Sir Thomas understands how important critical observation truly is.

### **FANNY'S DEBUT**

For a time it seems that Fanny's assimilation into Mansfield society must come at the cost of her own beliefs. Her triumph at the end of the novel is that she is assimilated into the society she has so long been excluded from without having to compromise the knowledge she has gained through living as a spectator her whole life. However, she also must reconcile with the theatricality of society and learn how to be actively involved despite her introversion. Thus, Sir Thomas sends her to Portsmouth, "where she learns to esteem rather than disdain the theatricality of the Mansfield Park regime" (Litvak 1992, 23). After only a few days, Fanny finds that "she could think of nothing but Mansfield, its beloved inmates, its happy ways.... The elegance, propriety, regularity, harmony—and perhaps, above all, the peace and tranquillity of Mansfield, were brought to her remembrance every hour of the day" (*MP*, 266). The key words Fanny uses to describe Mansfield—particularly "elegance" and "propriety"—rest on social performances being adhered to by those involved. Part of her initial fear at Mr Crawford's sudden appearance in Portsmouth stems from the fact that she

is “ashamed” of her family, acutely aware of how their behaviour must appear to members of the gentry (*MP*, 272). She begins to learn the value of a performed appearance, and is relieved when her father is able to appear “a very different man” when introduced to Mr Crawford. Mr Price displays “more than passable” manners and the “expressions of an attached father” so that Fanny’s anxieties are “infinitely soothed” (*MP*, 273–74). Her internal endorsement of performed behaviour is followed closely by a reaffirmation of her discerning abilities of a spectator—Mr Crawford overacts his effusions on Everingham, pressing his hints of wanting a wife far too heavily on the conversation. Fanny is disappointed, though she wants to believe he is sincere in his intentions “to be a friend to the poor and oppressed” (*MP*, 275). She is able to discern that this is yet another mask Mr Crawford is trying on in the hopes of impressing her, and concludes that “he was and must ever be completely unsuited to her” (*MP*, 275).

Fanny does, however, find a willing companion in her younger sister Susan. Fanny’s “first solid consolation” is in perceiving Susan’s attempting to rectify how things are conducted in the home. It takes Fanny “at least a fortnight” before she begins to understand Susan, whose character is “so totally different” from Fanny’s (*MP*, 268–69). When she does, however, Fanny sees that Susan is alert to the improper way business is conducted in their home, and Fanny admires her for her discernment at so young an age. With the modicum of authority the position of elder sister affords her, Fanny steps into a director’s role to guide Susan in her endeavours to set things right. Here, she mirrors Sir Thomas’ earlier mixed attempts to direct Fanny herself into polite society. More significantly, Fanny has once again stepped into the role of prompter as she took up earlier in the novel during the Mansfield theatricals. Though Susan is often “wrong,” Fanny resolves “to give occasional hints to Susan, and endeavour to exercise for her advantage the juster notions of what was due to everybody, and what would be wisest for herself” (*MP*, 269). Once Fanny is able to resolve the antagonism between Susan and Betsy over the silver knife, Susan readily opens up to Fanny, and Fanny is able to take up the dual role of prompter and director more overtly. In a moment of “daring,” Fanny subscribes to a library and begins to direct Susan’s education in a

similar manner to the kindness Edmund showed Fanny on her first arrival to Mansfield. Susan is driven by a desire to become knowledgeable and makes “a most attentive, profitable, thankful pupil” (*MP*, 284). Fanny in turn becomes Susan’s “oracle” both on morals and manners, and the use of the word ‘oracle’ is a significant one. To be an oracle is to be in a position of authority, wisdom, and guidance that has been conferred by mystic or divine means. Fanny begins to hone Susan’s mind through conversation and learning, while Susan becomes ever enchanted by the “manners” and “amusements” of Mansfield (*MP*, 284). Fanny realises that Susan is much better suited for the realm of Mansfield than Portsmouth, and is “exquisitely happy” (*MP*, 301) when Sir Thomas requests that she invite her protégée to return with her to Mansfield.

In the wake of the scandal caused by Mr Crawford and Maria, Fanny’s methods and opinions are validated and justified. Edmund confesses that his “eyes are opened” to Mary Crawford’s character following a visit that has left him reeling from her shallow lack of moral grounding. Finally able to openly voice her opinion, Fanny confides to Edmund the insensitive and avaricious comments Mary wrote to Fanny upon hearing of Tom’s illness. Though Edmund struggles at first to reconcile with her superficiality, he eventually consoles himself with the knowledge that she did care for him to such a degree that she had been “more near doing right” (*MP*, 312). The sudden validation of Fanny’s observations allow her to be assimilated into Mansfield society more organically and without the pressure to relinquish her opinions. Edmund in particular “clings” to Fanny’s friendship (*MP*, 312), cementing Fanny’s position by reversing the roles they held at the beginning of the novel. Fanny becomes the comfort for Edmund through his disappointment and grief, as he was her comfort when she was newly arrived at Mansfield. The reversal of positions highlights how far Fanny has come in the novel—she has become a sensitive, discerning young woman who has come to embrace the place that was once daunting and isolating to her. She has become useful, even indispensable, to the inhabitants who once passively relegated her to the unused recesses of the house. More than that, she has come to appreciate the performative society that once terrified her, and in doing so she has become an active member of that society

through her direction of Susan. Yet the novel itself ends on an ambiguous, grey note for Fanny. If she has honed her intelligence and judgment through observation, what are we to make of the proclamation that Mansfield has “long been” perfect to her? Such an ending, coupled with the flurried tying up of loose ends, tends to leave readers unsatisfied. After seeing Fanny suffer so much throughout the novel, it is difficult to understand how she might have thought Mansfield perfect. Ultimately, it seems that those who outright reject the theatrical, or who use its methods indiscriminately and without moral integrity, are the characters who have lost something by the end. But in seeing Fanny move from spectator to performer, we are left to wonder if the declaration of Mansfield’s perfections mirrors Fanny abandoning the facility for memory that played a crucial role in protecting her from Henry Crawford for so long. If so, Fanny has lost a valuable critical skill and ultimately given up a part of herself.

# Conclusion

## Variations on a Theme

In this thesis I have attempted to trace some of the ways contemporary theatre informed Jane Austen's first three published novels. As I have argued, the influence of the theatre can be seen in the behaviour of characters and how they engage with the social world around them. In each of the novels discussed, Austen creates a social world that is dependent upon a willingness to perform. The decision to act is not the immoral or corrupting force in Austen's work as it was for so many of her contemporaries. It might be argued that Marianne Dashwood's dramatics are framed negatively by the text, but ultimately, it is her intent and lack of propriety that is being criticised. She does not lose her theatricality; rather, she simply becomes more aware of her audience and what performances are appropriate for the setting. Trouble looms when antagonists such as Wickham and Crawford use performance to deceive those around them rather than to ease social interaction. Austen shows us a dual nature of performance, so that we can only conclude performance in her work is a neutral tool. The sincerity and intent behind social masks therefore become the key concerns of her texts.

Austen is also drawing on various contemporary issues surrounding the stage. The cultural controversies between legitimate and illegitimate playhouses drove the development of unique styles and forms of drama that Austen was intimately familiar with. We know she saw various burlettas and pantomimes, and even wrote a few burlesques herself for her own amusement (Byrne 2002, 90). All of these forms were associated with illegitimate theatres.

Thus it is unsurprising that we can see elements of illegitimate theatre appearing in Austen's mature works. *Sense and Sensibility* offers the most prominent example; Marianne Dashwood's devotion to sensibility results in performances that would not be out of place in unlicensed productions. In particular, her reliance on gesture, tableau, and physical reaction mimics pantomime and melodrama. The idea of eloquently expressing emotion through gesture was of growing interest in the period, and as Jane Moody writes, "it was illegitimate theatre ... which gave this hyperbolic iconography its most spectacular expression" (Moody 2000, 84). Moreover, Austen legitimises Marianne's dramatic performances as a valid mode of expression, thus legitimising illegitimate theatre as a theatrical form.

We know that Austen was also a dedicated musician, who practiced on the piano daily for most of her life. Her impressive collection of music has been remarked upon for its scope and variety; it also demonstrates how rich musical life could be for performers (Wood 2011, 153). The tension between the cultivation of musical skill for self-improvement versus public recognition is subtly satirised in Austen's novels. *Pride and Prejudice* gives us Elizabeth Bennet, a willing social performer who is frank about her lack of musical talent. Nevertheless, her musical performances are often pleasing and natural rather than technically pedantic. She is contrasted with Caroline Bingley, who, as an accomplished woman, is also a pianist. However, where Elizabeth only plays when pressed, Caroline is willing to exhibit her talents in order to centre attention on herself. Caroline misunderstands the real benefits of developing an interest in music in the same way she misunderstands the point of reading. Both activities should be used to improve the mind and "add something more substantial" to the shallow gilt of accomplishments (*P&P*, 27).

In a more extreme example of this dichotomy, Lady Catherine boasts of her musical taste despite lacking an ability to play, while Georgiana Darcy is so consumed by practice that musical performance has become a way of connecting to the world around her. Lady Catherine uses music purely to advance her own reputation without any commitment to playing. Gillen D'Arcy Wood writes that this "failure to meet the minimum terms of accomplishment is far worse than their abuse" (Wood 2011, 159). Thus, though Elizabeth

dislikes playing and Georgiana's rehearsals distance her from people, their attitudes towards accomplishment are presented as far preferable to those of Caroline and Lady Catherine.

Finally, Austen also draws on dramatic theory to inform her novels. *Mansfield Park* offers us a model of spectatorship that encourages an emotional connection to performances while maintaining a rational critical response (Nachumi 2001, 238–39). The didactic aspect of being a spectator was discussed extensively by Joanna Baillie. Contrary to the idea that viewing a play could be morally corrupting, Baillie argued that spectatorship was a natural human impulse that developed our sympathetic capacities. She wrote that the ability to be a sympathetic, engaged spectator “will fit a man more particularly for the most important situations in life” (Baillie 2001, 76); it “improves us by the knowledge we acquire of our own minds” (Baillie 2001, 90). Fanny Price is such a spectator. Relegated to the position of spectator due to her social class, Fanny is a critically engaged heroine who is the novel's only character with the finesse of understanding to detect false behaviours. The understandings she gains from observing those around her help her to navigate society without being seduced by the attractive, but nonetheless shallow, Crawfords.

But the influence that the theatre had on Jane Austen's works is by no means limited to intertextual allusions. Austen had a profound understanding of how theatrical form worked, and though she never wrote any plays beyond the parodies and burlesques in her *Minor Works*, her novels still bear the hallmarks of a theatrical tradition. Her mature work “honed” her use of dramatic technique “without ever abandoning it fully” (Byrne 2002, 89). Paula Byrne suggests that Austen turned to novels because they allowed her the “authorial control” that drama lacks (Byrne 2002, 99). In moving to novel writing, however, Austen did not lose her sense of dramatic form. The structure of her novels, composed as they are of scenes of dialogue with sparse descriptions of setting, is often reminiscent of play scripts. Austen is then able to enhance the drama of her novels through her use of free indirect discourse. The technique allows her “to be simultaneously inside and outside the consciousness of a character” (Byrne 2002 99), rendering a character's own thoughts on a second stage privy only to the reader.

Austen deploys volume breaks with the same dramatic power a playwright would deploy act breaks. Each volume is then composed of set-pieces of action interspersed with moments of reflection that give both character and reader an opportunity to process the action. Byrne thoroughly discusses the importance of entrances and exits in such set-pieces. She writes that entrances and exits “are the markers of beginnings and endings, and of moments of surprise and suspense—of drama” (Byrne 2002, 123). Austen’s sense of dramatic entrances and exits is most prominent in *Sense and Sensibility*, but it also appears in her other novels. Perhaps most memorably, Austen combines a dramatic entrance with the end of the first volume of *Mansfield Park*. Julia Bertram bursts in on the middle of the *Lovers’ Vows* dress rehearsal with the cry, “My father is come! He is in the hall at this moment” (*MP*, 120), bringing the private theatricals to an unexpected end.

Across all three novels, Austen explores the same topics from a variety of angles. They all have similar basic plotlines, characters, and themes, yet each time the execution of these elements is distinct. Considered together, we can see thematic parallels and dramatic structures that belie a far more liberal picture of Austen than the one put forward by her brother in the wake of her death. Contrary to many writers of her day, Austen did not believe that theatre was a corrupting or lesser form. Instead, an intimate understanding of the theatre underpins her work. She presents performance as an ambivalent, neutral tool—and even as a necessity of social life—rather than attempting to vilify or venerate it. Austen’s focus is internal. To her, the intent and feeling behind a performance is what matters when making any kind of moral judgment. By approaching similar themes in various ways, Austen creates complementary novels that experiment with ideas about the theatre and challenge us to think complexly about her work.

Clearly, the theatre’s influence had a profound impact on Austen’s fiction, and it would be tempting to continue this study with her most famous director, Emma, or her later, most complex spectator, Anne Elliott. There is also much to be said about Catherine Morland’s dedication to viewing her life as a dramatic construction. My work has attempted

to bring together the most important scholarly work on Austen and the theatre, and I hope it has also introduced some new paths for future researchers to follow.

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