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The Novel as Drama

Staging Theatrical Aspects of the Narrative in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*

Ann M. Shanahan

Abstract

Of Jane Austen's full-length novels, Mansfield Park *deals most directly with theatrical subjects, yet it is the least frequently adapted for the stage. Plots, themes, and characters in the novel echo those of the popular late eighteenth century play* Lovers' Vows, *and the first volume includes a performance of that play as part of a "home theatrical." In 2011, I completed a workshop adaptation and staging of Mansfield Park. I used the method of Chamber Theatre founded by Robert Breen, a technique of literary adaptation that retains the narrative voice by use of an embodied narrator and assignment of narrative passages to characters in direct address with the audience. A physical enactment of the relationship of the narrator to the central figure of Fanny Price revealed a dramatic component at the heart of the narrative point of view and its progression. This method illuminated a performance-based structure to the novel and rendered it remarkably well-suited to theatrical adaptation.*

While Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) deals directly with theatrical subjects, it is the least frequently adapted of Austen's novels for the stage. Themes in the novel echo those of the popular late eighteenth century play, *Lovers' Vows* (1798) and the first volume of the novel includes a performance of that play as a "home theatrical," common in the period. The lack of stage adaptation may be explained by a commonly held critical position that the novel is Austen's most "problematic," and that it paints a negative view of theatre, reflecting Austen's personal opinion of the practice (Byrne 2000:148).

In 2011, I completed a workshop staging of my own adaptation of *Mansfield Park*. For this I used the method of Chamber Theatre founded by Robert Breen at Northwestern University, a form of literary adaptation that retains the narrative voice by use of an embodied narrator.[1] While I set out merely interested in exploring the metatheatrical potential of the novel's theatre-based scenes on

stage, the application of the Chamber Theatre method revealed additional theatrical aspects to the novel, beyond the overt subjects pursued. This method revealed a theatrical dimension to the narrative point of view in relation to the central female character of Fanny Price. Some of these dynamics have been suggested, at least in part, through textual analysis by scholars interested in Austen and theatre. However the Chamber Theatre method, because of the clarity demanded by its physicality, allowed further development of what has been suggested elsewhere. Consideration of these features may ameliorate some concern for of the "problems" in the novel, especially criticism of its central female character, and clarify some of the questions concerning Austen's views on theatre. Certainly this method illuminated a performance-based structure to the progression of the narrative, rendering it remarkably well-suited to theatrical adaptation.

The Novel and the Theatre

I was originally drawn to the project of adapting *Mansfield Park* because of its theatrical content.[2] In the story of Fanny Price's adoption by her rich relations, the Bertrams, her cousins and their fashionable new neighbors, Mary and Henry Crawford, undertake a staging of a popular drama to pass the time while the patriarch, Sir Thomas, is off attending dangerous business in Antigua. Austen connects characters, conflicts, and themes in the novel with those of the chosen play, *Lovers' Vows*, an English adaptation by Elizabeth Inchbald of a late eighteenth century German play by August von Kotzebue, *Das Kind der Liebe* (1780), translated alternately as *The Natural Son* or *The Love Child* (Allen 2006).

A substantial portion of the first volume of *Mansfield Park* involves the selection of and preparation for the play. While the actual performance never occurs because of the surprise return of Sir Thomas at a dress rehearsal, Austen relishes in the details of backstage dilemmas and petty jealousies in the preparation process. Themes related to performance and theatre reemerge throughout the remainder of the novel, as the home theatricals are referenced often throughout, and by a recurring reference to acting, particularly around the character of Henry Crawford, who is credited as a talented actor, on stage and off. As an example of the novel's reference to drama and theatre, in the second volume Crawford performs a section of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, and then reflects on his ease and naturalness reading portions aloud:

> Shakespeare one gets acquainted with without knowing how. It is a part of an Englishman's constitution. His thoughts and beauties are so spread abroad that one touches them everywhere; one is intimate with him by instinct. No man of any brain can open at a good part of one of his plays without falling into the flow of his meaning immediately [391].

In these sorts of direct references to dramatic literature and theatre practice, *Mansfield Park* is immersed in a world of performance to a greater degree than any of Austen's novels.

While the theatrical content of the novel first attracted me to the project, in adapting the material I quickly discovered that the vision of theatre presented by the novel is complicated, even negative. The theatricals initiate acts of moral degradation that the novel ultimately condemns. Furthermore, the theatre and the specific play chosen are criticized and resisted on moral grounds by the main characters with which we identify (Fanny Price and her beloved cousin Edmund), and celebrated by those we censure (Fanny's cousins Maria and Tom Bertram and the conniving Crawfords). When Fanny first reads the play to be rehearsed:

> She ran through it with an eagerness which was suspended only by intervals of astonishment, that it could be chosen in the present instance — that it could be proposed and accepted in a private Theatre! Agatha and Amelia appeared to her in their different ways so totally improper for home representation — the situation of one, and the language of the other, so unfit to be expressed by any woman of modesty, that she could hardly suppose her cousins could be aware of what they were engaging in [161].

Likewise, Edmund counsels his brother Tom against the plan to produce a play, especially while their father is away in Antigua:

> In a *general* light, private theatricals are open to some objections, but as *we* are circumstanced, I must think it would be highly injudicious, and more than injudicious to attempt anything of the kind. It would show great want of feeling on my father's account, absent as he is, and in some degree of constant danger; and it would be imprudent, I think, with regard to Maria, whose situation is a very delicate one, considering everything, extremely delicate [147].

As Edmund and Fanny anticipate, the rehearsals for the play do indeed spur negative results. Prompted by their intimacy in scenes together, Maria Bertram begins an affair with the rake Henry Crawford, though she is betrothed to John Rushworth. Balance and order is returned to Mansfield when the patriarch Sir Thomas returns and puts an end to the chaos of rehearsals. As a result, Fanny's situation improves significantly, along with her overall happiness. When the affair fanned by the theatricals is revealed later in the novel, Fanny is vindicated in her choice not to accept Crawford's hand in marriage, elevated in her position in the family, and ultimately secure in a happy ending with her love, Edmund. Considering its role in the plot, there is no doubt that theatre functions as a destabilizing, negative element: those who do not participate in it benefit from that choice; those who do suffer disease, censure, and even expulsion from society. Thus, my initial rationale for adapting *Mansfield Park* based on its theatrical content was at best complicated, at worst contradicted, by the spirit of the novel's treatment of theatre.

Several critics have argued that the novel's perspective reflects Austen's own negative view of theatre. Chief among these was Lionel Trilling in an essay that

was to become the introduction the *Pelican Guide to English Literature* (1957). In her influential book, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975), Marilyn Butler argues "there could be no doubt in the minds of Jane Austen and most of her readers that the name of Kotzebue is said to be synonymous with political subversion and dangerous ... messages about 'freedom in sexual matters and defiance of traditional restraints'" (233–234). According to critic Paula Byrne, author of *Jane Austen and the Theatre*,

> Butler's influential reading of *Lovers' Vows* along with the older but still frequently-cited work of Lionel Trilling on the novelist's rejections of the "histrionic art," has put the seal on the critical orthodoxy that asserts Austen's condemnation of private theatricals. Even though ... a plethora of critical ambiguity surrounds the play acting sequence in *Mansfield Park*, few have challenged the assumption that Austen was hostile to the drama [2000:249].

Byrne and others, notably Penny Gay, have countered this assumption.[3] These scholars read Austen's novels in light of her participation in home theatricals and play attendance noted in her copious correspondence. Austen and her family themselves engaged in home theatricals at the rectory at Steventon (Byrne 3–28), and she regularly attended the theatre in London, Southampton, and Bath, where she lived just before writing the novel (Jordan 1987:140). *Lovers' Vows* was performed in Bath at least fifteen times between the years the Austens lived there (1801–1806). To contradict the idea that Austen disliked theatre Byrne offers evidence, mainly from the novels themselves, of Austen's detailed familiarity both with Kotzebue's play and with several other popular plays of the English stage. She argues that Austen would not have known so much about something she censured. Austen's careful treatment and unusual insight into rehearsal dynamics and theatrical practices suggest that she had a great deal of interest in, even love of, the craft: "For some critics what is particularly attractive about Austen's choice of play is the opportunity given them to construe *Mansfield Park* an attack against the drama. One of the problems with this argument is that Austen enjoyed going to Kotzebue plays.... She clearly knew *Lovers' Vows* extremely well" (150). Likewise, Byrne points out that the novel and Inchbald's play deal with the same themes and characters:

> Elizabeth Inchbald's play raises considerations about the right of women to choose their own husbands, about father's responsibility to his children, and perhaps most radically about the validity of innate merit rather than social position. In *Mansfield Park* Austen is deeply engaged with all of these issues. In order to develop her interest in the relationship between role playing and social behavior, she needed a play that could be interlinked with the characters in her novel [153].

Byrne concludes that Austen's vision was deeply intertwined with the practice of theatre. She argues that Austen saw social behavior like theatre: "Far from proposing that acting encourages a kind of insincere role playing in life, Austen suggests in her depiction of polite society that an ability to perform socially is often a necessity" (203). Reviewing all her novels, Byrne argues that "Austen's interest in social mobility is inextricably bound up with her knowledge of eighteenth-century theatre, both public and private, where reversals of rank and station were commonplace" (195). She asserts that Austen's innovations in novel writing owe significant debt to her love and knowledge of the theatre, and in specific reference to *Mansfield Park*, "that the range of its allusiveness and variety of its quasi-dramatic techniques, [the novel] is much more deeply involved with the theatre than has hitherto been assumed" (177).

In her book of the same title as Byrne's, Penny Gay arrives at similar conclusions. Like Byrne, Gay points to theatrical qualities in Austen's writing as evidence of both her knowledge of and deep identification with theatre practice. She begins the chapter on *Mansfield Park* with reference to the conclusion of the first volume of the novel, when, in a highly theatrical moment, Julia Bertram rushes in to announce the surprise return of Sir Thomas: "Thus in this most apparently anti-theatrical of her novels, Jane Austen employs the methods of the drama with brilliant panache" (Gay 2002:98). Gay arrives at conclusions similar to Byrne's that "the novel's recognition that theatricality, like the world, is always with us — and that it cannot be harnessed uncomplicatedly to serve the cause of morality" (98). She argues that what seems ostensibly like criticism of theatre actually demonstrates its power. In the later parts of the novel Austen uses theatrical methods in profound ways that are not immediately obvious. These devices are successful because Austen has "has prepared the reader for the contemplation of the subtle but pervasive power of these structures by alerting us in Volume I to the power of acknowledged theatricality (108).

The Adaptation Process

Gay's and Byrne's observations on Austen's deep interest in theatre and performance are supported by discoveries during the process of the novel's theatrical adaptation. As I moved into the actual practice of adapting — creating the script and especially *staging* the narrative in physical space — profound performative and theatrical aspects of the novel's content, form, and style began to reveal themselves. These elements suggested reasons why the novel might be better fit for theatrical adaptation than previous practice suggests. The physical staging offers insights beyond those discerned from textual analysis, into the relationship of theatre to Austen's writing, especially in the progression of the narrative voice in relation to Fanny Price.[4]

The most immediate feature of Austen's writing to emerge in my process was the amount of the novel written as *dialogue* and placed in quotation marks. In the program notes to his adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility* at Northlight Theatre in Skokie, Illinois (2011), director and writer Jon Jory pointed out not

only the dominance of dialogue in Austen's novels (roughly 70 percent of the printed on the page) but also of her skill at evoking character through dialogue. The theatre adaptor's job with Austen's work is thus a relatively easy one. In extracting the dialogue from *Mansfield Park*, I noticed a consistent structure to the chapters. Most begin with a brief narrative description followed by a long dialogic section. Some conclude with short return to the narrative, others end in the dialogue itself. This structure is similar to scenes in a play with scene descriptions followed by dialogue.[5]

In addition to the heavy use of dialogue in the novel, the narrative prose also often assumes the voices of characters as if they are speaking. Austen is credited for the development and sophistication of this narrative form, known as "free indirect speech." Her narrators often speak in the third person, through the thoughts and vernacular of the characters she is describing. When Fanny learns her love Edmund is about to participate in the theatrical activity she dislikes, the narrator, without quotations for Fanny, alternates between hers and her heroine's voices: "To be acting! After all his objections—objections so just and so public! After all that she had heard him say, and seen him look, and known him to be feeling. Could it be possible? Edmund so inconsistent. Was he not deceiving himself? Was he not wrong? Alas! it was all Miss Crawford's doing" (183–184). Byrne comments on this authorial feature of Austen's narrative: "the author is able to be simultaneously inside and outside the consciousness of the character, to be both fully engaged and ironic (99).[6] In her book *The Play of Fiction*, Emily Anderson considers Austen's free indirect speech a narrative form of theatricality in and of itself. "Her free indirect discourse, a rhetorical technique that implies the speaker's attitude, makes her narrator, much like Fanny, a speaker who speaks only when spoken 'through'" (2006:136). Quoting an unnamed colleague, Anderson asserts, "in these moments of free indirect discourse ... the narrator borrows language and thought from her female characters [to] speak both freely and indirectly—likening these to moments of theatre" (136). Even apart from such considerations as these, free indirect speech is a form of narration readily adaptable to dialogue or soliloquy. In addition to the prevalence of dialogue, several textual features render Austen's text easy convertible to scripted form.

In addition to readiness for spoken text in quotes and free indirect speech, Austen also uses punctuation as a kind of vocal scoring—designed to guide a *speaker*, more than a reader. These would impact the delivery of the lines as spoken on the stage. Dashes, semicolons, italics, and exclamation points impact the way the words are meant to be spoken by characters aloud. Examples are copious throughout: "A pretty trick upon my word! I cannot see them anywhere"; "*That* is Miss Maria's concern. I am not obliged to punish myself for *her* sins. The mother I could not avoid ... but the son I *can* get away from" (118). While editors point out that much of this punctuation, especially the italics, was commonly added by compositors at printers in the early nineteenth century, most editions of *Mansfield Park* rely on the second edition printing of 1816, which

Austen herself was able to correct from the 1814 printing; thus its features likely reflect authorial intent (Todd 2005:xl–xliii).

Dialogue, free indirect speech, and vocal scoring through non-traditional punctuation join with several features of Austen's writing to reveal a theatrical sensibility governing her work, and render the material a natural fit for dramatic adaptation. Byrne writes,

> Jane Austen was indebted to the theatrical set piece, or scene.... [M]any of the most memorable moments in her works may be perceived in terms of their dramatic impact. Austen's novels are "dramatic" in the sense that her scenes were often conceived and conducted in stage terms. The prevalence of character revealing dialogue is the most far reaching theatrical debt. It should be considered alongside the collecting of characters in appropriate groups and the contriving of entrances and exits [177].

One such theatrical "set piece" is the scene at Sotherton early in the novel.[7] This precedes the home theatrical section of the novel, but contains all the trappings of a ready-made theatre scene, complete with witty dialogue, stage directions, and farcical entrances and exits. Byrne extracts the following exchange between Henry Crawford and Maria Bertram as evidence of Austen's skill at writing virtually uninterrupted dialogue, with minimal insertion of narration that functions as "stage direction":

> "It is undoubtedly the best thing we can do now, as we are so far from the house already," said Mr. Crawford, when he was gone.
>
> "Yes, there is nothing else to be done. But now, sincerely, do not you find the place altogether worse than you expected?"
>
> "No, indeed, far otherwise. I find it better, grander, more complete in its style, though that style may not be the best. And to tell you the truth," speaking rather lower, "I do not think that *I* shall ever see Sotherton again with so much pleasure as I do now. Another summer will hardly improve it to me."
>
> After a moment's embarrassment the lady replied, "You are too much a man of the world not to see with the eyes of the world. If other people think Sotherton improved, I have no doubt that you will."
>
> "I am afraid I am not quite so much the man of the world as might be good for me in some points. My feelings are not quite so evanescent, nor my memory of the past under such easy dominion as one finds to be the case with men of the world."
>
> This was followed by a short silence. Miss Bertram began again. "You seemed to enjoy your drive here very much this morning. I was glad to see you so well entertained. You and Julia were laughing the whole way."
>
> "Were we? Yes, I believe we were; but I have not the least recollection at what. Oh! I believe I was relating to her some ridiculous stories of an old Irish groom of my uncle's. Your sister loves to laugh."
>
> "You think her more light-hearted than I am."

> "More easily amused," he replied; "consequently, you know," smiling, "better company..." [114–115].

Phrases such as "speaking rather lower," "after a moment's embarrassment," and "this was followed by a short silence" might be stage directions, as they attempt to convey physiological shifts though outward behavior. Indeed, this section of the novel was lifted for the adaptation with almost no alteration. Narrative insertions such as those above were directly enacted, and helped the actors both with interpretations and in the specifics of playing the beat changes.

Based on the combination of these formal and stylistic features, alongside the fact that the much of the novel is concerned with performance of a play, with what we know of Austen's own regular interest in the theatre, one might go so far to speculate that Austen was writing close to the dramatic medium when she wrote the novel. Her process of writing — observation of her own world, imagination of each character, and the recording on the page — is a kind of internal theatrical act on the part of the novelist. Not only might we consider Austen's procedure as similar to playwriting, but the experience of *reading* the novel evokes one similar to watching a play in the imagination of the reader, especially given the dominance of theatrical features identified above. Emily Anderson's work identifies performance in novel writing, particularly by women, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Significantly, she argues that this trend culminates with Austen: "The novel, like the playhouse or the masquerade, could offer its authors yet another theatrical frame; the fictional text, which announces a discrepancy between its author and the statements it conveys, could function as an act of disguise; and authorship could become an act of performance (2). Women in particular (e.g., Eliza Haywood, Frances Burney, Elizabeth Inchbald, and Maria Edgeworth) writing both novels and plays, "experiment with the fictional frame of the novel, which is highlighted with increasing insistence as the century progresses comes to duplicate the frame of the playhouse; it signals that everything contained therein is artifice" (4).

The Theatricality of the Narrative

This idea of an internal dramatic process in the experience of the novelist and the reader is supported by a close analysis of the narrative voice in relation to the central female character, Fanny Price. Such theatricality is identified by scholars such as Byrne, Gay, and Anderson; however, these aspects were made even clearer by application of Robert Breen's method of Chamber Theatre which suggests a means of preserving the narrative voice in the adaptation of literature for the stage. In the introduction to his book *Chamber Theatre*, Breen writes,

> It is the thesis of this text that there is a technique for presenting narrative fiction on the stage in such a way as to take full advantage of all the theatrical devices of the stage without sacrificing the narrative elements of the literature.... Chamber Theatre is dedicated to the proposition that the ideal literary experience is one in which the simultaneity of the drama, representing the illusion of actuality (that is, social and psychological realism), may be profitably combined with the novel's narrative privilege of examining human motivation at the moment of action [Breen 1986:4–5].

Since Chamber Theatre seeks to preserve the narrative aspects of drama and Austen uses dramatic elements in her narrative, the use of this method with adapting *Mansfield Park* was a fruitful one, particularly in what it revealed about the narrative in relation to the central female character. I followed one of Breen's suggestions to make a character of the narrator so that she interacts with the other character on the stage. My spatial placement of her in relation to the other characters, particularly Fanny, revealed a theatrical relationship at the very center of *Mansfield Park* that might not be as clear from textual analysis alone. These considerations may help rescue the novel from some criticism of its "problems" as they help explain the uncharacteristic nature of its heroine. Likewise these considerations help clarify Austen's stance on theatre, as they reveal her deep identification with acts of observation and performance.

Fanny Price is considered the most problematic of Austen's heroines and not everyone likes her. She is opaque, especially in comparison with such figures as Eliza Bennett. She is criticized as passive, quiet, weak, and morally rigid (Byrne 2000:149). Lionel Trilling mused, "Nobody, I believe, has found it possible to like the heroine of *Mansfield Park*" (qtd. in Todd lxvi). As we blocked the play in space, I began to see that Fanny's passive qualities and relative silence throughout the first parts of the novel render her a sort of *audience* within its structure. Furthermore, Fanny's journey through the novel may be considered a move from audience to actor, or participant. I learned after completing the adaptation that several scholars have similarly examined Fanny's position as spectator and noted that her role changes over the course of the novel. Marilyn Butler argues that Fanny moves from audience to "experiencing subject" (248). Alistair Duckworth characterizes her development in the novel as a move from "periphery to center" (qtd. in Todd lxxi). Penny Gay details Fanny's move from audience to being "looked at" (117–120).

The question of whether Fanny will participate in events is a recurring refrain in the novel. Edmund regularly champions her opportunities for riding, travel, and excursion of any sort. Even when she does go along, the narrator reminds us "her own thoughts were habitually her best companions" (94), and she is not included in the activities of others. This becomes especially clear first in the long scene at Sotherton described above, a group excursion to the home of her cousin's wealthy fiancé, in which she sits still on a bench while characters enter and exit the wooded knoll around her. As observer alone, she witnesses the treachery of her cousin and the Crawfords before any of the other characters are allowed to see it. In the neutrality of her presence, Byrne observes that Fanny is

not a substitute for the ironic narrator, but rather a sort of passive audience, a stand in for the objective, witnessing reader:

> Confusingly, Fanny's ubiquitous presence, rather than focusing the ironies of the scene, offers disarming lack of perspective. Through the quasi farcical entrances and exits of the various characters, her thoughts are shaped largely by her jealous concern for Edmund. But though she seems to be little more than a conduit, it is significant that she should witness Henry in action. Her knowledge of his duplicitous conduct prepares her for her rejection of his advances in the third part of the novel [Byrne 183].

The motif of "Fanny as audience" is formally established during the preparations of the play where she serves as audience and prompter:

> ...it was a pleasure to *her* to creep into the theatre, and attend the rehearsal of the first act — in spite of the feelings it excited in some speeches for Maria.— Maria, she also thought, acted well — too well;— and after the first rehearsal or two, Fanny began to be their only audience — and sometimes as prompter, sometimes as spectator — was often very useful.— As far as she could judge, Mr. Crawford was considerably the best actor of all: he had more confidence than Edmund, more judgment than Tom, more talent and taste than Mr. Yates.— She did not like him as a man, but she must admit him to be the best actor, and on this point there were not many who differed from her [193–194].

Like in the scene at Sotherton, her outside perspective gives her a unique vantage point on what is happening that others don't share:

> Fanny, being always a very courteous listener, and often the only listener at hand, came in for the complaints and the distresses of most of them. *She* knew that Mr. Yates was in general thought to rant dreadfully; that Mr. Yates was disappointed in Henry Crawford; that Tom Bertram spoke so quick he would be unintelligible; that Mrs. Grant spoiled everything by laughing; that Edmund was behindhand with his part, and that it was misery to have anything to do with Mr. Rushworth, who was wanting a prompter through every speech. She knew, also, that poor Mr. Rushworth could seldom get anybody to rehearse with him: *his* complaint came before her as well as the rest; and so decided to her eye was her cousin Maria's avoidance of him, and so needlessly often the rehearsal of the first scene between her and Mr. Crawford, that she had soon all the terror of other complaints from *him* [192–193].

The question of whether or not Fanny will take part in the play itself figures large in the theatrical section of the novel. She staunchly resists, to the criticism of her judging Aunt Norris, her cousin Tom's request that she play Cottager's Wife. She pleads, "I could not act anything if you were to give me the world. No indeed I cannot act" (171). Answering Fanny's reluctance, Tom declares, "you may be as creep mouse as you like, but we must have you to *look at*" (171, my emphasis). Fanny is finally forced to participate when Mrs. Grant fails to show up for the final rehearsal.

Significantly, Fanny is onstage at the climax of the scene, the dramatic close to the first volume of the novel, so the events are not filtered through her eyes as above. "They *did* begin; and being too much engaged in their own noise to be struck by an unusual noise in the other part of the house, had proceeded some way when the door of the room was thrown open, and Julia, appearing at it, with a face all aghast, exclaimed, 'My father is come! He is in the hall at this moment'" (137). Byrne points out that Julia directs attentions to the tableau; however, "there is a double focus: the reader watches as the character in the novel watching a character on stage. Furthermore the scene is not filtered through the eyes of Fanny, for she is also on the stage, about to take her part" (208).

Fanny's participation in the play and momentary position "on stage" alters her relation vis-à-vis the narrative voice. The move at this point in the novel is significant. While her actual appearance as a performer is saved by her uncle's surprise return from Antigua, her role in the real life of Mansfield does increase dramatically at this point in the novel. She is quite suddenly more visible to others and included in more events. Her uncle notices her and compliments her beauty for the first time.

> Sir Thomas was at that moment looking round him, and saying, "But where is Fanny? Why do not I see my little Fanny?"— and on perceiving her, came forward with a kindness which astonished and penetrated her, calling her his dear Fanny, kissing her affectionately, and observing with decided pleasure how much she was grown! Fanny knew not how to feel, nor where to look. She was quite oppressed. He had never been so kind, so *very* kind to her in his life. His manner seemed changed, his voice was quick from the agitation of joy; and all that had been awful in his dignity seemed lost in tenderness [208].

Notice of Fanny continues and escalates. As Edmund tells Fanny later:

> Your uncle thinks you very pretty, dear Fanny — and that is the long and the short of the matter. Anybody but myself would have made something more of it, and anybody but you would resent that you had not been thought very pretty before; but the truth is, that your uncle never did admire you till now — and now he does. Your complexion is so improved!— and you have gained so much countenance!— and your figure — nay, Fanny, do not turn away about it — it is but an uncle. If you cannot bear an uncle's admiration, what is to become of you? You must really begin to harden yourself to the idea of being worth looking at. You must try not to mind growing up into a pretty woman [231].

When the theatrical party disperses, the narrator reports, "Fanny's consequence increased on the departure of her cousins, becoming as she then did the only young woman in the drawing room, the only occupier of that interesting division of a family in which she had hitherto held so humble a third, it was impossible for her not to be more looked at, more thought of and attended to than she ever had before" (239).

Once invited to the Parsonage, Fanny attracts Henry Crawford's attention and marriage proposal. Penny Gay points out that it is by standing up to Crawford, ironically voicing her opinion against the theatricals, that she is noticed by him (118). This notice spurs the idea for Fanny's ball, a "coming out" where Fanny will make her first appearance in society. Gay notes,

> The phrase is identical to that which announces a new actress in the theatre. Austen is clear about what this new staging implies—commoditization the trade of coming out.... Fanny does not want to be "looked at" or introduced to the guests, and is envious of William "walk[ing] at his ease in the background of the scene"; Austen's natural application of theatre metaphors to this situation is striking [119].[8]

While she does not literally perform in the play, the theatrical activities lead to a shift in Fanny's "stage presence" in the world at Mansfield and coincide with a shift in her relation to the narrative voice. If Fanny is the audience to the events of the novel, the narrator is the dramatist creating the scene for Fanny to observe. As the novel progresses, Fanny's interaction with the narrator becomes increasingly active and complex.[9] Fanny acquires more of a voice and presence. The sheer number of her "lines" (passages written in quotation) increases, and she interacts more actively with the narrator in free indirect speech. At the beginning of the novel Fanny cannot speak without crying, but in the later chapters in Portsmouth it is Fanny alone who voices (now with quotation marks denoting autonomy from the narrator) her reaction to events and to letters she receives there. When Edmund defends her rival Mary Crawford, Fanny exclaims:

> "'So very fond of me!' 'tis nonsense all. She loves nobody but herself and her brother. Her friends leading her astray for years! She is quite as likely to have led *them* astray. I firmly believe it. It is an attachment to govern his whole life. Accepted or refused, his heart is wedded to her forever. Oh! write, write. Finish it at once. Let there be an end of this suspense. Fix, commit, condemn yourself" [492].

The narrator gradually recedes, giving more for Fanny to articulate herself. The resolution of the novel's central conflicts concerning the triangle between Edmund, Mary Crawford, and Fanny occurs in a scene when the narrator is all but absent. Edmund assumes the narration as he relates in flashback his final farewell to Mary Crawford while Fanny observes. Below is the scene as it appeared in my adaptation, showing Edmund's assumption of the role as narrator and the receding authorial voice:

> NARRATOR: They reached Mansfield on Thursday, and it was not till Sunday evening that Edmund began to talk to her on the subject. Sitting with her on Sunday evening—a wet Sunday evening—the very time of all others when, if a friend is at hand, the heart must be opened, and everything told; it was impossible not to speak...

> EDMUND: She met me with a serious—certainly a serious—even an agitated air; but before I had been able to speak one intelligible sentence, she had introduced the subject in a manner which I owned had shocked me.
>
> MARY: I heard you were in town, I wanted to see you. Let us talk over this sad business. What can equal the folly of our two relations?
>
> EDMUND: I could not answer, but I believe my looks spoke. She felt reproved. Sometimes how quick to feel! With a graver look and voice she then added,
>
> MARY: I do not mean to defend Henry at your sister's expense.
>
> EDMUND: So she began, but how she went on, Fanny, is not fit, is hardly fit to be repeated to you. I cannot recall all her words. I would not dwell upon them if I could. Their substance was great anger at the *folly* of each. To hear the woman whom—no harsher name than folly given! So voluntarily, so freely, so coolly to canvass it! No reluctance, no horror—It was the detection, in short—oh, Fanny! it was the detection, not the offence, which she reprobated. *(He stops)*
>
> FANNY: And what...
>
> NARRATOR: ...said Fanny—believing herself required to speak—
>
> FANNY: ...what could you say?
>
> EDMUND: Nothing, nothing to be understood. I was like a man stunned. She went on, began to talk of you; yes, then she began to talk of you, regretting, as well she might, the loss of such a—. There she spoke very rationally.
>
> MARY: He has thrown away such a woman as he will never see again. She would have fixed him; she would have made him happy forever. Why would not she have him? It is all her fault. Simple girl! I shall never forgive her. Had she accepted him as she ought, they might now have been on the point of marriage, and Henry would have been too happy and too busy to want any other object. He would have taken no pains to be on terms with Mrs. Rushworth again. It would have all ended in a regular standing flirtation.
>
> EDMUND: Could you have believed it possible? But the charm is broken. My eyes are opened. Gladly would I submit to all the increased pain of losing her, rather than have to think of her as I do. I told her so.
>
> FANNY: Did you?
>
> EDMUND: Yes; when I left her I told her so.
>
> FANNY: How long were you together?
>
> EDMUND: Five-and-twenty minutes. Well, she went on to say that what remained now to be done was to bring about a marriage between them. She spoke of it, Fanny, with a steadier voice than I can.
>
> MARY: We must persuade Henry to marry her, and properly supported by her own family, people of respectability as they are, she may recover her footing in society to a certain degree. In some circles, we know, she would never be admitted, but with good dinners, and large parties, there will always be those who will be glad of her acquaintance; and there is, undoubtedly, more lib-

erality and candor on those points than formerly. What I advise is that your father be quiet. Persuade him to let things take their course and it may all end well.

EDMUND: Now, Fanny, I shall soon have done. All this together most grievously convinced me that I had never understood her before, and that, as far as related to mind, it had been the creature of my own imagination, not Miss Crawford, that I had been too apt to dwell on for many months past. She would have laughed if she could. It was a sort of laugh, as she answered...

MARY: A pretty good lecture, upon my word. Was it part of your last sermon?

EDMUND: She tried to speak carelessly, but she was not so careless as she wanted to appear. I only said in reply, that from my heart I wished her well. and such has been the end of our acquaintance. And what an acquaintance has it been! How have I been deceived! Equally in brother and sister deceived! I thank you for your patience, Fanny. This has been the greatest relief, and now we will have done [Shanahan 2011:66].

Aside from obligatory insertions by Fanny, the narrator has retired entirely here, fully redundant to the present moment and the narrative of the characters she has created.

The narrator does take up her voice again immediately following in the last chapter, which ties together all the loose strands of the plot as a whole, including the union of the lovers which is such a hallmark of Austen's work. "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore everybody, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest" (533). But the narrative position here is complicated. First, she is ready to immediately abandon her project and put down her pen. Second, she refers to Fanny as "My Fanny"—directly assuming for herself an identity for the first time separate from the fiction. "My Fanny, indeed, at this very time, I have the satisfaction of knowing, must have been happy in spite of everything. She must have been a happy creature in spite of all that she felt, or thought she felt, for the distress of those around her. She had sources of delight that must force their way" (533). In this repeated refrain "must have been," the narrator gives up her authority, and Fanny is allowed to exist separate from the narrator's omniscient eye. She is her own agent, actor, person—separate from what the narrator can know for certain.

This agency is not only given to Fanny, but to the general readership. In the description of the long-awaited union of the cousins in love, the narrator evades authorship:

> I purposely abstain from dates on this occasion, that every one may be at liberty to fix their own, aware that the cure of unconquerable passions, and the transfer of unchanging attachments, must vary much as to time in different people.—I only entreat everybody to believe that exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier, Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford, and became as anxious to marry Fanny as Fanny herself could desire [544].

The narrator steps out of her authorial role and every reader becomes their own writer and creator. The artifice and control of the process is abandoned for what is "natural."

With the release of narratorial authority, Fanny is set free. She is no longer audience; she is set free as an actor in her own life. After "waiting in the wings" (Byrne 149) we see Fanny take the stage and then naturally live her life. In the last paragraph, she enters the scene she has observed so long: "They removed to Mansfield; and the Parsonage there, which ... soon grew as dear to her heart, and as thoroughly perfect in her eyes, as everything else within the view and patronage of Mansfield Park had long been" (548).[10]

Conclusions

It is significant that *Mansfield Park,* written in her late thirties, is Austen's first full-length novel of her adult maturity. It was her first novel to be written and published with no delay, following a relatively long "fallow period" from writing (Le Faye 2002:228) and years devoted to the revision and repeated effort at publication of her earlier novels, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility,* conceived in her early twenties. Fanny Price's move to expression may reflect Austen's move from silent observation (and play watching) to fully confident novel writing and importantly, *publication,* where her work was finally welcome in a public arena. Following the long sought publication of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* in 1811 and 1813 respectively (Le Faye 1998:110–111), *Mansfield Park*—complicated, serious, unusual—was the first of Austen's novels written when she knew she would have an audience. Fanny's move to the center of the stage in Mansfield may reflect Austen's own move to the center of her life as an artist, finally secure after years of upheaval surrounding her father's retirement and death. For the first time she was earning money through publication to support herself, her mother, and sister. The layers of theatricality implied in the transition of Fanny from audience to performer, especially in relation to these features of Austen's biography, are perhaps even more significant to evaluating Austen's relation to the theatre than are the theatrical subjects of the novel. They most certainly provide substantive and interesting ground for dramatic adaptation of *Mansfield Park* and the staging of it.

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Notes

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1. Chamber Theatre is a method connected to the Performance Studies Program at Northwestern University. The teaching and practice of Robert Breen have been influential in the adaptation methods of such director/adaptors as Frank Galati, Mary Zimmerman, Paul Edwards, Jessica Thebus, Eric Rosen, and several members of Lookingglass Theatre in Chicago.

2. I thought the project of adapting *Mansfield Park* contained similar potential as staging the play *Our Country's Good* (1988) by Timberlake Wertenbaker, in which characters rehearse George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (1706). When I directed Wertenbaker's play in 2010, the project had allowed an in-depth workshop on period performance styles of both the Restoration and the late eighteenth century British stage. However, as I started on *Mansfield Park*, I noticed several points of sharp contrast in the attitudes towards the plays by the main characters and of the situation of play-making in the contexts of the stories. Rather than offering a civilizing influence as in *Our Country's Good*, in *Mansfield Park* theatre initiates the acts of moral degradation that the novel ultimately condemns.

3. Several of these theatrical aspects are covered by Byrne in her book, *Jane Austen and the Theatre*, which was recommended to me after I had completed the adaptation. Her textual study provides valuable analysis of what she calls the "quasi-theatrical" elements in Austen's writing. It is significant that several of the same features became clear from physical enactment as from text and biographical analysis. On the other hand, the physical staging offered additional insights into the relationship of theatre to Austen's writing. These are described in the body of the essay.

4. Many of Gay's arguments resonate with those that emerged through my staging process, especially concerning the role of the theatre and performance in a development of Fanny Price. Gay demonstrates how Austen uses theatre as a tool to educate Fanny Price in sexuality and more broadly in confident embodied habitation of the world around her. While I encountered Gay's scholarship well after the process of adaptation, her conclusions support and enrich those discerned through physical staging.

5. Similar to these conclusions regarding the prominence of dialogue, Paula Byrne develops a sophisticated argument for the influence of drama on Austen's style through comedies of manners by Richardson and playwrights turned novelists, Henry Fielding and Elizabeth Inchbald: "Fielding and Inchbald metamorphosed themselves from playwrights into novelists, and in so doing introduced theatrical effects into the novel. Austen correspondingly abandoned the dramatic and epistolary forms because they lacked a controlling narratorial voice. By adapting the best parts of Richardson's comedy of manners and the quasi-theatrical innovations of Fielding and Inchbald, she achieved a synthesis that enabled her to find her own unique novelistic voice" (102).

6. Byrne mourns the lack of characteristic third person perspective in most film and television adaptations of Austen's novels: "It is for this reason that film and television adaptations — brilliantly as they may render the surface of Jane Austen's comic world — can never seriously satisfy the serious reader of the novels themselves. Screenwriters find it almost impossible to render the ironic third person authorial voice that is so important to Austen's narrative method. Important as the drama was to the making of her fictional worlds, Austen was in the end a novelist" (99). Thanks to the use of the Chamber Theatre technique, which strives for "presenting narrative fiction on the stage in such a way as to take full advantage of all the theatrical devices of the stage without sacrificing the narrative elements of the literature" (Breen 1986:4), in my project this feature of the novel remained strong. "Chamber Theatre is not interested in the problems of transforming fiction into drama; it resists the temptation to delete narrative descriptions and rewrite summaries as dialogue. No effort is made in Chamber Theatre to eliminate the narrative point of view which characterizes fiction; indeed, the storytellers angle of vision is emphasized through physical representation on the stage" (Breen 1986:4). It was in fact this aspect of the adaptation that allowed me to see the theatrical features embedded in the narrative point of view and its progression.

7. Byrne argues that "the Sotherton episode alludes to and adapts on e of the most popular comedies of the eighteenth century stage, *The Clandestine Marriage* (1766) by George Colman the Elder and David Garrick" (2000:178–186). Similar elements include the heroine's name "Fanny," a reformed rake, improvements to grounds, a garden setting and serpentine path, and intrusion by brother and sister of another class.

8. In her chapter on *Mansfield Park*, Gay traces the role of theatre in Fanny's "sex education" (107). She offers several observations on theatrical elements in the narrative and aspects of increasing performance for Fanny, all of which were supported by my observations in staging the novel. Chief amongst these are reference to Fanny's role as "the daughter oppressed by a tyrannical father, a staple of Victorian melodramas to come" and the "Dickensian tropes of Victorian Drama" in the Portsmouth scenes (117–122).

9. As with Fanny's role as audience, other critics have noted a relationship between Fanny and the narrative voice. Citing David Marshall, Emily Anderson notes that "critics frequently use Fanny's self effacing manner as a stylistic template for those other invisible figures, the narrator who spends most of the novel behind free indirect discourse and the supervising author who will not speak in *propria persona*" (135). While scholars have identified Fanny's initial role as audience and her transition to visible participation, as well as her relationship to the narrative voice, none have explicitly identified the theatrical tradeoff that happens between the two. Staging with both figures embodied in physical space made this clear.

10. The staging of this relationship between narrator and the character of Fanny was done rather simply. The physical presence of "Fanny as audience" was simply dramatized by her stationary and relatively peripheral placement on stage. This placement shifted as she began to co-author narrative sections and enter her life as a participant. As this transition unfolded, the narrator could become more remote and recede to the periphery in exchange. In the final scene, the narrator receded to the periphery almost entirely as Fanny and Edmund walked upstage center through a wedding arch. The play concluded with a finishing dance, with Fanny and Edmund up center and the narrator joining as any other dancer from the downstage periphery.

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