

**‘I could be any thing or every thing’: Performance and the Boundaries of Social Propriety
in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice***

In his 1859 essay on ‘The Novels of Jane Austen’, George Lewes describes Austen’s narrative style in terms that are distinctly associated with the theatre:

The people speak, feel, and act; everything that is said, felt, or done tends towards the entanglement or disentanglement of the plot; and we are almost made actors as well as spectators of the little drama.¹

Lewes draws attention to the presence of theatrical conventions in Austen’s narratives and literary techniques. A novelist beloved by playwrights, with Richard Sheridan praising *Pride and Prejudice* as ‘one of the cleverest things’ he had ever read,² Austen writes insightful studies of character and masterful dialogues that evidence her knowledge of the theatre and its elements. Contrary to critical opinions that Austen was anti-theatrical, her novels recognise the significant influence of theatre on society, demonstrating an acute awareness of social performativity and its moral ambiguity. While Lionel Trilling argues that Austen represents the private theatrical in *Mansfield Park* as a threat to ‘the integrity of the self’,³ and Marilyn Butler cites Austen’s approving reading of Thomas Gisborne’s *Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* – which emphasises the dangers posed by acting to women – as evidence of her negative attitude towards theatre,⁴ the contexts of Austen’s life conversely indicate her appreciation for the dramatic arts. Austen’s letters reveal that she was a frequent attendee of the theatre and an astute critic of actors’ performances, sharing the contemporary admiration of Edmund Kean’s performance as Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*⁵ and expressing regard for the great tragic actress Sarah Siddons.⁶ Furthermore, in her youth, Austen wrote short comedies such as *The Mystery* and *The Visit*, and witnessed many home theatricals, which Penny Gay argues to be a formative influence on Austen’s awareness of ‘the seductive power of theatre [and] the ambivalence of acting’.⁷

¹ George Lewes, ‘The Novels of Jane Austen’, *Blackwood’s Magazine* 86 (1859), <https://www.mollands.net/etexts/other/lewes.html> [Accessed 30 March 2023]

² Richard Sheridan, cited in Park Honan, *Jane Austen: Her Life* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1989), 320.

³ Lionel Trilling, ‘*Mansfield Park*’, in *The Opposing Self* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1955), 218.

⁴ Marilyn Butler, ‘*Mansfield Park*’, in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 231-232.

⁵ Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, March 2, 1814 in *The Letters of Jane Austen* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1908), 248.

⁶ Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, April 25, 1811, in *The Letters of Jane Austen*, 166-167.

⁷ Penny Gay, ‘Jane Austen’s Experience of Theatre’, in *Jane Austen and the Theatre*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4.

While performance is variously defined as ‘the action of performing a play, piece of music, ceremony’ or ‘the observable or measurable behaviour of a person [...] in a particular [...] situation’,⁸ the line between theatrical performance and constructed performances of identity is especially thin in the social world of Austen’s novels. This essay will explore how the inherently performative nature of society in Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) enables characters to challenge the boundaries of social propriety by engaging with the conventions of theatre. The presence of the theatre, however, manifests itself differently in the two novels, demonstrating Austen’s awareness of the theatre as both a leisurely pastime among the gentry and an implicit context that influences the performativity of social and gender roles.

The themes of the theatre and social performativity are central to Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, in which the production of *Lovers’ Vows* reveals how the novel’s characters express their hidden feelings and desires in the guises of acting and spectating. The play chosen by Austen for the novel’s private theatrical, Elizabeth Inchbald’s 1798 adaptation of a work by the German playwright August von Kotzebue, features controversial yet pertinent themes echoed within the novel, including a fallen woman, forbidden love, and class difference. These themes are reflected in the flirtations between the Bertram sisters and Henry Crawford, as well as Fanny Price’s jealousy of Edmund Bertram’s attention to Mary Crawford. Austen’s interplay between the narrative text, the subtext of the characters’ motivations, and allusions to *Lovers’ Vows* reveal the theatre and its conventions as a central narrative framework to the novel. In the six chapters dedicated to the theatrical, Austen incorporates elements of drama including staging, character development, dramatic tension, and spectatorship in her literary techniques.

Although extensive critical discourse surrounds Austen’s engagement with the theatre in *Mansfield Park*, attention is rarely devoted to the significance of the novel’s titular estate being appropriated for the theatrical. The transformation of Mansfield Park into a theatre implicitly demotes the social status of the house and its inhabitants, blurring the class boundaries that Edmund perceives to differentiate professional actors and ‘good hardened acting’ from upper-class amateurs

⁸ ‘performance, *n.*’, *OED Online*, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/140783?redirectedFrom=performance#eid>. [Accessed 30 March 2023].

‘who have not been bred to the trade’.⁹ Defining the estate’s transformation as ‘carnival disruption, the great house turned topsy-turvy’,¹⁰ Gay identifies theatrical elements of early modern Carnival celebrations influencing Austen’s narrative. Carnival’s dramatic elements of disruptive social satire including ‘masquerade, disguise and [...] role-reversal’,¹¹ as well as the usurpation of the master’s house, are especially relevant to *Mansfield Park*. Edmund’s disapproval of Tom ‘taking liberties with my father’s house’ (*MP*, 242) identifies how the theatrical endangers the propriety symbolised by the estate itself. The consequences of these dramatic ‘liberties’ are reflected in Austen’s representation of the changing physical setting of Mansfield Park. Her description of Tom and Yates ‘walking off together to consult farther in the room now beginning to be called *the Theatre*’ (*MP*, 258) reveals a transgressive alteration of the house’s semantic identity. Not only does the play threaten social order by redefining the identities of its participants, but the language used to describe the transforming spaces in Mansfield Park reflects the threat to the estate as an emblem of upper-class stability.

While the production of *Lovers’ Vows* enables Austen’s characters to express true feelings in the guise of acting, Austen also explores how her female characters use the play to liberate themselves from social conventions. What Anna Lott refers to as a contemporary ‘anxiety about the unpredictable forces inherent in representation, particularly in female acting’¹² is reflected in the reactions to Maria playing Agatha opposite Henry Crawford’s Frederick, despite her ‘extremely delicate’ (*MP*, 240) situation of being engaged to Mr. Rushworth. Fanny’s interior monologue indicates her unease at Maria’s skill in scenes expressing love towards Henry, reflecting that ‘Maria she also thought acted well – too well; –’ (*MP*, 310). The parenthetical aside within Fanny’s free indirect discourse identifies her source of anxiety in Maria’s acting, yet the second dash breaks off her observation from arriving at the conclusion of social impropriety.

In contrast, Mary’s retelling of Mr. Rushworth witnessing Maria and Henry rehearsing exemplifies her understanding of the subversive implications of role-playing. Reassuring Rushworth that ‘there is something so *maternal* in [Maria’s] manner, so completely *maternal* in her voice and

⁹ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (New York: Anchor Books, 2017), 242.

[Henceforth all in-text citations will refer to this edition, abbreviated *MP*]

¹⁰ Penny Gay, ‘*Mansfield Park*: Fanny’s Education in the Theatre’, in *Jane Austen and the Theatre*, 107.

¹¹ Michael Bristol, *Carnival and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 40.

¹² Anna Lott, ‘Staging a Lesson: The Theatricals and Proper Conduct in *Mansfield Park*’, *Studies in the Novel* 38, no. 3 (2006), 275.

countenance' (*MP*, 316), Mary manipulates his perception of the scene to disguise its impropriety. The italicisation of '*maternal*' emphasises the uncomfortable ambivalence between Maria acting the affectionate relationship between a mother and her son, and the irony of Maria's romantic attraction to Henry as perceived by Mary. Austen thus uses this narrative episode to encourage her readers to be critical audiences of social drama, emphasising the moral ambiguity of theatrical performances.

Henry Crawford's declaration that 'I feel as if I could be any thing or every thing' (*MP*, 236) highlights the malleability of identity inherent in social performativity, and the challenge for the novel's characters and readers alike to differentiate between performance and truth. When do the self-professed actors of *Mansfield Park*, if ever, stop acting? When Henry proposes to Fanny, is he still attempting to make 'a small hole in Fanny Price's heart' (*MP*, 418)? Does he continue to play a part when he 'still kept his station and retained [Maria]'s hand' (*MP*, 324) after Sir Thomas's arrival interrupts their rehearsal, or has he – as Maria believes – revealed his true feelings? This theatrical education in critical spectatorship, particularly for the women of the novel, is a central aspect of navigating the performativity of society. Elizabeth Inchbald, the playwright who adapted *Lovers' Vows*, endorsed the instructive potential of theatre and suggested that 'plays representing strong, independent women could [...] have a strong positive social effect.'¹³ Austen implicitly represents the didactic elements of the theatre when her female characters decode social theatricality. For instance, when Julia and Maria fight for the role of Agatha, Julia interprets the speech and behaviour of Henry and Maria to determine whether they are performing to disguise social impropriety:

The influence of his voice was felt. Julia wavered; but was he only trying to soothe and pacify her, and make her overlook the previous affront? [...] He was, perhaps, but at treacherous play with her. She looked suspiciously at her sister; Maria's countenance was to decide it: if she were vexed and alarmed—but Maria looked all serenity and satisfaction (*MP*, 258)

The language of the passage emphasises its dramatic contexts, with the lapse into Julia's free indirect discourse similar to a metatheatrical aside, her analysis of 'Maria's countenance' revealing her sister's inability to equal Henry's skilful acting, and the 'treacherous play' semantically connecting social and theatrical performances.

¹³ Lott, 'Staging a Lesson', 281.

While Fanny Price's older cousins are experienced in deciphering the complexities of social theatricality, the episode of the theatrical in *Mansfield Park* is a significant moment in Fanny's education in navigating the performative artifice of society. Fanny's first reading of *Lovers' Vows* is portrayed through free indirect discourse as an awakening to the subversive potential of theatre, her tension between 'eagerness' and 'astonishment' (*MP*, 260) reflected in Austen's narrative pacing. Fanny's rapid success of emotions while reading the play are conveyed through the exclamation marks, dashes, and multi-clausal sentences within a paragraph only containing two full stops. Nevertheless, Fanny's naïve reflection that 'she could hardly suppose her cousins could be aware of what they were engaging in' (*ibid*) indicates that she is yet to be educated on social performativity. Therefore, although Gay proposes a reading of *Mansfield Park* modelled on the mediaeval morality play – with Edmund assuming the part of *Everyman*¹⁴ – it is perhaps more fitting to suggest that it is Fanny who embodies the journey of *Everywoman* from innocence to experience, the theatre playing a key role in her entrance into society.

In contrast to Fanny Price, Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* is able to expose the artifice of social theatricality pervading upper-class circles. Compared to the six chapters devoted to the organisation of the theatrical in *Mansfield Park*, *Pride and Prejudice* only references the theatre twice in passing over the course of its narrative. Nevertheless, critics widely acknowledge theatrical influences in *Pride and Prejudice*, with Paula Byrne writing that it is the novel that 'most naturally lends itself to dramatic representation'¹⁵ in its abundance of dramatic speech, dialogues, and careful scene-staging. While Trilling argues that 'every virtue of freedom, vivacity and consciousness that is celebrated in *Pride and Prejudice* is condemned in *Mansfield Park*',¹⁶ the novels both emphasise the necessity of looking beyond the often superficial performativity of 'First Impressions'. In *Mansfield Park*, despite Fanny's critical distance as a 'quiet auditor' (*MP*, 258) situated in a liminal position between acting and spectating,¹⁷ she refuses to learn by performing – evidenced by her emphasis on the distinction between 'read[ing] the part' and 'say[ing]' it (*MP*, 316). In *Pride and Prejudice*,

¹⁴ Gay, 'Theatricals and Theatricality in *Mansfield Park*', *Sydney Studies in English* 13 (1987), 66.

¹⁵ Paula Byrne, 'Pride and Prejudice', in *Jane Austen and the Theatre* (London: Hambledon and London, 2002), 131.

¹⁶ Trilling, 'A Portrait of Western Man', cited in Butler, 202.

¹⁷ Jocelyn Harris, 'Pride and Prejudice and Mansfield Park', in *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 46.

however, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy are aware of society's performative nature, with five out of twenty instances of words related to 'performance' occurring in their direct speech. The theatricality of social life in *Pride and Prejudice* is further emphasised in Austen's descriptions of characters who 'play their parts'¹⁸ in order to disguise sentiments deemed improper by society.

Like a director blocking a scene, Austen's attention to staging is particularly evident in *Pride and Prejudice*. For instance, the scene in which Elizabeth enters the drawing room at Longbourne to find Bingley having proposed to Jane is characterised by Christina Lupton as 'carefully curated'.¹⁹ The pose of the couple 'standing together over the hearth, as if engaged in earnest conversation' (*P&P*, 257) is reminiscent of a tableau. The careful staging of this private scene demonstrates what Gay refers to as the 'inescapable' theatricality of social life in Austen's novels,²⁰ where even intimate moments are characterised by theatrical conventions.

Although Austen is the ultimate director of the social theatre in *Pride and Prejudice*, she also enlists her characters to direct scenes of their own. For instance, when dancing with Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth encourages him to speak by drawing attention to the performative conventions of social propriety: 'It is *your* turn to say something now, Mr. Darcy. – *I* talked about the dance, and *you* ought to make some kind of remark on the size of the room' (*P&P*, 69). Prompting Darcy for his 'line', Elizabeth implies that all public interactions are performances that require adherence to convention. Earlier in the novel, Elizabeth stages a comically 'picturesque' scene in the grounds of Netherfield. Encouraging Mr. Darcy and the Bingley sisters to walk together, she directs them to 'stay where you are. – You are charmingly group'd, and appear to uncommon advantage. The picturesque would be spoilt by admitting a fourth' (*P&P*, 40). Combining the languages of imperative stage directions and picturesque improvement, Elizabeth's witty scene-setting challenges social propriety, as she draws on the advice of the artist and aesthetic theorist William Gilpin for the ideal arrangement of cattle in a landscape.²¹

¹⁸ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2019), 77.

[Henceforth all in-text citations will refer to this edition, abbreviated *P&P*]

¹⁹ Christina Lupton, 'Introduction', in Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, xxvi.

²⁰ Gay, 'Prologue', in *Jane Austen and the Theatre*, ix.

²¹ William Gilpin, *Observations, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty* (London: 1786), ii, 258.

Unlike Elizabeth, who revels in subversively comedic social theatricality, Caroline Bingley's social performances are staged to manipulate the people around her. Caroline is portrayed by Austen as one of the novel's consummate performers, employing her acting skills to present a curated public image of herself. Nevertheless, Caroline's social performativity is selective and hypocritical, evidenced by her interaction with Mrs. Bennet in which the superficiality of social convention is emphasised. Although Caroline 'performed her part indeed without much graciousness', the fact that 'Mrs. Bennet was satisfied' (*P&P*, 34) by Caroline's behaviour reveals her inability to critically evaluate Caroline's lacklustre social performance.

In the chapters dedicated to Jane's stay at Netherfield, however, Caroline is faced with a more perceptive audience in Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy. The scene of Caroline's walk around the drawing room is a consciously staged performance designed to attract Darcy, yet one that is promptly detected. When Darcy remains 'inflexibly studious', she tactically engages Elizabeth as her scene partner by asking her to 'follow my example, and take a turn about the room' (*P&P*, 42). This theatrical disguise of flirtation initially appears to be successful when Darcy 'unconsciously closed his book' (*ibid*), demonstrating the captivating effect of performances in social settings. Nevertheless, Darcy exposes the artifice of the scene when offered by Caroline to join her and Elizabeth:

You either chuse this method of passing the evening because you are in each other's confidence [...] or because you are conscious that your figures appear to the greatest advantage in walking; – if the first, I would be completely in your way; – and if the second, I can admire you much better as I sit by the fire (*P&P*, 42-43).

Choosing to maintain the critical distance of spectatorship, Darcy's response to Caroline's performance thus reveals how she conceals her subversive intentions through social theatricality.

Although Elizabeth participates in Caroline's performance for Mr. Darcy in the drawing room, she is not always complacent to act a part in the Netherfield social theatricals. In the conversation about female accomplishments in Chapter VIII, Elizabeth critiques the superficial performativity of fashionable women's education. The concept of performativity is a key contextual framework for the debate between Caroline, Mr. Darcy, and Elizabeth, which begins with Caroline enthusing about Georgiana Darcy's 'performance on the pianoforte' (*P&P*, 29). The introduction of

the word 'performance' implicitly conveys Austen's representation of female accomplishment as an aspect of social theatricality. Once more, contemporary commentaries on the relationship between women and theatre inflect Austen's writing. Gay observes that Elizabeth's reaction to Caroline and Darcy's list of demands for a truly accomplished woman reflects the ideas of the author and playwright Hannah More on female education. More characterises the superficiality of accomplishments through the language of social theatricality: for accomplished women, 'the morning is all rehearsal, and the evening is all performance'.²²

Elizabeth's response to Darcy that '*I never saw such capacity, and taste, and application, and elegance, as you describe, united*' (*P&P*, 30) critiques the social performativity required of women by men, grounded in the distinction between the '*I never saw*' of realistic, personal female experience and the '*as you describe*' of societal ideals dictated by men. Furthermore, Elizabeth's polysyndetic repetition of 'and' draws attention by exaggeration to the immense demands made of women as social performers. The necessarily theatrical element of courtship, in which women must display their accomplishments and act the part of an ideal wife, complicates the moral status of social theatricality in Austen's novels. Although there are characters in both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* who engage in social theatricality with selfish or transgressive motives, performativity is also represented as an inevitable necessity of life.

Through their stylistic and thematic engagements with the theatre, *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice* dramatise the challenges to propriety that arise when acting departs the theatrical realm and enters the social realm. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, Austen was acknowledged as an author who employed theatrical conventions in her novels. Whether overtly or implicitly addressing the theme of the theatre, her literary techniques in *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice* are characterised by an awareness of staging, dialogue, theatrical world-building, and critical spectatorship. Therefore, although the novels appear to present two different perspectives through their heroines on the moral nature of the theatre and theatricality, they share an acknowledgement that performativity is inseparable from the social worlds to which they belong.

²² Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, cited in Gay, *Jane Austen and the Theatre*, 81.

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