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# "Unsteady Characters"

## *Theatrical Wordplay in Mansfield Park*

*Adam Brantley*

For decades, theatricality has proven one of the most fruitful lenses through which to examine Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. Evidence of this comes in the two recent academic books on the subject, both of which are titled *Jane Austen and the Theatre* and were somehow published independently in the same year (Byrne; Gay). Such synchronicity rarely occurs in academia; that it did is a testament to the richness of Austen's work and the importance of the theater to understanding it. While continuing to dispute its nuances, critics have reached at least two loose conclusions about *Mansfield Park's* intentions. First, thanks in large part to historical contextualizations like those by Penny Gay and Paula Byrne, long-standing myths of Austen's personal "antitheatricality" have been largely discredited. Second, critics now tend to agree that part of the purpose of *Mansfield Park* is to expose the "unavoidable theatricality of adult social life" (Gay 107), acknowledging that, for better or for worse, performance is an inextricable part of nearly all interactions in the novel (Litvak 5). This shared theatrical context has opened the way for a variety of more intricate interpretations, including recent scholarship revealing *Mansfield Park's* participation in contemporaneous debates about the emotional effect of the theater (Nachumi 233), "proper" female conduct as a catalyst for social change (Lott 275), and "character" as a form of stable identity (Urda 283). However, one aspect of theatricality in *Mansfield Park* that has not been fully

explored is the effect of the theatrical wordplay embedded in the novel's narrative. These puns and ironies, many of which have yet to be identified, reinforce notions of Austen as not only an astute sociologist, but also a clever and subtle satirist. Throughout *Mansfield Park*, Austen uses such wordplay to comically emphasize that even the most superficially "antitheatrical" characters—especially Fanny and Sir Thomas—are unavoidably steeped in theatrical behavior. This provides further evidence that Austen is not merely responding to the common, though contested, belief that the stage was inherently immoral, but ironizing the debate itself by showing the inevitability of acting in upper-class society. In so doing, Austen blurs the lines between performance and reality in exciting and often hilarious ways. *Mansfield Park* is already known among Austen's novels for its complexity, but I investigate layers of theatricality and compositional artistry deeper than those previously acknowledged.

PPuns and wordplay in *Mansfield Park* are not wholly unexplored territory. Much has been written of its double-entendres, particularly of Mary Crawford's decidedly irreverent "Rears and Vices" pun (Heydt-Stevenson 310). Others have noted "Austen's natural application of theatrical metaphors" to various scenes (Gay 119). The most famous of these theatrical puns comes from Fanny Price herself when she is asked to assume a minor role in the staging of *Lover's Vows*. Panicking, she protests, "Indeed you must excuse me. I could not act any thing if you were to give me the world. Indeed, I cannot act" (115). Scholars have noted that this declaration of Fanny's has a double meaning suggesting not only her lack of acting talent, but also her inability or refusal to "perform" socially in the same way as the Crawfords and the Bertram sisters (Gay 108). According to Jenny Davidson, "because Fanny cannot act . . . without looking like a hypocrite, she refrains from acting at all" (254). "Acting" here suggests both play-acting and executing an action. This pun therefore epitomizes Fanny's "unwillingness to act strategically in the short term" for her own long-term benefit (Davidson 247). Clearly, Fanny's theatrical language has broader, more ironic applications than are readily apparent. It is therefore not a stretch to assume that some apparently innocuous words and phrases may also have important dramatic applications, especially in a novel so deeply engaged with theater.

Indeed, many of these potentially theatrical words and phrases in *Mansfield Park* center on Fanny Price herself. Though Fanny is vocal about her disapproval of both *Lovers' Vows* and social performativity in general,

she is, to her dismay, unable to avoid participating in either. Generally, critics describe Fanny's role in the drama of *Mansfield Park* in one of two ways: she is either a perceptive spectator or an unwilling actor. In the first case, they focus on her ability to distinguish performance from reality, often pointing to her more-or-less correct suspicions about the moral character of Henry Crawford (Marshall 73; Nachumi 241; Urda 292). When characterizing her as an unwilling actor, they cite instances in which she is thrust suddenly and reluctantly into the spotlight, including the aforementioned scene in which "almost every eye was upon her," ironically pinning her at center stage even as she protests that she "cannot act." Emily Allen notes "a certain theatricality in her agitated response to being a spectacle," pointing out that similar scenes recur throughout the novel (201). Such displays, often deliberately orchestrated by Sir Thomas or others, force the helpless Fanny into the spotlight, where she is made to perform her femininity for others' benefit (Litvak 22). In some ways, Fanny is treated almost like an actor who has forgotten her lines; whereas Mary Crawford and the Bertram sisters are only too happy to assert themselves by flirting and fawning over their love interests, Fanny is shy and reticent. The other characters, concerned about her sociability and especially about her marriage prospects, honestly believe that they are doing Fanny a favor by drawing attention to her. Consequently, Fanny spends much of the novel doing her very best to escape awkward situations and to avoid the people that would put her into them. She is not always successful, as evidenced by the scene above. No matter how much she would prefer to stay in the wings, she often finds herself a reluctant actress.

However, while simply being watched does necessitate some level of performance, this is an incomplete analysis of Fanny's own intrinsic theatricality. For someone so vocally opposed to performing, she spends a significant portion of the novel doing just that in one way or another, often without outside compulsion. In his article on *Mansfield Park's* depiction of "true acting," or the performativity inherent even in honest expressions of feeling, David Marshall notes at least one instance of such theatricality in Fanny's rapturous outburst on the virtues of nature:

'Here's harmony!' said she, 'Here's repose! Here's what may leave all painting and all music behind, and what poetry can only attempt to describe. Here's what may tranquillize every care, and lift the heart to rapture! When I look out on such a night as this, I feel as if there could be neither wickedness nor sorrow in the world; and there certainly would be less of both if the

sublimity of Nature were more attended to, and people were carried more out of themselves by contemplating such a scene.' (89)

Fanny's speech is undeniably dramatic. But Marshall also points out that Fanny uses the word "scene" three separate times in referring to nature, "as if she were beholding a painting or a scene on stage" (75). Though Marshall does not fully explore their implications, these puns may suggest that Fanny understands her place in nature as a kind of theater in which she is a spectator. However, the context of her speech reveals even deeper dramatic significance. Readers tend to assume that, because Fanny is "antitheatrical," her expressions of emotion must always be genuine, with no ulterior motives. However, it is worth remembering that she is speaking here to Edmund, her secret and as-of-yet unrequited love interest who is, at that very moment, watching Fanny's romantic rival Mary Crawford "in an ecstasy of admiration of all her many virtues" (89). While the novel acknowledges that Fanny is indeed a girl of "very acute" feelings, this is clearly more than an innocent expression of emotion (11). Fanny is desperately attempting to draw back Edmund's attention to herself by performing her emotions for him, hoping that doing so will both distract him from Mary and remind him of her own desirable qualities (which, ironically, Edmund's instruction was instrumental in shaping). Fanny's repeated use of the word "scene" underscores not only her personal theatrical relationship with nature but the fact that she is staging her own scene for Edmund.

This is not the only instance of Fanny performing. In fact, the word "perform" appears repeatedly throughout the novel in reference to Fanny, and while some instances of it do not connect directly to her theatricality, its placement is almost always significant. For example, in the beginning of chapter 2, "the little girl *performed* her long journey [to Mansfield Park] in safety" (10, emphasis added). This sentence is admittedly unassuming at first. But it seems an improbable coincidence that, in a novel so overtly concerned with performativity, Austen would by accident choose this as the first very sentence to introduce her heroine. Elsewhere, we read that Fanny "quitted the room herself to perform the dreadful duty of appearing before her uncle" and later that "having such another observe her was a great increase of the trepidation with which she performed the very awful ceremony of walking back to the drawing-room" (139, 174). In both instances, the word "perform" describes not only Fanny's actions, but also her attitude—if not to other characters, then at least to the readers. Fanny's emotion is

certainly genuine, but even true feelings can be emphasized and exaggerated to convey a message. Here, Fanny “performs” her displeasure by making no effort, and seems to go out of her way, to communicate her dismay to others by the way she carries herself.

The inherent theatricality of Fanny’s behavior is further emphasized by the inclusion of the word “ceremony” in the quote above. This word is associated with the drama of ritual; formal ceremonies often include props, scenery, scripts, and actors of some kind or another. They are a type of theatrical themselves, a fact we are reminded of when the Crawfords and Bertrams flirt around Sotherton chapel’s altar, accentuating the drama of the scene with repeated mentions of the marriage “ceremony . . . going to be performed” (70). Of course, Austen’s omniscient narrator complicates these puns since it is difficult to know whether Fanny is actively “performing” her ceremonies or whether the narrator is offering winking commentary on her unintended behavior. Either way, they offer further evidence to support Marshall’s idea of “true acting” in *Mansfield Park*, which he describes as “something between a theatrical part and a real part.” By emphasizing that Fanny must perform in order to express her genuine emotions, Austen’s theatrical wordplay suggests that “acting [can] be true and . . . real feeling [can] be acted” (Marshall 76). In other words, when overstated or deliberately accentuated, even honest thoughts and feelings become a form of acting.

Despite many years of critics casting Fanny primarily as a spectator or an actor thrust unwillingly onto the stage, there is evidence to suggest that, in a novel full of “unsteady characters,” Fanny may actually be the best actor of the lot, despite her protests to the contrary (Austen 147). Critics have already noted that the most scandalous thing about *Lovers’ Vows* is that none of the actors are actually acting; the “vows” that Mary, Edmund, Maria, and Henry read from the script are honest expressions of forbidden feelings (Bevan 607; Byrne 200; Marshall 78). Put another way, what makes these chapters so memorable is that the reader, the actors, and of course Fanny all recognize that the play itself is merely a symbolic backdrop for the melodrama of reality. According to Kathleen Urda, this is part of the reason that Austen never allows us to see the play being performed in the novel; she wants to emphasize that, for all the talk of their acting skill, the Crawfords and even the Bertram sisters spend most of their time simply being their inherently theatrical selves, packaging actual desires in more-or-less superficial performances (284). If anything, their downfall is not that

they are theatrical, but that they are not talented enough actors to know when and how to perform prudently.

By contrast, Fanny acts her part so well that no one—arguably not even she—is aware of the depth of her feelings, particularly her feelings for Edmund. While Fanny is not usually “theatrical” in the same extravagant, histrionic way as the Crawfords (scene at the window notwithstanding), she is still a master of emotional concealment. This too is a form of acting, albeit a less flamboyant one. We learn early on that, even as a young girl, Fanny is good at concealing her true feelings; miserable and lonely, she sobs for a week after first arriving at Mansfield Park, but “no suspicion of it [was] conveyed by her quiet passive manner” until Edmund accidentally finds her crying on the attic stairs (12). Ironically, this is in some ways both the first and last moment in which we see Fanny being completely vulnerable, since it is here that she begins to fall in love with Edmund—an affection that she hides for the rest of the book, or at least until the narrator abruptly intercedes in the final chapter. Considering that most of *Mansfield Park’s* internal drama depends on Fanny’s secret feelings for Edmund, it is remarkable that no one seems to have even the slightest suspicion of them. This observation informs one meaning of a later pun by Henry Crawford. In chapter 24, he laments that “I do not quite know what to make of Miss Fanny. I do not understand her. . . What is her *character*?” (180, emphasis added). Henry’s use of the word “character” has theatrical implications—in short, he is baffled by the motivations behind Fanny’s acting. He cannot understand why she finds him so distasteful, but readers, benefitted by dramatic irony, know the truth: Fanny not only disapproves of Henry’s libertine impulses, but she is also secretly in love with Edmund. None of the other characters realize this. The takeaway is that Fanny does have a theatrical character, one which she has carefully cultivated over the years at Mansfield Park and is unknowable to her peers—which is exactly what she wants. At least in this regard, Fanny is the most accomplished actor of them all.

Austen puns on the word “character” elsewhere too, most notably to implicate Sir Thomas in the grand façade of Mansfield Park. Though Lionel Trilling influentially claimed that Sir Thomas was the most antitheatrical of all of Austen’s characters, even hanging Austen’s own supposed antitheatricity on his decision to shut down the staging of *Lover’s Vows*, critics have since debunked this notion. On the contrary, Joseph Litvak shows that Sir Thomas is a crucial participant in *Mansfield Park’s* most theatrical displays, often

functioning as the estate's director and stage-manager. For example, Litvak points out that, by ordering Fanny to bed in front of Henry, Sir Thomas deliberately exhibits her as an obedient young woman, previewing for Henry's benefit the submissive marital role Sir Thomas hopes she will soon take. The ball in Fanny's honor, which is "conceived and staged by her uncle," is another such theatrical event, reinforcing Sir Thomas's directorial role (Litvak 23). These and other similar scenes suggest that, as the paternal head of *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas himself is directly responsible for much of the drama and ritual that takes place there. He is not just Mansfield Park's master. He is also its master of ceremonies.

Sir Thomas's theatrics are not limited to his directing, though; he has, as it were, a speaking role. Austen's puns suggest that Sir Thomas not only carefully performs his own cultivated persona (like Fanny), but that he thinks of others in terms of characters and performance as well. The best example of his own theatricality is his response to Mr. Yates, who in an embarrassingly overperformed bit of "true acting" bows deeply and dramatically upon meeting him. In a beautiful example of free indirect discourse, the narrator reveals that, though Sir Thomas was "as far from pleased with the necessity of the acquaintance as with the manner of its commencement," he nevertheless "received Mr. Yates with all the appearance of cordiality which was due his own character" (143). It is difficult to overstate the irony of this sentence, especially given Sir Thomas's disapproval of Yates's slimy insincerity. According to Austen, Sir Thomas's immediate inclination upon seeing Yates's performance is to literally put on his own. The pun implies that Sir Thomas's superficial and therefore performative cordiality is a result of his active concern with "staying in character," or maintaining an image befitting his rank and reputation. This kind of theatricality is not the same "treacherous play" that Maria accuses Henry of earlier in the novel (107). Despite his lack of judgment and his authoritarian episodes, Sir Thomas ultimately has good intentions for his family. Still, his preoccupation with image is particularly ironic considering his vocal disapproval of staged theatricals. This irony is further heightened by an authorial interjection just before this passage. After Mr. Yates gives his exaggerated bow, the narrator begins to say that Yates's display would be the final dramatic performance ever staged at Mansfield Park. But, importantly, she interrupts herself before finishing the thought, clarifying that: "It would be the last—in *all probability* the last scene on that stage" (143, emphasis added). This



self-correction, though deceptively minor, is significant because it shows the narrator backtracking to allow for the possibility of more theatricality in the future. And indeed, Sir Thomas gives his own such performance immediately following Mr. Yates's display. Austen's careful placement of the word "character" to describe Sir Thomas's concealment of feelings—his "true acting"—reminds us that he is not only as guilty of performing as the young people, but that he is also the more skilled performer.

Similar "character" puns appear throughout the book, putting witty, subversive spins on passages that may otherwise be read as "antitheatrical." After dismantling the planned theatricals, Sir Thomas decides not to chastise the young people any further, reasoning that "they were young, and . . . of unsteady characters" (147). While this can be read straightforwardly as fatherly concern, it can also be understood as an ironic meta-observation about their acting ability, or lack thereof. After all, every participant in *Lover's Vows* either uses the play to disguise their true desires or is, like the irredeemably dull Mr. Rushworth, simply a poor thespian. In both cases, the young people's performances are insincere or unbelievable, making them "unsteady characters." Soon after this, Sir Thomas speaks approvingly of Mr. Rushworth's "decided preference of a quiet family-party to the bustle and confusion of acting," to which Mrs. Norris responds with yet another subtle but delightful pun. "He is not shining character," she says, "but he has a thousand good qualities" (149). Given what we read in volume 1, calling Mr. Rushworth "not a shining character" is a decided understatement. Austen repeatedly informs us that his acting ability is not only pitiful, but nonexistent. "There was," she writes, little chance of "Mr. Rushworth's ever attaining to the knowledge of his two-and-forty speeches. . . . As to his ever making anything *tolerable* of them, nobody had the smallest idea of that except his mother" (130). It is unlikely that Austen intended for Sir Thomas and Mrs. Norris to appear as though they were making these "character" puns intentionally—the jokes are too subtle, too ironic for that. Instead, they seem to originate from Austen herself, to the point that one wonders whether she inserted them purely for her own enjoyment.

While it is true that unintentional theater puns are difficult to avoid when writing anything, Austen's theatrical wordplay is so contextually significant and comically pitch-perfect that it is even more difficult to ignore. Taken together, these puns indicate that Austen was more minutely concerned with theatricality than previously thought, making the question

of theatricality perhaps the most important theme of the novel. But they also have implications for our understanding of the way that Austen engaged with her own work, because they suggest a kind of meta-communication from Austen to her readers. With every theatrical pun, Austen essentially breaks the novel's fourth wall, bypassing both the narrator and characters' dialogue, to comment more directly to the reader on the unavoidable theatricality of Regency society. I suspect that further analysis of Austen's sentence-level prose, both in this and her other novels, would reveal more examples of such meta-communication, as well as deeper nuances in both her social commentary and her humor.

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