

Jane Austen's Readers, Writers, and Actors in *Mansfield Park*

THESIS

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**To my husband, Thomas,
who lovingly supported
and prayed for
me through this**

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INTRODUCTION

The literary education offered by Jane Austen in her book *Mansfield Park* and her revelation of each of her characters are inseparable. Jane Austen must have thrilled at revealing her own created beings in each of her novels, not only as they see themselves and want to be seen, but as she, their creator, sees them and wishes us, her readers, to see them. She does this in many ways, and surely one could trace her revelations through many different means. Still one of the most amazing ways she works to bring forth character, weak or strong, dull or intelligent, is through her characters' pursuit of reading and writing and their participation in some other literary venture, small or great. In these processes, the characters freely express their natures.

A [sic] Walton Litz, (in his essay in *Jane Austen's Achievement*), claims that many of Austen's main characters are amateur artists busy with the work of fiction making and characterization:

They invent plots, write letters of character analysis, read between the lines of other letters, play games with words and names, discuss absent friends, sketch portraits, collect literary extracts, put on plays, probe motives and arrange matches that have an aesthetic "rightness"¹ to them. These

activities and many more are imitations of the process in which Jane Austen herself is engaged, and as we follow them with amused delight we gain a fuller sense of the characters as she sees them. (69-70)

Perhaps it is because she herself is engaged in such a creative activity that Miss Austen is able to show us her characters more fully by keeping them busy with the same creative process, so that they are, for a time, not playing their roles, but living out what Austen wants her most insightful readers to see in each.

In this thesis I will focus on *Mansfield Park*, the novel that I believe is Austen's most powerful in illustrating this method of exposing characters through their reading, writing, and acting. I will explore Austen's own literary background; the reading and discussions of reading, even letters in *Mansfield Park*; the critics of *Mansfield Park*, and the play the characters present in *Mansfield Park*. I will juxtapose extracts from Austen's own letters with significant, related items; and the poems found in the novel with other passages about reading. The literary activities of reading and writing, as well as viewing and studying plays, were obviously Jane Austen's favorite ways of enjoying life. Her ability to read, describe, and comment on the characters of her acquaintances in a lively and vivid way comes out in her letters as much as in her novels. It is natural, then, that she should endow some of her most interesting characters with a literary ability that brings out their character as well. For these reasons, a study of the characters in *Mansfield Park* who show an interest in reading and writing can reveal much about Austen's own literary art.

CHAPTER ONE

AUSTEN'S LITERARY EDUCATION AND BACKGROUND

In his preface to *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion* of 1818, Henry Austen writes of Jane Austen, his sister, "Her reading was very extensive in history and *belles lettres*; and her memory extremely tenacious. Her favourite moral writers were Johnson in prose, and Cowper in verse. It is difficult to say at what age she was not intimately acquainted with the merits and defects of the best essays and novels in the English language" (H.Austen 4).² Jane Austen grew up in school. Her parents had a boys' school in their home. In her earliest writings, which begin, to our knowledge, at age twelve, the influence of boys is clear. They are filled with the humor and topics of interest to boys of her age, for example, horses, carriages, and wrecks. Her father was a minister and teacher, who valued reading and learning, read extensively, and "wrote some of his own sermons at least." (Tomalin 2). Her mother, who could "make magic with words," (25) wrote poems for many occasions. Claire Tomalin's biography is sprinkled throughout with Mrs. Austen's poems, and those of James, one of Austen's older brothers.

At seven, Jane, her sister Cassandra, and her cousin Jane Cooper, were sent to a school for girls in Oxford, run by Mrs. Cawley, Jane Cooper's aunt. This must have been an unhappy and lonely experience for them. Before the year was over, all three girls became ill, and their mothers brought them home. After being home a year, Cassandra

and Jane, now nine, were again sent away to school, this time to the Abbey School in Reading. Mrs. La Tournelle, who was in charge of this school, was more interested in acting than in any academic course of study. She told them stories of actresses and actors and may have involved them in some acting. They were taught spelling, needlework, dancing, and possibly piano, but little in traditional academics, and they were brought home again toward the end of 1786. These two inferior schools made up all of Jane Austen's formal education (33-43).

Jane's real learning seems to have taken place at home, with her father, who loved books and had a five-hundred-book library, with her mother who wrote poetry, and with her brothers who loved to direct and act in plays for family and neighborhood entertainment. By the time Jane was eight, and in the period between attending the two schools, she was "able to read anything in English on her father's shelves that took her fancy." She could even read a little French by then, perhaps learned at Mrs. Cawley's. We know that she owned a volume of *Fables choisies* with her name inscribed in it in 1783 (39). Evidently, Jane's parents allowed her to read anything she wanted. Before she was an adult, she read *Sir Charles Grandison*, by Samuel Richardson. This novel, concerned with "maternal drunkenness and paternal adultery," explains "the correct attitude to adopt towards a father's mistress and illegitimate half-brothers" (67). Jane's father seemed not to be shocked by her reading such literature, nor was he shocked by her bold writing in her childhood stories (for examples, see Tomalin 62). Thus, as Tomalin writes, her "father's bookshelves were of primary importance in fostering her talent, given that the first impulse to write stories comes from being entertained and excited by other people's" stories (68). Her character was so formed by the cozy memory of

childhood hours of delight in reading, writing, being read to and acting, that she must have been compelled to some degree to reveal her fictional characters by these activities.

Soon after Jane Austen returned home from her first school, the Austens had new neighbors, the Lefroys, the rector and his wife from a nearby village. Anne Lefroy, the rector's wife, known as Madame Lefroy, "had a reputation as a great reader and writer of poetry"(39). She became a very important mentor to Jane. She knew

Milton, Pope, Collins, Gray, and the poetical passages of Shakespeare. [. . .] She did not let children or domestic cares stop her sitting down to talk over a poem or a piece of writing by a friend. She soon became Jane Austen's best loved and admired mentor, the person she would run to for advice and encouragement and who always made time for her, an ideal parent to be preferred to the everyday one (39).

Mrs. Lefroy helped Jane choose books to read. Tomalin thinks Mrs. Lefroy may have been the one who influenced Jane to begin reading Dr. Johnson after his death in 1784, since Austen later associated Johnson with the memory of Mrs. Lefroy. Jane began reading Johnson's essays from the *Rambler*, which contained short dramatic life studies, some incidents a little shocking for a young girl, yet quite fascinating to an intelligent child.

At seven, Jane was a spectator of her brothers' play during the Christmas holidays, a tragedy titled *Matilda*. Though her brothers were young and the play a poor one, this experience may have been the first to lead her to identify with a character like

Fanny Price, a spectator of the preparations for the play attempted by the other characters in *Mansfield Park* (31). Again, when Jane was eight, her brothers performed Sheridan's *The Rivals*. James, the producer of these plays, wrote a poem for each play. James was fifteen and Henry thirteen. They may have allowed some of the girls to be involved in this one since it had too many parts for the boys. *The Rivals* was about books and reading, very funny to the Austens, growing up in a house full of books. In one scene (interesting in light of the topic of improper literature in *Mansfield Park*), the maid is told to hide some books for her mistress Lydia, who doesn't want it to be known that she is reading "improper" books:

LYDIA Here, my dear Lucy, hide these books. Quick, quick! Fling *Peregrine Pickle* under the toilet—throw *Roderick Random* into the closet—put *The Innocent Adultery* into *The Whole Duty of Man*...put *The Man of Feeling* into your Pocket—so, so—now lay *Mrs. Chapone* in sight, and Leave *Fordyce's Sermons* open on the table.

LUCY O burn it, ma'am! The hair-dresser has torn away as far as *Proper Pride*.

LYDIA Never mind—open at *Sobriety*. —Fling me *Lord Cherterfield's Letters*. Now for 'em. (41)

Another play was performed by the Austens and friends when Cousin Eliza (Elizabeth Hancock, now married to Count Feuilleide), was staying with them during Christmas, 1786. Mr. Austen allowed them to put painted scenery in the barn. Every one helped. Two plays: *Which is the Man?* by Hannah Cowley and *The Wonder! A Woman*

Keeps a Secret, by Suzannah Centlivre, were chosen. The memory of the content of the latter play most likely had some influence on Austen later as she was writing *Mansfield Park* and choosing an “improper” play for her characters to attempt to act out. In *The Wonder*, the daughter of a Portuguese nobleman risks losing her lover by sheltering his sister, who is escaping from an arranged marriage; even when her own reputation and marriage are at risk, she keeps the secret. Tomalin explains that “Eliza played the heroine and spoke the epilogue written by James in praise, if not quite of the emancipation of women, at least of their increased power over men since the days when Portuguese noblemen oppressed their ladies” (55). While Eliza was there, they also performed *Bon Ton* and *Chances*, by Garrick. The most interesting and exciting aspect of all this play-acting was what went on backstage, the boys’ flirting with their older and married cousin, Eliza. Both James and Henry were infatuated with her by then. “Eliza was a flirt by her own account—‘highly accomplished, after the French rather than the English mode’ wrote James’s son carefully, eighty years later” (56). Soon after these dramas, the Austens produced Fielding’s *Tom Thumb* for the neighborhood (57). A little later, Austen came up with a play of her own, three scenes of *The Mystery*. In 1788, the family put on two well-known farces, *The Sultan* and *High Life Below Stairs* (63). These events and the flirtations that Jane watched as her brothers and Eliza rehearsed likely had something to do with the scenes she created for the *Mansfield Park* party. The entire drama idea may have been born of these memories.

It would be difficult to be certain that one had a complete list of everything Jane Austen read before she began *Mansfield Park*, but we do have records of a number of important pieces of literature she enjoyed, important because of their influence in

forming her opinions and convictions; these readings made many contributions to her novels. In his essay quoted at the opening of this chapter, her brother Henry tells us, “Her favourite moral writers were Johnson in prose and Cowper in verse” (H. Austen 4). Dr. Johnson is easily traced as a direct influence in Austen’s writing. According to Tomalin, “She read *Rasselas* and Johnson’s essays in the *Rambler* and *Idler*” (68). His phrases and thoughts both appear in her writing. She read Boswell and called Johnson “my dear Dr. Johnson.” In two of her letters to Cassandra, in 1798, Austen mentions that their father had bought a copy of Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* and read Cowper aloud in the evenings. Austen listened when she could (LeFaye 22—27). We also know that she had memorized Cowper’s long poem *The Task* (Tomalin 167). She made Cowper the favorite poet of Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* and has her quoting Cowper on several occasions. Henry mentioned also Richardson and Fielding (H. Austen 4). “ ‘Her knowledge of Richardson’s works was such as no one is likely to again acquire,’ wrote her nephew in his *Memoir*. He said that every incident in it was familiar to her and every character like a friend” (Tomalin 69). Of Fielding’s writings, she read not only “*Tom Thumb*, brought to her by her brothers,” but also *Tom Jones*, which

deals candidly and comically with sexual attraction,
fornication, bastard children and the oily hypocrisy of
parsons, and roundly states that the sins of the flesh are of
little account, and much to be preferred to the meanness of
spirit of of sober, prudent people [. . .][S]ome would be
displeased to hear of the daughter of a clergyman reading
such a bawdy story. (115)

She was familiar with Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and his *Sentimental Journey*. The women novelists and playwrights she liked were Charlotte Lennox, Fanny Burney, Charlotte Smith, Maria Edgeworth, and Hannah Cowley. In reporting these favorite authors, Tomalin points out that Jane Austen "was never prim" (Tomalin 68). She was at least familiar with Mary Wollstonecraft's central arguments for better education and status of women. She owned a copy of Robert Bage's *Hermsprong*. Bage was also outspoken in support of Wollstonecraft's claims for women (139). One sees this influence in her writing indirectly but clearly: she makes her intelligent female characters as intelligent as her intelligent male characters, and her dull male characters as dull as her dull female characters. Shakespeare we do not necessarily see as a direct influence in her writing, but, of course, she was familiar with him. As Henry Crawford points out in *Mansfield Park*, Shakespeare is "a part of an Englishman's constitution," and as Edmund replies, "We all talk Shakespeare, use his similes, and describe with his descriptions." He is mentioned three times in her letters. Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* reads and quotes Shakespeare. Catharine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* is reared on him (69). Certainly, this is not a complete list of Austen's readings, but it does serve to show some of the influences that are important.

Tomalin observes that "looking over her shoulder at what we know her to have read in those early years tells us chiefly how original she was; how she appreciated, took what was useful to her, and kept her own voice and imaginative ground clear" (68-9). "At home she read, wrote and followed her own imagination," claims Tomalin (85), later observing, "The world of her imagination was separate and distinct from the world she inhabited" (168). As mentioned before, Austen had been writing at least since the age of

twelve. Some of her early pieces, composed over several years, were transcribed into three notebooks. *Lesley Castle*, one of her comic pieces told in letters and dedicated to her brother Henry (written between January and April, 1792) was copied unfinished into the second notebook: “At the front of this notebook, Austen wrote ‘Ex dono mei Patris’ (‘a gift from my Father’).” Mr. Austen appreciated and encouraged his daughter’s skill so much that he bought her paper for writing, a very expensive luxury at the time.

Austen dedicated *History of England* to Cassandra, who also illustrated the book. At the end of her *History of England*, right before turning sixteen years old, Jane wrote “Saturday Nov: 26th 1791” (65-67). From 1794 to 1796 she wrote *Lady Susan*, a cynical tale, told in letters, about a female predator who is very wicked, but attractive and entertaining. After *Lady Susan*, Austen censored her imagination concerning women’s wickedness, though we may see something of that trait in Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park* (83-84). To write, Austen needed working conditions that gave her time away from daily routine. Her nephew wrote:

She was careful that her occupation should not be suspected by servants, or visitors, or any persons beyond her own family party. She wrote upon small sheets of paper which could easily be put away, or covered with a piece of blotting paper. There was, between the front door and her offices, a swing door which creaked when it was opened; but she objected to having this little convenience remedied, because it gave her notice when anyone was

coming (Tomalin 216, citing James-Edward Austen-Leigh,
A Memoir of Jane Austen, 102).

Jane Austen wrote for her family years before any of her works were published. She read her books to her family, as she finished them. Tomalin believes this is the reason the characters speak to one another like real people. She not only read her works to the family and received their reactions, but most likely practiced to herself, as most of us do when we are going to read aloud and want to make a good impression. This pre-reading would allow her to make changes where the reading wasn't smooth. We have a record that she read *Elinor and Marianne* to her family before 1796. At that time, the book we know as *Sense and Sensibility* was written in letters as *Lady Susan* had been.

The often-quoted passage from one of Austen's letters to Cassandra concerning her own opinion of *Pride and Prejudice* provides us with a remarkable hint of the subject matter of her next great work, *Mansfield Park*, which does indeed provide a contrast to the playful style of *Pride and Prejudice*:

The work is rather too light & bright & sparkling; —it wants shade; —it wants to be stretched out here & there with a long Chapter —of sense if it could be had, if not of solemn specious nonsense —about something unconnected with the story; an Essay on Writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparte —or anything that would form a contrast & bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness & Epigrammatism of the general

stile. —I doubt your quite agreeing with me here —I know
your starched Notions. (Le Faye 203)

The remarkable hint in the passage above about her next great work is in the phrase, “Essay on writing.” In one of her letters, Austen claims that the subject of her next work will be “ordination.” She must have written this before she was very far into the actual writing of *Mansfield Park*, and certainly, ordination is a subject often under discussion in this novel. However, I hold that *Mansfield Park* contains more “essays on writing” and reading than on ordination; yet writing as a subject is not “unconnected to the story,” as she says in the passage above that it should be, but is so much a part of it, that there would be no story at all, were the pieces on writing, reading, and drama omitted.

CHAPTER TWO

READING AND DISCUSSIONS OF READING

It is remarkable how much discussion of reading and books there is in Jane Austen's novels. A character's interest in reading books and ability to discriminate among them are used by Austen as an index of that character's general powers of discrimination. [. . .] Reading then, is used by Austen as a paradigm for the process of perception and judgment. (Kelly 129)

Perhaps this statement by Gary Kelly was the first that opened my eyes to this phenomenon in Austen's novels, but nowhere have I seen it so clearly as in *Mansfield Park*. Kelly then demonstrates how reading the character of others and how clear judgment and wisdom—especially in deciding whom to trust—are related to reading skills in many of her novels. In his article, Kelly even uses the word “reading” so interchangeably with “judgment” and the reading of character, that *his* reader must keep alert to understand what he is saying at times. He claims that Fanny Price knew herself well, even as she grew up, because she could read well. Most readers of Jane Austen can remember the climax of *Pride and Prejudice*, where we find Elizabeth reading a letter from Darcy and suddenly exclaiming “I never knew myself until now.”

Kelly points out that Elizabeth was not a reader like Fanny, and so never knew herself until she read in Darcy's letter something she had never realized about her own character. Still when one looks closely at a novel filled with readers like *Mansfield Park*, one realizes that there is more to it than those good readers having good judgment of character.

From the second page of the book, we find letters written, read, and affecting characters by their content. However, the first comments on the subject of reading and its importance appear at the end of the second chapter, when Fanny is ten years old:

[Edmund] knew her to be clever, to have a quick apprehension as well as good sense, and a fondness for reading, which, properly directed, must be an education in itself. Miss Lee taught her French, and heard her read the daily portion of History; but he recommended the books which charmed her leisure hours, he encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment; he made reading useful by talking to her of what she read, and heightened its attraction by judicious praise. In return for such services she loved him better than any body in the world except William; her heart was divided between the two. (J.Austen 19)

Here we see several aspects of the importance of reading to forming character. Edmund is already a good reader and has good judgment. His sisters think Fanny stupid because she is not interested in drawing and art and has not been taught geography before her arrival at Mansfield Park. But Edmund, in this passage, shows insight in his judgment of

Fanny's character: "He knew her to be clever, to have a quick apprehension as well as good sense." This passage also lays groundwork, showing us clearly that it was Edmund who helped her to know what books to read to bring her joy in her free time. It was Edmund who "encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment," Edmund who "made reading useful by talking to her of what she read." And, of course, we find here that it was through all this education and reading instruction that love was born. On a later occasion, Edmund says to Fanny, "I'm glad you saw it all as I did" (p.19). The narrator's comment is, "Having formed her mind and gained her affections he had a good chance of her thinking like him" (58).

An interesting irony here, concerning judgment's relation to literary pursuits, is that as the novel continues, we see that Fanny, whose judgment was formed to such a great extent by Edmund, is much better able to judge or read character than he is. He certainly does not have the discernment about Mary Crawford's character that he needs to protect himself. He begins to understand at first, yet he rejects his own early reading of her character because he wants to believe the best of one with whom he is planning to fall in love. It is this first realization about Mary's character that Fanny and Edmund are discussing when he makes the statement above, that he is glad she "saw it all as I did." He doesn't have the same excuse for not reading Henry's character as well as Fanny does. Perhaps again, he engages in wishful thinking. He wants Fanny to love and marry Henry so that he can be her brother-in-law, as his hope is to marry Henry's sister Mary. He certainly has the same opportunities Fanny has had to see what games Henry plays with his sisters. During the play rehearsals and at Sotherton, Henry constantly plays with one sister's emotions and then the other's, juggling them both to keep the favor of each.

Perhaps the only reason Edmund doesn't have the judgment he himself has fostered in Fanny in these cases is that he is so busy falling in love that he is not the spectator she is. The whole time the others are socializing and play-acting, Fanny is reading their behavior and their character: "Fanny looked on and listened, not unamused to observe the selfishness which more or less disguised, seemed to govern them all, and wondering how it would end" (118).

Another passage that speaks of reading and gives us information to judge some characters and to see the effect reading has on character shows Fanny again—indulging in her favorite activity, reading. She is not doing this in her own free time or for her own purposes, but she is reading to Lady Bertram in the evenings while the other girls are out enjoying the party season. One might think Fanny would feel like Cinderella not invited to the ball, but, no, she is enjoying herself and is comfortable and relaxed beyond anything she feels when the entire family is present:

She naturally became everything to Lady Bertram during the night of a ball or a party. She talked to her, listened to her, read to her; and the tranquility of such evenings, her perfect security in such a *tête-à-tête* from any sound of unkindness, was unspeakably welcome to a mind which had seldom known a pause in its alarms or embarrassments. (30)

The next occasion we have of a character directly reading a book occurs in the scene where Fanny is reading the play, *Lovers' Vows*, which her cousins and their friends chose to perform in their amateur theatre:

The first use she made of her solitude was to take up the volume which had been left on the table, and begin to acquaint herself with the play of which she had heard so much. Her curiosity was all awake, and 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; and longed to have them roused as soon as possible by the remonstrance which Edmund would certainly make. (124)

Here we as readers see what Fanny's values and even what some of her cousins' values are. Her reaction and emotions upon reading this play exhibit these values. Fanny believes that it is extremely important to have a spotless moral reputation. As she reads the play, she is most concerned about the morals of her female cousins. It is hard to tell whether Fanny feels that women must keep themselves purer than men or whether the parts for women in this play are more shocking than the parts for the men. But because she is concerned about the parts Julia and Maria will play and the motivation that would make them accept such parts, we see something of *their* characters as well, from Fanny's

perspective. Moreover her confidence in Edmund's doing something to stop such shocking behavior tells us how much she respects Edmund and how much hope she puts in his ability to make things right. It also tells us that she knows him to be a man of moral scruples. So we find out something about several characters just from this single reading incident.

One of the most interesting incidents of Austen's novel, occurs when Henry Crawford reads to Lady Bertram, Fanny, and Edmund. This occasion begins with Fanny's reading Shakespeare to Lady Bertram. Henry and Edmund walk into the room to find that shy Fanny has put down her book upon hearing them approach. Henry, who is by now attempting to court Fanny, knows that his reading skill shows him at his most impressive. He lifts the volume to find the very passage they have been reading and asks permission to continue the reading himself. He will impress not only Fanny, but Lady Bertram as well, in case that might be handy later. Fanny, in spite of herself, is impressed. However, we should let the text speak for itself:

Lady Bertram. [. . .] assured him, as soon as he mentioned the name of Cardinal Wolsey, that he had got the very speech. Not a look, or an offer of help had Fanny given; not a syllable for or against. All her attention was for her work. She seemed determined to be interested by nothing else. But taste was too strong in her. She could not abstract her mind five minutes; she was forced to listen; his reading was capital, and her pleasure in good reading extreme. To good reading, however, she had been long

used; her uncle read well—her cousins all—Edmund very well; but in Mr. Crawford's reading there was a variety of excellence beyond what she had ever met with. The King, the Queen, Buckingham, Wolsey, Cromwell, all were given in turn; for with the happiest knack, the happiest power of jumping and guessing, he could always light, at will, on the best scene, or the best speeches of each; and whether it were dignity or pride, or tenderness or remorse, or whatever were to be expressed, he could do it with equal beauty. It was truly dramatic. —His acting had first taught Fanny what pleasure a play might give, and his reading brought all his acting before her again; nay, perhaps with greater enjoyment, for it came unexpectedly. [. . .]

Edmund watched [. . .] how she gradually slackened in her needle-work. [. . .] how it fell from her while she sat motionless over it—and at last how the eyes [. . .] were turned and fixed on Crawford, fixed on him for minutes, fixed on him in short till the attraction drew Crawford's upon her, and the book was closed, and the charm was broken. (305-6)

Henry Crawford, then, is the best reader of all; and Fanny, who loves excellent reading above almost everything else (besides perhaps excellent character), is awed by his reading even though she thinks little of his character. In fact, in Crawford's superior

reading in this instance and during the drama, we find that he can change characters and emotions skillfully, and can read anything dramatically because he practices drama in his very life. Gary Kelly describes this as “Crawford’s ‘variety of excellence’ in reading, his versatility, which draws Fanny, and versatility is the skill at ‘turning,’ something one can be too good at, as Crawford’s defection to Maria later in the novel shows” (140). He is able to change character however the situation requires to accomplish what he wishes at the moment. His courtship of Maria and Julia is only manners, the wish to please and attract without having any serious desire. His real desire for Fanny’s good opinion leads him to attempt even to take on her values. He makes some comment a few moments later about being interested in the clergy but concludes that he would not wish to participate in it constantly. Seeing a movement of her head at this, he finally persuades her to tell him what the motion meant.

“You shook your head at my acknowledging that I
should not like to engage in the duties of a clergyman
always, for a constancy. Yes, that was the word.
Constancy, I am not afraid of the word. [. . .] I see nothing
alarming in the word. Did you think I ought?”

“Perhaps, Sir,” said Fanny, [. . .] “perhaps, Sir, I
thought it was a pity you did not always know yourself as
well as you seemed to do at that moment.” (311)

And this very lack of “constancy” about his character—which she sees when he reads the different Shakespeare parts so skillfully—bothers her.

Following this reading, the conversation between Edmund and Henry is significant as well because of the opinions they express about reading and good and bad readers. First, they discuss Shakespeare. Crawford says that

“Shakespeare one gets acquainted with without knowing how. It is 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.” (306)

Edmund agrees that one is familiar with Shakespeare to some degree from childhood, that everyone quotes his best known passages and that we find these in many of the books we read. He observes:

“We use his similes and describe with his descriptions; but this is totally distinct from giving his sense as you gave it. To know him in bits and scraps, is common enough; to know him pretty thoroughly, is perhaps, not uncommon; but to read him well aloud, is no every-day talent.” (306-7)

Concerning this exchange, Gary Kelly points out that

the reader of the novel, conscious of Austen’s own attitude to literature by the very character of the text he or she holds in his or her hands, as well as by the many critical discussions of literature throughout Austen’s fiction, must

feel the superficiality of Crawford's gentlemanly
nonchalance about an important aspect of the national
cultural tradition. (141)

Edmund's speech shows more depth in the understanding of Shakespeare's importance, but this is clouded by the fact that he still feels it necessary to praise Crawford's performance (if not his opinions) for Fanny's sake. The rest of their discussion on reading is about the

too common neglect of the qualification, the total
inattention to it, in the ordinary school-system for boys, the
consequently natural—yet in some instances almost
unnatural degree of ignorance and uncouthness of men, of
sensible and well-informed men, when suddenly called to
the necessity of reading aloud, which had fallen within their
notice, giving instances of blunders, and failures with their
secondary causes, the want of management of the voice, of
proper modulation and emphasis, of foresight and
judgment, all proceeding from the first cause, want of early
attention and habit. (J.Austen 307)

Then the two men discuss reading as it relates to Edmund's profession as a clergyman: “how little the art of reading has been studied! How little a clear manner, and good delivery, have been attended to!” And Crawford points out:

“Our liturgy has beauties which not even a careless,
slovenly style of reading can destroy; but it has also

redundancies and repetitions, which require good reading not to be felt. [. . .] I must confess [. . .] that nineteen times out of twenty I am thinking how such a prayer ought to be read, and longing to have it to read myself—.” (306-9)

Later, when Fanny is with her family, and specifically with her sister Susan, another matter regarding reading and its importance comes up. Fanny has just established a relationship with Susan and has begun to realize the value in Susan’s character. She considers Susan to have been cheated because she has not had anyone like Edmund to be her mentor and show her good books to read and guide her understanding. Now Fanny is homesick; in her homesickness, she “loved to fancy how she could have read to her aunt” (394), and especially she misses her little room which had been her own sitting room at Mansfield Park and which was filled with her books like her good friends who had seen her through a lonely childhood:

after a few days, the remembrance of the said books grew so potent and stimulative, that Fanny found it impossible not to try for books again. There were none in her father’s house; but wealth is luxurious and daring—and some of hers found its way to a circulating library. She became a subscriber—amazed at being any thing *in propria persona*, amazed at her own doings in every way; to be a renter, a chuser of books! And to be having any one’s improvement in view in her choice! But so it was. Susan had read nothing, and Fanny longed to give her a share in her own

first pleasures, and inspire a taste for the biography and poetry which she delighted in herself. (363)

On the same page, we find Fanny reading to “banish the idea” of Edmund being in London with Mary. So she reads to escape, to improve herself, and to improve Susan’s character. We learn how this experiment with Susan turns out when Susan

growing very fond of her, and though without any of the early delight in books, which had been so strong in Fanny, with a disposition much less inclined to sedentary pursuits, or to information for information’s sake, [. . .] had so strong a desire of not appearing ignorant, as with a good clear understanding, made her a most attentive, profitable, thankful pupil. Fanny was her oracle. Fanny’s explanations and remarks were a most important addition to every essay, or every chapter of history. What Fanny told her of former times, dwelt more on her mind than the pages of Goldsmith; and she paid her sister the compliment of preferring her style to that of any printed author. The early habit of reading was wanting. (381)

Susan has different motives for reading than Fanny does, but she learns to love the occupation by first loving Fanny and wanting to be like her. In every case, there is a connection to character. And later we find her taking Fanny’s role of reader to Lady Bertram and being “delighted” with that role (431).

The next reference we have to reading books occurs when Tom Bertram ill, wants Edmund, rather than anyone else in the family, to read to him (391). The only reference we have to anyone else in Fanny's immediate family participating in the activity of reading anything other than letters, is her father's borrowing a neighbor's newspaper on a regular basis. The significance of this habit of her father is in the traumatic moment when he reads to Fanny the newspaper article about Maria Rushworth and Henry Crawford's elopement (401). Obviously, the article itself tells something of Maria's and Henry's characters. But look at her father's reaction, which shows something of his character, as reader of this article:

“I don't know what Sir Thomas may think of such matters; he may be too much of the courtier and fine gentleman to like his daughter the less. But by G— if she belonged to me, I'd give her the rope's end as long as I could stand over her. A little flogging for man and woman too, would be the best way of preventing such things.” (401)

First, he judges Sir Thomas harshly when the man is obviously devastated and by the way has done nothing but kind deeds for Mr. Price's own children. There is no compassion here, only harshness, cursing, and bitterness, no human feelings, or thoughts of what poor Fanny must be going through emotionally at this moment.

Before leaving the subject of reading and of the different characters with their varied reading habits and talents, we should touch on the few instances of certain kinds of reading material, including some instances of poetry, quoted or familiar to Fanny. Perhaps it is not remarkable that Fanny has the same favorite authors and poets as Jane

Austen does: Cowper, Johnson, and Scott, among them. Fanny remembers a line from Cowper's *The Task*, (Lucas 436 cites i.338) as she listens to the discussion of improvements Mr. Rushworth has been considering for Sotherton: "Cut down an avenue! What a pity! Does not it make you think of Cowper? 'Ye fallen avenues, once more I mourn your fate unmerited,'" Fanny whispers in astonishment to Edmund (J. Austen 50). While visiting the chapel at Sotherton, Fanny remembers Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel*: "No banners, cousin, to be 'blown by the night wind of Heaven.' No signs that a 'Scottish monarch sleeps below'" (J. Austen 77). And again, Lucas's annotation reminds of us of Scott's lines ii.10 and ii.12:

Full many a scutcheon and banner riven
Shook to the cold night-wind of heaven.
They sate them down on a marble stone
(A Scottish monarch slept below). (Lucas 436)

On another occasion Fanny compares Mansfield Park, where she has been less than totally accepted and loved, where she has wished for her family for years, with Portsmouth, only to realize after spending several weeks with her family, that she is not as happy as she was at Mansfield Park. In comparing these two homes, "Fanny was tempted to apply to them Dr. Johnson's celebrated judgment as to matrimony and celibacy, and say, that though Mansfield Park might have some pains, Portsmouth could have no pleasures" (J. Austen 357). Lucas tells us that Austen alludes to Johnson's *Rasselas*, chapter 26. "Marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasures" (438).

When Edmund visits Fanny's sitting room, he picks up and mentions several books he finds there as he is about to leave her. He tells her he thinks she would rather

be reading: “How does Lord Macartney go on? And here are Crabbe’s *Tales*, and the *Idler*, at hand to relieve you, if you tire of your great book” (J. Austen 140-141). Lucas’s notes tell us that “Lord McCartney” and the “great book” refer to George, Lord McCartney, whose *Plates to his Embassy to China* were published in folio in 1796, and his *Journal of the Embassy* itself was first published in Sir John Barrow’s *Some Account of the Public Life*, and a *Selection from the Unpublished Writings of the Earl of Macartney* of 1807 (437). Lucas’s note on Crabbe’s *Tales* is pertinent here too: “[T]his, the greatest of all Crabbe’s volumes, was published in 1812. Jane Austen obviously wants us to know that Fanny keeps up with the best writing of the day” (437). Fanny is a serious reader who takes what she can glean of good from each and every one of the best authors and poets that her creator read. Tomalin, as quoted earlier, observes, “She appreciated, took what was useful to her, and kept her own voice and imaginative ground clear” (Tomalin 68). Fanny spends so much of her time reading for the first eighteen years of her life, while other children have playmates, that her character emerges from what she believes is good in her reading matter.

In this chapter, I have tried to cite reading sessions and discussions of reading to call attention to the significance of such sessions in *Mansfield Park*, attempting to indicate how characters show something about themselves and their makeup by their participation in the activity of reading. Now I will turn to the book’s drama and letters to point out similar uses in Austen’s created world and characters.

CHAPTER THREE

LETTERS IN MANSFIELD PARK

Although reading and discussions of reading are more obviously significant to revealing character, the letters in *Mansfield Park* are far more numerous and therefore might be considered just as important. In fact, they involve more characters. In letters—people, real and fictional—deliberately tell about themselves, but also inadvertently reveal what kind of people they are, and incidentally something about their writing talent. I'll comment on each letter as it follows in the story in chronological order, to eliminate the confusion about the order of events which might occur if I grouped letters showing each personality. The second page of the book records an exchange of letters among the sisters, Mrs. Norris, Lady Bertram, and Mrs. Price, and the effect these letters have on their readers. So here we begin.

After Frances Ward's imprudent marriage to a Lieutenant of Marines without education, fortune, or connections,

Mrs. Norris had a spirit of activity, which could not be satisfied till she had written a long and angry letter to [her sister], to point out the folly of her conduct, and threaten her with all its possible ill consequences. Mrs. Price [Frances Ward's married name] in her turn was injured and angry; and an answer which comprehended each sister in its bitterness, and bestowed such very disrespectful reflections on the pride of Sir Thomas, as Mrs. Norris could

not possibly keep to herself, put an end to all intercourse
between them for a considerable period. (J. Austen 2)

The letter from Mrs. Norris to her sister, which points out “folly” and “threatens ill consequences,” certainly does not show a loving sister, but one who even wishes “ill consequences” for Mrs. Price. The fact that she does it in a “spirit of activity” also says something of the writer, who, we will find later, indeed seems to have a nervous energy that compels her to be always taking care of other people’s business for them whether they like it or not. Now, what of the receiver of this letter? Naturally Mrs. Price is angry, as anybody would be. However, as most would not do, she writes a letter and actually mails it while she is still angry. This is a telling fact, illustrating that she first acts and considers the consequences later. (Perhaps her imprudent marriage confirms this as well). Mrs. Price’s letter to Mrs. Norris openly expresses her bitterness and shows disrespect for Sir Thomas. In fact, it shows that she does not care to have a relationship with either sister, nor does she desire the help that Sir Thomas might be willing to give her. Mrs. Norris, not the kind of person to keep all the contents of such a letter to herself, shares them with Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram. The result is an end “for a considerable period” to correspondence among the sisters.

The next record of letters among the sisters comes eleven years and going on nine children later. The letter is to Lady Bertram from Mrs. Price, a letter “which spoke so much contrition and despondence, such a superfluity of children, and such a want of almost every thing else, as could not but dispose them all to a reconciliation.” She asks for their “countenance as sponsors” to the expected ninth child, and asks help in maintaining the first eight. She is sharp enough to ask Sir Thomas’s advice about what to

do with her eldest boy, and whether he can be of any help in Sir Thomas's West Indian property. According to the narrator, the letter was "not unproductive. It re-established peace and kindness. Sir Thomas sent friendly advice and professions, Lady Bertram dispatched money and baby-linen, and Mrs. Norris wrote the letters" (3). Here, Mrs. Price shows more intelligence and foresight than she does in the rest of the novel. Of course the letter is not unproductive! What a master of manipulation! She expresses humility, certainly not present in the letter of eleven years before. She appeals to the mercy of Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram by outright asking for it and admitting to wrong. Few people who have been long estranged from a family member could resist such an opportunity for reconciliation, when they are not required to show their share of the humility! Then Mrs. Price appeals to their pity when she describes her poor circumstances, their pride when she asks their advice, and she almost makes herself appear concerned about their affairs when she asks if her boy could be of any help to Sir Thomas. Perhaps, to be fair, her humility and concern do appear in other parts of the book—when she hopes for help from others—but basically she is self-centered. Even her own children do not seem to rate much love. She is "bemoaning" her ninth childbirth coming up, and wants to send her ten-year-old son off to the West Indies if possible. And this is her favorite son. We never see her interested in books of any kind, but at least Mrs. Price has some skill in letter writing. Thus even she has a literary side. And as we have hinted already, the recipients of this letter respond with apparent kindness and love, some of which may be real, but since it costs them no pride and no money that they will miss and gives them an opportunity to show their superiority by giving advice, we cannot be sure from their reaction to this letter how kind and unselfish they actually are.

The next letter scene is a very touching one to most readers of *Mansfield Park*. After little nine-year-old Fanny has come to live with the Bertrams and Edmund discovers her crying and very despondent in her homesickness, he begins to help her compose a letter to her brother William.

“Would it make you happy to write to William?”

“Yes, very.”

“Then let it be done now. Come with me into the breakfast room, we shall find everything there, and be sure of having the room to ourselves.” [. . .] [T]hey went together into the breakfast-room, where Edmund prepared her paper, and ruled her lines with all the good will that her brother could himself have felt [. . .]. He continued with her the whole time of her writing, to assist her with his pen-knife or his orthography, as either were wanted; and added to these attentions, which she felt very much a kindness to her brother, which delighted her beyond all the rest. He wrote with his own hand his love to his cousin William, and sent him half a guinea under the seal. Fanny’s feelings on the occasion were such as she believed herself incapable of expressing. [. . .] From this day Fanny grew more comfortable. She felt that she had a friend. (14-15)

Here the narrator lets us know from her comments that Edmund’s kindness is genuine. We see in Edmund an unselfish and observant friend to little Fanny. We see

Edmund's motives in his question, "Would it make you happy to write to William?" He uses his knowledge and education to help her to begin a better understanding and education than she has had before. First, she learns how to prepare materials to write a letter, and how to go about getting it mailed. We see in Fanny great love for and confidence in her brother William; she will be a lifelong friend to Edmund because of his kindness to her brother, more than because of his kindness to her. She trusts him from this day on.

The letter Sir Thomas writes to his family, upon being informed that Maria might marry Mr. Rushworth (with his approval), appears next in the novel. Sir Thomas has been told nothing negative about Rushworth and is

truly happy in the prospect of an alliance so unquestionably advantageous [. . .]. It was a connection exactly of the right sort; in the same county [. . .]. He only conditioned that the marriage should not take place before his return [. . .]. He wrote in April, and had strong hopes of settling every thing to his entire satisfaction, and leaving Antigua before the end of the summer. (35)

This letter shows a man who wants to be home with his family and involved in their little joys but who is perhaps not very wise. He asks none of the questions left unanswered by the information he received about this Mr. Rushworth, whom he has never met, and yet is ready to marry off his daughter to one so little known. Financial considerations, so far, are enough to satisfy him. If that were all he cared about, we would not think much of

him, but from this letter alone we cannot see that there are other things he might worry about when he actually meets the fellow.

The next matter of interest concerning letters is a conversation among Mary Crawford, Edmund Bertram, and Fanny Price on the topic of a brother's letters. Mary is speculating about how Tom Bertram, who is away from home, and Edmund may correspond. She starts with Edmund's telling her that he will relay a message to Tom for her if he writes, but at present he sees no occasion for writing. She then assumes with confidence that he would not write to Tom if the latter were gone a year, nor would Tom write as long as he did not have to. They would never see a reason to write. She says all brothers are the same; they write only if it were the

“most urgent necessity in the world; and when obliged to take up the pen to say that such a horse is ill, or such a relation dead, it is done in the fewest possible words. You have but one style among you. I know it perfectly. Henry, who is in every other respect exactly what a brother should be, who loves me, consults me, confides in me, and will talk to me by the hour together, has never yet turned the page in a letter; and very often it is nothing more than, ‘Dear Mary, I am just arrived. Bath seems full, and every thing as usual. Your’s [sic] sincerely.’ That is the true manly style; that is a complete brother’s letter.” (57)

Fanny Price objects. Her brother William writes long letters. Edmund explains that Miss Price's brother is such an excellent correspondent that she “thinks you [Mary] too severe

upon us” (53). A few pages later there is another conversation about this one just described, this time between only Edmund and Fanny, who assess what they now know of Mary’s character from her conversation. However, Fanny’s assessment becomes an assessment of Henry’s character due to what Mary has revealed of him as a letter writer. Edmund says, “She speaks of her brother with a very pleasing affection.” Fanny answers, “Yes, except as to his writing her such short letters [. . .] but I can not rate so very highly the love or good nature of a brother, who will not give himself the trouble of writing any thing worth reading, to his sisters, when they are separated” (57). Thus, one character in the book analyzes another, one means by which Austen develops character.

Another letter affects the daughters of Sir Thomas Bertram. His letter from Antigua explains that he hopes to be in England again in November, “the black month fixed for his return.” At least it is “black” to Maria and Julia Bertram, who consider that “to think of their father in England again within a certain period, which these letters obliged them to do, is a most unwelcome exercise.” Each girl has her own reasons for dreading his return. But we do not know anything here except what the letter itself and its effect upon its recipients tells us of its writer and readers. Since Austen does not present it verbatim, we know only that “Sir Thomas wrote of it with as much decision as experience and anxiety could authorize.” Sir Thomas is a serious man and does not shrink from decision. He knows from having been in this situation before that he cannot promise beyond doubt that they will see him in November. But as far as it is possible for him to decide, he has decided upon November. That explains the word “experience.” But what of “anxiety”? As the remainder of the story confirms, this father is an anxious head of his family, and with good reason, although he may not understand why at this

time. Besides being “decisive,” “experienced,” and “anxious,” he is also “hopeful.” In the narrator’s words, we hear that he “looked forward with the hope of being with his beloved family again early in November” (96). Two other letters come from Antigua, these from young Tom Bertram, and the only letters recorded from him: “The approach of September brought tidings of Mr. Bertram first in a letter to the gamekeeper, and then in a letter to Edmund” (103). Why is his first letter to the gamekeeper and his second to Edmund? Jane Austen obviously wants to imply something about Tom’s values and therefore about his character. Alan Donovan writes, “We are conscious of an incongruity between Tom’s self-indulgence and the respect he owes to his family” (Donovan 113), and the fact that he wrote the gamekeeper first underlines Donovan’s point.

Later, Fanny receives a letter from, her brother William, “a few hurried happy lines,” not the long letters she has boasted of receiving from him, but this is because he will see her soon. The letter has been “written as the ship came up Channel, and sent into Portsmouth, with the first boat that left the Antwerp, at anchor, in Spithead.” The fact that William wrote to say he was coming, reveals all the love she can have wished from her brother. Crawford “found her trembling with joy over this letter, and listening with a glowing, grateful countenance to the kind invitation which her uncle was most collectedly dictating in reply” (J.Austen 209). So here is yet another letter, a kind invitation. Sir Thomas, seen earlier as such an object of dread by his daughters, is seen here through Fanny’s eyes as kind and later to William as kind and inviting. The shared activity of Sir Thomas’s and Fanny’s writing the letter, too, speaks of a close relationship between them that is rather new at this point to the reader. Has the uncle changed, or has

Fanny become less fearful, more understanding of the love that he so little knows how to express? These are questions about these characters that this scene might raise.

On another day, Fanny discovers Edmund in her own sitting room, beginning a letter to her. Upon her arrival, he naturally ceases writing and explains his errand. After he has gone, Fanny

seized the scrap of paper on which Edmund had begun writing to her as a treasure beyond all her hopes, and reading with the tenderest emotion these words, “My very dear Fanny, you must do me the favour to accept”—locked it up with the chain as the dearest part of the gift. It was the only thing approaching to a letter which she had ever received from him; she might never receive another; it was impossible that she ever should receive another so perfectly gratifying in the occasion and the style. Two lines more prized had never fallen from the pen of the most distinguished author—never more completely blessed the researches of the fondest biographer. The enthusiasm of a woman’s love is even beyond the biographer’s. To her, the hand-writing itself, independent of anything it may convey, is a blessedness. Never were such characters cut by any other human being as Edmund’s commonest hand-writing gave! This specimen, written in haste as it was, had not a fault; and there was a felicity in the flow of the first four

words, in the arrangement of “My very dear Fanny,” which she could have looked at forever. (240)

What a lot of emotion over a twelve-word, unfinished sentence! But any romantic female and probably a few romantic males would understand such emotion. In these twelve words, Edmund reveals the fact that Fanny is “very dear,” the fact that he considers her “his” in some manner of speaking, the fact that he is about to offer her a gift, and that it will be a favor to him if she accepts his gift. She sees all of these things in this note, but her feelings for him cause her to go further and to have feelings even for his handwriting. Even the arrangement, the order in which he put the four words, “My very dear Fanny,” is of importance to her as she reads their message. Jane Austen does not make fun of Fanny, but she seems to be smiling affectionately at the romantic nature this scene reveals about Fanny. As has been mentioned regarding other letters, we can see certain aspects of the character of the letter’s recipient as well as of the character of its writer.

That very evening the next letter comes in the form of “a very friendly note”

from Mr. Crawford to William stating that as he found himself obliged to go to London on the morrow for a few days, he could not help trying to procure a companion; and therefore hoped that if William could make up his mind to leave Mansfield half a day earlier than had been proposed, he would accept a place in his carriage. Mr. Crawford meant to be in town by his uncle’s accustomed late dinner-hour, and William was invited to dine with him at the Admiral’s. (240-1)

This note tells us that Mr. Crawford, its writer, is very friendly, especially in this instance, to William; that he is generous; that he has good manners (in pretending his reason for wanting William is to “procure a companion” rather than to do William a favor). He is welcoming William into his home to dine with his uncle, who is an important man, an admiral, in the branch of the service to which William belongs, and could therefore do William some good just by his acquaintance. We know, of course, that Crawford has ulterior motives for looking good at this point. The note, then, conceals something of his real nature. However, we cannot tell that from his letter alone. Besides, manners being an outward form, though pleasant, anyone with any kind of motives can have good manners and often do in Jane Austen’s novel. The fact is that Henry Crawford does have, in most instances, very good manners, pleasing to most of his acquaintances. None of the readers of this letter have a problem with it, so in itself it does not reveal the writer’s selfishness. We are told that it makes William, Sir Thomas, and Fanny happy for different reasons that may not reveal anything new about their respective characters (240-1).

The next note of significance is from Mary to Fanny, delivered by Henry, who is also behind the writing of it. This note comes after Henry has proposed to Fanny and been rejected but when he is still not convinced that she will not have him. In the belief that she might feel the match unacceptable to his family because of their different stations in life, Henry has Mary write to show Fanny her approval:

“My Dear Fanny, for so I may now always call you, to the
infinite relief of a tongue that has been stumbling at *Miss*
Price for at least the last six weeks—I cannot let my

brother go without sending you a few lines of general
 congratulation, and giving my most joyful consent and
 approval. —Go on, my dear Fanny, and without fear; there
 can be no difficulties worth naming. I chuse to suppose
 that the assurance of *my* consent will be something; so, you
 may smile upon him with your sweetest smiles this
 afternoon, and send him back to me even happier than he
 goes. Your's [sic] affectionately, M.C." (275)

First, we will examine what it reveals of its writer. Not only did the narrator tell us that Henry is behind the writing of it, but also his role is fairly obvious from the content as well. Still, Mary does speak her true feelings on the occasion. Neither of the siblings can imagine any other reason Fanny might reject his suit, and Mary very much wishes for the match. She thinks she gives Fanny great pleasure when she reveals this. Her pride is ironic and conspicuous as such condescension often is, but the letter reveals Mary's affection for Fanny— about six weeks old. Nothing in the story seems to say that her affection is totally false, though she sometimes overstates it and uses it for ulterior motives. In this letter, she shows affection for Fanny to help Henry win his bride and to express what she really feels. Fanny's reaction to this letter shows something too, but not happiness:

for though she read in too much haste and confusion to
 form the clearest judgment of Miss Crawford's meaning,
 [actually, she was reading under Henry's eye] it was
 evident that she meant to compliment her on her brother's

attachment and even to *appear* to believe it serious. She did not know what to do, or what to think. There was wretchedness in the idea of its being serious; there was perplexity and agitation every way. (275)

Fanny does not want to take his proposal seriously; the idea of marriage to Henry makes her wretched. She has tried to believe he is no more serious about her than he has been about Maria. Fanny is angry at the arrogance of Henry's proposal and his careless treatment of the other girls with whom he was so recently trifling and who were deeply hurt by him. She is embarrassed, confused, and distressed, being shy and unaccustomed to such attentions. She does not want the pressure Mary's note puts on her, but much is revealed about her in her reaction to it. When Avrom Fleischman writes about Fanny's reaction to the proposal and to Mary's note, he claims Fanny is still essentially a child and that Henry's proposal and the need to answer it calls forth the woman in her, but she refuses to respond as a woman, choosing to remain a child in order not to have to face Henry's challenge (54). She attempts an answer to Mary's note, still under Henry's eye; Fanny even admits that she "had no doubt that her note must appear excessively ill-written, that the language would disgrace a child" (J.Austen 279). After Mary has gone to London and has written Fanny often, we learn, concerning these letters, that Henry has supplied a few lines, "warm and determined like his speeches," to be relayed to Fanny through each letter. We learn further that this is a

correspondence which Fanny found quite as unpleasant as she had feared; Miss Crawford's style of writing, lively and affectionate, was itself an evil, independent of what she

was thus forced into reading from the brother's pen, for Edmund would never rest till she had read the chief of the letter to him, and then she had to listen to his admiration of her language, and the warmth of her attachments. —There had, in fact, been so much of message, of allusion, of recollection, so much of Mansfield in every letter, that Fanny could not but suppose it meant for him to hear; and to find herself forced into a purpose of that kind, compelled into a correspondence which was bringing her the addresses of the man she did not love, and obliging her to administer to the adverse passion of the man she did, was cruelly mortifying. (341-2)

What an extraordinary sort of correspondence is described in these few words! Fanny feels used by these letters from Mary, which are not really from Mary to her, but from Mary to Edmund and from Henry to her. She does not want messages from Henry at all, and she certainly does not wish to be a channel through which Edmund and Mary can correspond with one another, yet she has no choice. The letters come “repeatedly,” but stop later, when Fanny is away from home and needs letters. What we see of character here is that Mary is a user. Neither Henry nor Mary is very perceptive in certain ways. Neither has ever realized that Fanny does not want Henry's affections. We see that Edmund is not awake about these matters either. He has not realized how distasteful Henry's advances are to Fanny or that she has an aversion to Mary. He also has not seen her love for him, or he would not be asking her to read Mary's letters to him and listen to

him admire Mary. Worst of all, he has not perceived Mary's real character. He is still fooling himself about her. And as she reads these letters, poor Fanny's misery is again evident about all these attachments: Henry's to her, Mary's to Edmund, Edmund's to Mary, and even Mary's to Fanny.

The next letter she receives from Mary arrives after she has been in Portsmouth for some time, long enough to be homesick and to welcome a letter even from Mary. Mary apologizes for not having written for a while because of all her engagements (Fanny is not with Edmund, so it is not as interesting for Mary to write her). She also apologizes because Henry is not around to send her a message of love in the letter (she still doesn't understand that Fanny does not want Henry's love), and she gossips that she has seen Maria and Julia, that Maria is jealous of Fanny because of Henry, that their friend Yates still follows Julia around, and that he would not be a good catch for Julia because his "rents are not equal to his rants" (359). Thus, more of Mary's worldliness and her misunderstanding of Fanny's feelings come out here. She sounds as though she believes that everyone thinks as she does, though some will not admit it. We'll see more of this in her later letters. Fanny's reaction to this particular letter surprises even herself. She is actually happy to get it because she is so homesick:

In her present exile from society and distance from every thing that had been wont to interest her, a letter from one belonging to the set where her heart lived, written with affection, and some degree of elegance, was thoroughly acceptable. [. . .]. There was great food for meditation in this letter, and chiefly for unpleasant meditation; and yet,

with all the uneasiness it supplied, it connected her with the absent, it told her of people and things about whom she had never felt so much curiosity as now, and she would have been glad to have been sure of such a letter every week. (358-9)

In reading this letter, Fanny really does learn something new about herself, in spite of Gary Kelly's observation referred to earlier: "[T]here is no dramatic moment of self-recognition for Fanny Price as there is for Elizabeth Bennet" (130). She is not deceived about the depth of Mary's affection for her or Mary's motives in most of her letters, which Mary scarcely tries to hide. Yet she finds that in her new situation, living with a family of much less refined manners and living quarters than she is used to, she is pleased to get this letter, which shows some elegance, even though its values are all superficial. She is pleased, though it brings her unpleasant thoughts and very little good news. It speaks of those from the set she is accustomed to and speaks with affection, for which she feels starved at the present, and, in short, shows her own affections for superficial values to be stronger than she has thought.

The next letter from Mary comes after Henry's visit to Portsmouth to see Fanny. It is a long and superficial letter. It tells her all she knows already of Henry's visit to her, but from his point of view. It tells her that Henry "makes me write." It hints that Mary is having a hard time trying to get over thoughts of Edmund: "[H]e gets into my head more than does me good." She has seen him a few times: "My friends here are very much struck with his gentleman-like appearance" (379), the surface characteristics which her worldly friends approve. It also tells her that Henry wishes he and Mary could be

allowed to come and take her back to Mansfield. The letter mentions a dinner party that Mary and her hostess will be giving at which Henry will see the Rushworths and that Mary is glad because she is curious to see Maria and Henry greet one another again (377-9). This letter reveals even more than before that Mary enjoys things that are not quite morally healthy, for example it is entertainment to her to bring Henry Crawford and Mrs. Rushworth together. The letter also reveals more of her very material values, which seem to have everything to do with why she wants to get over Edmund. Some of Fanny's thoughts when she reads it confirm some of these features:

The woman who could speak of him, and speak only of his appearance! She who had known him intimately half a year! Fanny was ashamed of her. [. . .] That Miss Crawford should endeavor to secure a meeting between him (Mr. Crawford) and Mrs. Rushworth, was all in her worst line of conduct, and grossly unkind and ill-judged. (380)

We learn nothing very new about Fanny, but we do see once more that she values Edmund's character far above his looks.

Next is a long letter from Edmund, who explains that he has not written earlier because he has not yet the good news he has hoped to send her about an engagement to Mary. He says his hopes are much weaker now that he has seen Mary in her London setting with her London friends. He saw her on several occasions, but she was very different and seemed encouraged to foolishness. He calls her friends "cold hearted" and "vain," "mercenary," and "ambitious." He feels her salvation lies in being detached from them. He can never give her up, and he believes she cares for him: "It is the influence of

the fashionable world altogether that I am jealous of. It is the habits of wealth that I fear” (384). He thinks he could stand to lose her because he is not rich enough rather than because of his profession, against which her prejudices, he believes, are not as strong as they once were. He speaks of Fanny as almost engaged to Henry and feels that if he loses Mary he will lose Fanny and Henry as well. He is considering writing to Mary, rather than talking to her in person about his feelings, and submits this idea with its pros and cons to Fanny. He has seen Crawford and believes him faithful to Fanny and sure of his own mind. He has seen Henry and Maria in the same room and says they did not meet as friends. She was cool. They hardly spoke. Henry drew back, surprised at her coolness. Edmund also writes:

“I had little enjoyment [in London]—but have less here. We are not a lively party. You are very much wanted. I miss you more than I can express. My mother [. . .] talks of you almost every hour, and I am sorry to find how many weeks more she is likely to be without you.” (385)

He believes that she is happy in Portsmouth with her family, but wants her at home (Mansfield), needs advice about fixing up his parsonage, etc. He says he knows his letter shows contradictory feelings. He is not comfortable and is bad company for anyone right now. This letter shows that Edmund’s principles of right and wrong are probably much stronger than his desire to have what he wants and that these principles are likely to win out in his inner battle concerning Mary Crawford. Somehow, he has appeared blind to her faults, but actually he has just been denying them; and even now he tries to blame them on the London friends who have been her lifetime influences. Never does he

consider that she could just as easily have been the one who influenced them, as Fanny points out in her own thoughts.

It is clear from Edmund's letter that Fanny is the only one to whom he has felt free to talk about these things and that he knows she can see the flaws in Mary's character, but he still does not recognize that Fanny does not want Henry, and he does not see Henry's flaws. He does not realize how Fanny feels about being in Portsmouth either, but he does speak of Mansfield as her "home" in a most natural way. His love of and dependence on Fanny are clear; his disappointment and confusion regarding Mary and what his next move should be and his serious, moral principles are equally clear. But what of the effect on the recipient? Here are new feelings in Fanny—impatience and fury. (She is no longer excited about his handwriting!) She is angry that he does not yet have this matter with Mary settled so that she (Fanny) can begin to get over it. She cannot bear the thought of waiting until Easter to go home or of her aunt asking for her. Here she is with her mother who does not care for her at all. She is angry that Edmund is so blind about Mary, thinks Mary's influence may make him lose respectability, and bristles at his believing Mary to be fond of her: "She loves nobody but herself and her brother" (386). Fanny hates the fact that he believes she will marry Crawford and that he will lose her if he loses Mary. She storms over sentence after sentence in his letter. Finally she ends her silent tirade with "Fix, commit, condemn yourself" (387). Her reaction here shows us another side of Fanny's character. Shy, gentle, helpful, meek little Fanny can get angry and impatient! She sees and understands too much for her own comfort. She sees Mary's character, Edmund's blindness, Henry's fickleness, all of

which only frustrate her because she can share these insights with no one, not even Edmund. At this point, she is about to explode.

The next remarkable feature about letters is the interesting nature of Lady Bertram's correspondence. Jane Austen seems to know that we will recognize Lady Bertram as a certain type of lady correspondent:

Everyone at all addicted to letter writing, without having much to say, which will include a large proportion of the female world at least, must feel with Lady Bertram that she was out of luck in having such a capital piece of Mansfield news, as the certainty of Grants going to Bath, occur at a time when she could make no advantage of it, [. . .] For though Lady Bertram rather shone in the epistolary line, having [. . .] got into the way of making and keeping correspondents, and formed for herself a very creditable, common-place, amplifying style, so that a very little matter was enough for her; she could not do entirely without any [subject matter]. (387)

This "amplifying style" must be explained by her feelings about the piece of news (the Grants going to Bath) Edmund tacked on to the end of his letter to Fanny instead of letting his mother write it. It "must have been very mortifying to her to see it fall to the share of her thankless son, and treated as concisely as possible at the end of a long letter, instead of having it to spread over the largest part of a page of her own" (387). This explanation and Lady Bertram's letters that follow in these last weeks of Fanny's visit to

Portsmouth clearly show how shallow her thoughts and worries and even her feelings for her family members are. The letters also show her selfishness and her small little universe which includes mostly herself, her dog, her needlework, and her letter writing.

Occasionally one of her children makes enough of a stir (e.g., by becoming deathly ill or eloping) to bother and worry her to some degree, something that she wishes they would not do for her comfort's sake and yet welcomes for the sake of correspondence. The author tells us that when Lady Bertram is keeping Fanny informed about Tom's illness, it is at first "a sort of playing at being frightened. The sufferings which Lady Bertram did not see, had little power over her fancy; and she wrote very comfortably about agitation and anxiety, and poor invalids" (389). To do her justice, she writes more seriously out of worry when she has finally seen Tom and how close he has come to death. However, Fanny's reaction, with her compassionate and tender nature, is, from the first shallow letter "considerably more warm and genuine than her aunt's style of writing." These "were cares to shut out [almost] every other care" (389), and "Her eagerness, her impatience, her longings to be with them, were such as to bring a line or two of Cowper's *Tirocinium* for ever before her. 'With what intense desire she wants her Home'" (392-3). Strangely enough, Lady Bertram's letters, sometimes more than the rest, bring her consolation. For her aunt seems to miss and need her more; and in Portsmouth she does not feel as loved or needed. Besides, she does not expect depth from Lady Bertram, who is not capable of it. Her aunt's lines: "'I cannot but say, I much regret your being from home at this distressing time, so very trying to my spirits. -I trust and hope, and sincerely wish you may never be absent from home so long again'--were most delightful sentences to her" (393).

The last two letters from Mary Crawford to Fanny show more clearly the true character of the writer than any of the previous ones. They also show more distinctly how little she understands Fanny's character, which has never been hidden, though Fanny is quiet. The first is written after Mary realizes how sick Tom has been and has a difficult time getting news from Mansfield Park. Her long letter begins by asking forgiveness for not writing for a long time (a time during which Fanny obviously needed letters) and immediately asks for a very quick reply. This obvious selfishness, she herself readily recognizes and asks for forgiveness, so that her purpose, to get very wished for news quickly, will be accomplished. She believes, knowing Fanny, that the forgiveness is already hers. She recognizes Fanny's goodness but does not recognize that in this very human girl there is also hurt and resentment. She wants to know how serious Tom's illness is. She makes it clear in this letter that she wants to know whether Tom is to die and leave Edmund rich and therefore a more eligible husband. She is even excited at the thought of it and declares that she is not ashamed of such thoughts, that Edmund deserves the title and wealth and that Fanny must not be ashamed of such feelings and thoughts either, for they are perfectly "natural, [. . .] philanthropic, and virtuous," these last two because Edmund would do more good with the title and wealth than Tom would. She goes on to tell Fanny that Henry has been spending some time with Maria, but that he cares for no one but Fanny, and that she and Henry want more than ever to come and take Fanny back to Mansfield. Obviously this is not just for Fanny's sake, but because Mary needs an excuse to go there and determine for herself Tom's state of health and Edmund's willingness to propose to her. She says as much. One of the amazing things about this letter is that, while Mary exposes her horrible thoughts of Tom's possible death

and the advantage it would be to her, she thinks that Fanny will agree: "I really am quite agitated on the subject. Fanny, Fanny, I see you smile, and look cunning, but upon my honour, I never bribed a physician in my life." She obviously thinks Fanny feels as she does, for she later says, "do not trouble yourself to be ashamed of either my feelings or your own." The letter disgusts Fanny, who will have no part of bringing "the writer of it and her cousin Edmund together." Fanny's stubbornness, evident only in extreme cases, about three times in the novel, shows in her reaction to this letter (395-6).

The last letter from Mary is very short and unintelligible to Fanny, who has not yet received the news of Henry and Maria's elopement. She begs Fanny not to believe the story, or "to believe at any rate, that Henry is blameless, and in spite of a moment's *etourderie* thinks of nobody but you" (398-9). In spite of the fact that Mary says she does not believe the report herself, she is "sure it will all be hushed up, and nothing proved but Rushworth's folly." She hopes that Fanny "may not repent" not letting them come for her (398-9). What a character! As Edmund points out later, this letter proves that

"She saw [the adultery] only as folly, and that folly stamped only by exposure. The want of common discretion, of caution [. . .] Oh! Fanny, it was the detection, not the offence which she reprobated. It was the imprudence which had brought things to extremity, and obliged her brother to give up every dearer plan, in order to fly with [Maria]."

He sees in Mary, and we see in this letter, "no reluctance, no horror, no feminine [. . .] modest loathings!" (415). Fanny's reaction: she "stood aghast." She was sorry for the

parties concerned, even Henry; but “she hoped it might give him a knowledge of his own disposition, convince him that he was not capable of being steadily attached to any one woman in the world, and shame him from persisting any longer in addressing herself” (399). It is unnecessary for Mary to ask Fanny to keep quiet about it, as Mary should have “trusted to her sense of what was due her cousin,” though, at this point, Fanny still did not know how deeply her cousin was involved. All this testifies to the delicacy and seriousness with which Fanny treats moral issues, not even knowing what scandal Mary refers to in the letter (399-400).

The last letter Fanny receives while in Portsmouth is from Edmund, and it is the saddest one she has received yet. Fanny has already grieved for Maria and what her folly has done to the entire family. Edmund writes, adding to her knowledge of the “wretchedness” they are going through, by informing her that Julia has eloped with Yates to Scotland. He wants to come and get her because his father feels that his mother needs her. Susan is invited to come with her. He writes in confusion and begs her to make whatever she can of the letter and do what must be done. He is not up to formal politeness but knows that she will understand the kind feelings his father has in making this request. This letter shows Edmund’s distress by its very lack of organization and expressions of courtesy. He seems to be holding together, but barely. Since Fanny has already grieved for days at this point over Maria’s folly, we as readers are to understand the irony of her feelings over this very sad letter:

Never had Fanny more wanted a cordial. Never had she
felt such a one as this letter contained. [. . .] She was, she
felt she was, in the greatest danger of being exquisitely

happy, while so many were miserable. The evil which
brought such good to her! She dreaded lest she should
learn to be insensible of it. (404)

What a contrast to Mary Crawford's lack of shame when she feels Tom's death could bring her something so good! And Fanny's reasons for feeling such joy in the midst of such sorrow contrast with those of Mary. Fanny is joyful because the family at Mansfield wants and needs her in their distress and because, when she arrives at Mansfield Park, she will be useful to the family and take her share of the load by occupying and comforting Lady Bertram. That she is to take Susan with her means that she can continue to be of use to Susan and that Susan might be useful too; she knows that Susan loves being useful. Joy in the midst of sorrow is an emotion that Fanny has not before known that she could experience. Thus, Fanny is not so flat a character as many critics see her. She has so many facets in her personality that it is amazing to find that she is fictional, not real.

Letters were the first form of writing fiction that Jane Austen ever attempted seriously. The first draft of *Marianne and Elinor*, which later became *Sense and Sensibility*, was written as letters. *Lady Susan* was written as letters. In these early drafts, Austen had to show everything there was to know about a character and its nature and personality through letters. A letter writer herself, she had received many letters from others. Therefore she knew what real letters revealed about their writers. Thus, besides the many amateur actors and several skilled readers in this story, *Mansfield Park*

is filled with letter writers who reveal their characters through their letters and who call forth responses in the recipients that bring out knowledge of their characters as well.

CHAPTER FOUR

DRAMA IN MANSFIELD PARK

“One of the artistic feats of *Mansfield Park*,” according to B.C. Southam, “is the way in which the visit to Sotherton and the rehearsals for *Lovers’ Vows* are used to foreshadow the pattern of events and relationships that arise later in the novel” (Southam 21). The drama in *Mansfield Park* appears for the most part in volume I, chapters XIII through XVIII. After that point, Sir Thomas himself puts a stop to it. When Honourable John Yates, Tom Bertram’s friend and guest comes to visit, he entertains the young people with an account of the drama in which he has been involved in the latest household he visited. He

came on the wings of disappointment, and with his head full of acting, for it had been a theatrical party; and the play, in which he had borne a part, was within two days of representation, when the sudden death of one of the nearest connections of the family had destroyed the scheme and dispersed the performers. (109)

Soon, Yates has talked the bored youth at *Mansfield Park* right into such a scheme—to turn their father’s house into a theatre and begin to rehearse a play themselves, *Lover’s Vows*, the very play in which he was involved before. Who could have predicted

“how great a fire” would be set off by these “tongues” of culture and literary skill?

(James 3:5-6) The characters’ opinions about participating in a play are varied, and these opinions illustrate as much about their character as do their reading and their letters:

Henry Crawford, to whom in all the riot of his gratifications, it was yet an untasted pleasure was quite alive at the idea. “I believe,” said he, “I could be fool enough at this moment to undertake any character that ever was written, from Shylock or Richard III down to the singing hero of a farce in his scarlet coat and cocked hat. I feel as if I could be any thing or every thing, as if I could rant and storm, or sigh, or cut capers in any tragedy or comedy in the English language.” (111)

Henry’s speech is significant when one realizes Fanny’s opinion of him, and that some critics see Henry’s talent as a big part of his downfall, as explained in the chapter on reading. Austen indicates in this speech that Henry has already done all he can think of to “gratify” himself since he has had his independence, and acting entices him because it is one of the few things he has not done. Certainly Crawford is a man who likes to do a little of everything but not to be entrapped by anything; as we mentioned earlier, he would like to do a little preaching here and there too, enough to bring himself some praise, but he would not want to do it constantly. Henry does have the talent he senses in himself here. He could undertake any character that was ever written, for he is acting most of the time. He takes on the role of a lover, the role of a preacher, the role of a

concerned friend, whatever suits his purpose at the time, and only so long as it suits his purpose.

The character in this novel who is completely opposite Henry is, of course, Fanny Price, who has this to say about acting: “I could not act any thing if you were to give me the world. No, indeed I cannot act.” And later, “It is not that I am afraid of learning by heart,” said Fanny, [. . .] “but I really cannot act. [. . .] It would be absolutely impossible for me” (131-2). Kelly attempts to explain Fanny’s inability to act in three ways. First, she could have an aversion to dramatic acting itself, the literal meaning for the benefit of those self-absorbed people interested in her answer only to learn how it affects them and their need to get another actress. Kelly’s second reason for Fanny’s inability to act is a “physical incapability resulting from moral disapproval, which is a consistency of principal and action” (Kelly 139). Kelly thinks this reason would be aimed at Edmund, who showed inconsistency in his own convictions and joined the actors. This disapproval is real but could hardly be a conviction against acting in general, since Fanny does want to see the acting because she has never seen it before. Compare this wish of Fanny’s to Henry’s wanting to act because it is something he has never done. Henry is a doer and actor. Fanny is a spectator, an observer and thinker: “For her own gratification she could have wished that something might be acted, for she had never seen even half a play, but every thing of higher consequence was against it” (J.Austen 118). The word “gratification” was used in Henry’s case, too (111). The difference seems to be that Fanny does not put her gratification as the first “thing of consequence” (118). The third reason Kelly mentions is “Fanny’s peculiar passivity and retiredness throughout the novel.”

The fact that Fanny has so little to say, and the fact that, thanks to the narrator, we know she does feel much, means that for us it is always clear that Fanny means what she says; thus by contrast we become aware of how little meaning there is in what is said by others. Fanny's refusal to act, then, is usually dramatized in the novel as a refusal or reluctance to speak. (139)

Kelly implies that Fanny cannot act because she is too real to act. She must be exactly who she is and say nothing that she does not mean.

Edmund's opinions, in a conversation with Tom, about the acting and about *Lovers' Vows* also reveal his character:

The resolution to act something or other seemed so decided as to make Edmund quite uncomfortable. He was determined to prevent it, if possible, [. . .]

"You are not serious, Tom, in meaning to act?" [. . .]

"I think it would be very wrong. 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 any thing of the kind.

It would show great want of feeling on my father's account, [. . .] and it would be imprudent, I think, with regard to Maria, whose situation is a very delicate one" [. . .]

“My father wished us, as school-boys, to speak well, but he would never wish his grown up daughters to be acting plays. His sense of decorum is strict.” (J.Austen 113-4)

This last sentence describes Edmund himself, as he makes his vain objections to the acting scheme.

Tom, heir to the title though he is, shows some really shocking things about his character in his attitude toward performing the play. He answers Edmund:

“You take up a thing so seriously! As if we were going to act three times a week till my father’s return, and invite all the country. But it is not to be a display of that sort. We mean nothing but a little amusement among ourselves, just to vary the scene, and exercise our powers in something new. We want no audience, no publicity. We may be trusted, I think, in choosing some play most perfectly unexceptionable, and I can conceive no greater harm or danger to any of us in conversing in the elegant written language of some respectable author than in chattering in words of our own. And as to my father’s being absent, it is so far from an objection, that I consider it rather as a motive.” (113)

The first part of this speech becomes even more interesting, some thirty pages later when [e]ntirely against his [Edmund’s] judgment, a scene painter arrived from town, and was at work, much to the increase

of the expenses, and what was worse, of the éclat of their proceedings; and his brother, instead of being really guided by him as to the privacy of the representation was giving an invitation to every family who came in his way. (147)

In the last sentence of Tom's speech, he shows us that instead of considering his father's absence as a deterrent, he considers it a reason to do it. Of course, his stated reason is to help entertain away his mother's anxious hours. But even as he speaks, both brothers look at their complacent, sleepy mother, and laugh at the very idea. Further, Tom makes himself a liar, with the chosen play itself. In light of what Tom says above, after *Lover's Vows* is chosen, Edmund and Fanny are shocked. Fanny's thoughts are expressed, as we quoted earlier, with

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. (124)

Next we read Edmund's shocked words to Maria: "I think it exceedingly unfit for private representation, and [. . .] I hope you will give it up, —I cannot but suppose you will when you have read it carefully over." (126). Now, what are we to make of Tom's speech above? First he does not think it is to be taken "seriously," though it is clear to both that their father would seriously disapprove. Then he says Edmund talks as though they were

going to act three times a week until his father's return, and, as it turns out, they are involved in preparing for the play every day until their father's return. Then he says it is only "a little amusement among ourselves." They "want no audience, no publicity." But soon, Tom himself is out inviting every neighbor he sees. In his speech above, he also says, "We may be trusted, I think, in choosing some play most perfectly unexceptionable," after which they choose one which Edmund describes to Maria as "exceedingly unfit for private interpretation." James Kinsley quotes Samuel Taylor Coleridge's comment that this play "made its appeal by 'a pathos not a whit more respectable than the maudlin tears of drunkenness'" (433). Tom also speaks of "conversing in the [. . .] elegant written language of some respectable author," but the bold words of this author actually lead them into great indiscretion with one another. Gary Kelly explains why they really wish to speak in the language of this not-so-respectable author:

[B]y reading aloud something written and published by someone else, people may say to one another, and in public, what social convention would not permit them to say in ordinary circumstances unless they were willing to abide by the consequences of their speaking. [. . .] [I]t is the enacting of the play's love texts without any consequence, or without responsibility for any consequence, that is improper, and inappropriate. (137-8)

As for Maria, we must give her credit for one blush at Edmund's question: " But what do you do for women? " (J. Austen 125). But some of her comments are surprising as the

older daughter in a respectable family: “I am perfectly acquainted with the play, I assure you—and with a very few omissions, and so forth, which will be made, of course, I can see nothing objectionable in it” and “If I were to decline the part, [. . .] Julia would certainly take it” (126). Maria is self-centered and not at all interested in whether a thing seems moral or right, only in how it affects her. She obviously has read the play and has decided not to be shocked by it as Edmund and Fanny are. Oh, yes, she sees one or two objectionable parts, but “trusts” that they will “of course” be taken out. She entrusts her own understanding of right and wrong to that of Tom, Yates, and Crawford. They will be her guides, since they are more fun-loving than Edmund, and since fun is all that is important to Maria. If all the others had seemed shocked at the play, Maria would have agreed with them. She is not illiterate in that she can and does read, but she makes no personal judgment about what she reads.

Julia is much like Maria. Her knowledge of what part she wants shows that she has likely read the play. Since no one else is shocked by the mention of it, neither is Julia. Her only concern is that she should get the part of Agatha, and, when that does not happen, she says, “I am not to be Agatha, and I am sure I will do nothing else; and as to Amelia, it is of all parts in the world the most disgusting to me.” After a few more such words, she walks “hastily out of the room, leaving awkward feelings to more than one, but exciting small compassion in any except Fanny, who [. . .] could not think of her as under the agitations of *jealousy*, without great pity” (J.Austen 123). Julia is jealous of Maria and of Crawford’s preferring Maria. She too is self-centered, and, if she cannot have her way, will not play at all.

“Mr. Yates was particularly pleased,” as we would expect, his idea having originated from his heartache over not getting to present *Lovers’ Vows* at another friend’s house: “To storm through Baron Wildenhaim was the height of his theatrical ambition, and with the advantage of knowing half the scenes by heart already, he did now with the greatest alacrity offer his services for the part” (119). We cannot accuse Mr. Yates of quite as much self interest as the girls, since “he does not resolve to appropriate” the part he wants, but offers it first to another, pretending to want the part of Frederick equally as much. We see how alarmingly shallow Yates’ character is; “the height of his theatrical ambition” is to act this part, and it seems the height of his life ambition is to act anything, since that was all he did on his latest visit to another home and that is all he talks about when he comes to visit.

Another reaction to the play that is worth looking at is that of Mr. Rushworth, “who was always answered for by Maria as willing to do any thing” (120). He expresses his pleasure to Edmund with “We have got a play, [. . .] It is to be *Lovers’ Vows*; and I am to be Count Cassel, and am to come in first with a blue dress, and a pink satin cloak, and afterwards am to have another fine fancy suit by way of a shooting dress. —I do not know how I shall like it. ” But the narrator tells us:

Mr. Rushworth likes the idea of his finery very well,
 though affecting to despise it, and was too much engaged
 with what his own appearance would be, to think of the
 others, or draw any of those conclusions, or feel any of that
 displeasure, which Maria had been half prepared for. (125)

He also likes the fact that “ I come in three times and have two and forty speeches” (126). He repeats this statement many times, but he later becomes unhappy with the play when Maria and Henry’s flirting becomes obvious even to him. Mr. Rushworth’s reaction, on the occasion of the play, confirms all that we see of him elsewhere in the book. He is simple-minded, very vain and self-centered, spoiled by his mother. He is also capable of great jealousy and has to be deliberately calmed by others during the rehearsals.

Edmund and Fanny do, at first, have some hope that their Aunt Norris will be against so improper a play, but she

started no difficulties that were not talked down in five minutes by her eldest nephew and niece, who were all-powerful with her; and, as the whole arrangement was to bring very little expense to any body, and none at all to herself, as she foresaw in it all the comforts of hurry, bustle and importance, and derived the immediate advantage of fancying herself obliged to leave her own house, where she had been living a month at her own cost, and take up her abode in their’s [sic] that every hour might be spent in their service; she was, in fact, exceedingly delighted with the project. (117)

Reading this reaction, one cannot exactly accuse Mrs. Norris of having a literary interest in the play; however, her feelings do tell us something of her character: that she is extremely tight with money, particularly her own; that she loves the hustle-bustle scene because it makes her feel very important, her own sense of importance being one of her

primary characteristics; that Maria and Tom are her favorites; and that rather than guide them, she is generally guided by them as an over indulgent parent.

The interest in the play shown by most of the actors seems not to be very literary after all. That, in itself, shows us something of their character. Here it seems pertinent to point out that all the young people except Rushworth and Fanny, before the decision is made to perform *Lovers' Vows*, have already read the play. They all know exactly what they are talking about playing and which part is which. Fanny runs to read it immediately, so that we know she is not already familiar with it, though Fanny is more interested in literature than the others. Rushworth cannot be accused of being bookish. The others are all readers to some extent, but familiar with a different kind of reading from what Fanny enjoys. We know by now that Fanny's taste in literature is similar to that of her creator. Edmund, though, has fostered her taste in literature. And even Edmund has read *Lovers' Vows* and knows exactly which play they are talking about and why this is not proper for the women at all. It is surprising that they have all read it and none seems to be ashamed of that, but Maria blushes at the thought of performing it, and even Mary has to force herself to utter the bold and shameful parts of Amelia's scenes that have to be played with a man. The fact that they have some shame about performing it, but none about reading it, is an interesting characteristic of these young people and their moral understanding of literature.

Gary Kelly writes that these young people have obvious motives for wanting to use this particular play, Elizabeth Inchbald's *Lovers' Vows*, to say things to each other that would not be socially acceptable to say in ordinary circumstances. The social conventions held that, if one spoke of love to another, and especially in public, that

speaker should be prepared to marry. In Austen's day, to make such speeches without "intending to accept the consequences, or to speak love that was not felt, was coquetry or mere seduction and did lead, often, to social banishment" (137). Kelly notes that the young people deliberately chose a play with the subject matter of "sexual seduction and 'liberal' social views," so that they could enact "the play's love texts without any consequences, or without responsibility for any consequence" (137). That is what is improper about it. What they must read, the content of the lines of the play "agitate[s] the young people," even Edmund and Fanny. Kelly says this "blurring of the line between life and text is" being "actually sought after," not just allowed, to the extent that some of the actors express embarrassment at what they must say to "certain other persons in the play" (138). Mary Crawford comes to Fanny wishing to practice her embarrassing lines, the ones she is fearful of saying to Edmund. She expresses the need to "harden" herself to say these things to Edmund. Edmund comes to Fanny a few minutes later for the same purpose. Kelly quotes Mary, who says: "I did not think much of it at first—but, upon my word—. There, look at *that* speech, and *that*, and *that*. How am I ever to look him in the face and say such things?" He uses this quotation to illustrate that upon Mary's first reading she did not see a problem here and to contrast Mary's claim with Fanny's having seen, upon her first reading of the play, that the play's "appropriateness for the players" was one of the main reasons it was not appropriate "to be performed by them" (138). But Kelly's main point here is that Mary sees that "the text is a pretext for her to say what she means to Edmund" (138) and she knows it will be understood; therefore she is fearful. Kelly says, knowing this, it is clear that she should not go ahead with it:

For after Mary's confession that she knows she is doing what should (even for her) cause embarrassment, that she must "harden" herself, how can any careful reader think she is right to go ahead? Yet there has been such acceptance by critics, or the protest that for Fanny and Edmund such things are made too great a matter. This may be so; but the novel itself shows how great matters can grow from small ones and how living an honorable and moral life is a question of attention to small matters, not just carrying off the great ones. (137-8)

The parallels between these amateur actors and the parts they choose to play have been often discussed by critics and are very much a part of what we are considering here with our literary drawing out of characters, "for there can be no doubt that Jane Austen chose the play in order to bring out very important elements in the characters of *Mansfield Park*" (Kinsley 433).

Perhaps a summary of the content of *Lovers' Vows* is necessary for clarity here, though Jane Austen did not find it necessary for her purpose. In Inchbald's *Lovers' Vows*, Frederick discovers that his mother Agatha Friburg was the mistress of Baron Wildenhaim in her younger years and that he is the Baron's biological son. Frederick obtains the Baron's recognition as his son and persuades the Baron to marry his mother. The young clergyman, Anhalt, tutor to the Baron's daughter, Amelia, helps Frederick with this project. The Baron intends for Amelia to marry Count Cassel, a foolish man, but she loves Anhalt and persuades her father to allow her to marry him (quoted in

Kinsley 433). Even these details may not be explanation enough to impress on us Agatha's weak morals and Amelia's bold forwardness (her way of extracting a proposal from and getting the man she wants). Both are hinted at, however, in words from the novel that have already been quoted.

Lloyd W. Brown explains that Maria's performance as Agatha stresses sexuality that leads to her moral downfall and to the "eventual disgrace of the future Mrs. Rushworth," Maria herself. Yates takes the part of Baron Wildenhaim, significant because of "the moral rehabilitation experienced by both Yates and the baron" (81). Edmund plays Anhalt because Mary plays Amelia. "Like his *Lovers' Vows* counterpart, Edmund explains the moral principles of marriage" to the woman he is thinking of marrying. Amelia accepts Anhalt's marriage principles, whereas Mary rejects Edmund's values (81). Rushworth is of course the perfect actor for Count Cassel because of his foolishness. However, in the play, the father rejects the suit of the foolish man, while Sir Thomas does not prevent Maria's marriage to Rushworth. Brown underscores these parallels with the "distinct drama" constituted by the rehearsals. He explains as Kelly did above the "ulterior motives of the 'actors,'" which become obvious during rehearsals and even during the choosing of roles. He points out that Fanny, the very observant spectator, notices how "Maria acts 'too well' in her intimate role with Henry who is 'considerably the best actor of all' " (82). Mary too points out to Fanny, after walking in on Henry and Maria, that they will be the most "perfect" actors of all (Austen 152). And in Austen's story, they do become that by their own act of immorality later, as though by their acting they convince themselves of their characters. Then Mary Crawford, Brown points out, is delighted with the ambiguous relationship that she now has with Edmund because of their

roles in the play (Brown 82). There are other parallels, such as their all wanting Fanny to be an inferior character, and some other subordinate roles which are brought up as being appropriate or not for certain people because of rank. But those mentioned above are the primary ones that Austen focuses on as she develops the personal character of each of her creations beneath the surface of their formalities up to this time in her plot. Brown goes into more detail about Henry, the best actor: “On one level the intimacy with Maria Bertram is simulated to meet the requirements of the Agatha-Frederick plot; but on another level, it is an actual flirtation.” Later Henry’s courtship of Fanny shows that on one level “his attempts at reform are sincere [. . .], but they are also part of an elaborate performance aimed at Fanny. [. . .] [H]is ‘continued attentions’ adapt themselves ‘more and more to the gentleness and delicacy of her character’”(84).

As Kinsley says, “This is type casting with a vengeance.” Foolish Count Cassel’s loss of Amelia foreshadows Rushworth’s loss of Maria; “Agatha’s history foreshadows Maria’s seduction by Henry Crawford. [...] Baron Wildenhaim’s past misbehaviour anticipates Mr. Yates’s elopement with Julia, and his ultimate repentance and marriage to Agatha prefigure Yates’s marriage” to Julia. Amelia’s forward approach to Anhalt mirrors Mary Crawford’s forward attitude toward Edmund. Kinsley even notices that Edmund’s reluctance to play the part of Anhalt mirrored his doubts about marrying Mary (Kinsley 434). Acting, at Mansfield Park, Brown explains, “simultaneously embodies the sincere and the pretended. Herein lies the clue to the psychological effectiveness with which Jane Austen establishes the moral equation of her own characters with the *Lovers’ Vows* personalities” (83-4). After the play, with all of its moral issues, has influenced their lives, some of Austen’s young people, especially Maria and Julia Bertram and

Henry Crawford are prepared to go on with their lives, less afraid of yielding to their own moral weaknesses than before.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE CRITICS AND MANSFIELD PARK

How do Jane Austen critics view these instances of reading, writing, and acting in *Mansfield Park*? As we know, Fanny is not a favorite of many critics, though she is a favorite object of study for almost all Jane Austen critics. Lloyd W. Brown, in his work *Bits of Ivory*, may voice many critics' opinion when he calls Fanny's judgments "sentimental piety." He says they "tend to be self-consciously literary and are based on the idealistic or sentimental interpretation of popular writers." Besides mentioning her allusions to Cowper's line when Rushworth was discussing his improvements and to Scott's *Last Minstrel* at the disappointment regarding the chapel at Sotherton and the quotations from Cowper and Johnson when she was homesick for Mansfield Park, Brown also mentions her outburst about the "dear old, grey pony" with which she had begun her riding lessons: "In effect, Fanny's literary idealism exposes the heartlessness of Mary Crawford's worldly brilliance; but in turn Mary's satiric realism counteracts Fanny's sentimental piety." Thus, Brown thinks that these two characters' expressions of their literary educations expose one another's characters! His observation is an interesting twist to our theme (127-8).

Brown says that Mary's imitation of Hawkins Browne's "Address to Tobacco" reminds us of Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* and Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* in that she has a similar gift of parody. Mary imitates not just social types, but literary types (124). The reference here is to an actual rewriting of Browne's verse, which is worth mentioning because it shows a sample of Mary's interest in literature as well as a little creative writing, (or creative re-writing). Mary is talking to her sister, Mrs. Grant, who believes that when Sir Thomas comes back from Antigua, Mr. Rushworth, who is to marry Sir Thomas's eldest daughter, will most likely go to Parliament; evidently she thinks that Sir Thomas will see to that. Mary has already made some interesting remarks about all of the things that are going to happen when Sir Thomas comes home. Edmund will take orders; Maria will marry Rushworth; and Rushworth will go to Parliament, Rushworth, who has so little good sense and understanding:

"Sir Thomas is to achieve mighty things when he comes home," said Mary after a pause. "Do you remember Hawkins Browne's 'Address to Tobacco,' in imitation of Pope? —

'Blest leaf! Whose aromatic gales dispense
To Templars modesty, to Parsons sense.'

I will parody them:

Blest Knight! Whose dictatorial looks dispense
To Children Affluence, to Rushworth sense." (J. Austen 145).

Brown also remarks on Mary and Fanny's conversation about the names of the two Mr. Bertrams: the elder, Mr. Bertram; the younger, Edmund Bertram (77). With her affinity to literary heroes Fanny, prefers Edmund's name because it "is a name of heroism and renown—of kings, princes, and knights; and seems to breathe the spirit of Chivalry and warm affections" (J.Austen 190). And we must admit that Fanny, as a character, does tip the scale on the romantic side more than her creator seemed to, because Fanny has been reared with so little intimacy with human companions and so much with her books.

Brown also has a chapter on letter writing. He comments, "The writing on the reading of letters is almost invariably crucial to the dramatic and psychological development of plot and character" in Jane Austen's novels.

Jane Austen exploits the inherent emotional values of the letter writing process, and it probably accounts for the fact that so few of the letters in the novels are obscure or easily forgotten. Letter writing coincides with and represents the dramatic intensification of emotional and moral conflicts. (156-7)

He opens his chapter by quoting a letter from Jane Austen to her sister Cassandra: "I have now attained the true art of letter-writing, which we are always told is to express on paper exactly what one would say to the same person by word of mouth; I have been talking to you almost as fast as I could the whole of this letter" (quoted in Brown 137). He later relates this quotation to Lady Bertram's "amplifying style" of correspondence discussed in chapter three, and which Brown says breaks down finally when Lady Bertram discovers how ill her son really is and begins to write, in the narrator's words and

Fanny's thoughts, "as she might have spoken." Brown applies Jane's phrase, "the true art of letter writing," to Lady Bertram's newly found art: "she wrote as she might have spoken"(157).

Gary Kelly, perhaps, has the most to say that is relevant to literary talent found in Austen's novels. In his book *Jane Austen*, he explains *Mansfield Park* as "a novel of education, one might say of the romance of education, a sub-genre in the literature of Sensibility" (131). Fanny's character is revealed as deeper all the time through Kelly's insight: "Fanny's particular anguish is to have true judgment (the appropriate analogue in Austin's novels to a cultivated competence as a reader) but to be unable to act on or even utter it" (131). Kelly claims that one of the author's purposes for properly understanding the characters through their reading ability is to challenge her readers to read the characters properly. He discusses some of the debate among critics over who is more likeable—Mary or Fanny. He seems to believe that one must be a very skillful reader to see what one should see in Fanny—to read her properly—and perhaps Mary as well. He says that if we do not read Fanny properly, then we cannot be reading the novel properly, and he obviously believes that this novel is highly misunderstood even among most critics (145).

Kelly believes that Austen's statement that *Mansfield Park* was on the subject of ordination is worth looking at in light of the reading ability necessary for a clergyman of her day. He devotes several pages to this subject in the form of commenting on the young people's discussion in *Mansfield Park* concerning Edmund's chosen profession:

In ordination, one reads aloud a text, and one thereby
performs an act by which one's condition in life is

transformed by being made part of (not extinguished by) a social institution. [. . .] including language, conduct (or “manners”), literature, religion, property, social class, and so on. (145)

Kelly refers to the first of several discussions between Mary Crawford and Edmund Bertram on their difference of opinions on the role and importance of a clergyman. Mary exclaims, “How can two sermons a week, even supposing them worth hearing, supposing the preacher to have the sense to prefer Blair’s to his own, do all that you speak of?” (134, citing from J.Austen 84). Kelly asks,

[A]nd could the reader do anything but agree with Edmund [. . .] after reading this perfect demonstration not only of his fitness to be the kind of preacher he images in his “sermon” here, but of his ability to write and deliver his own sermons and not those plagiarized, as Mary suggests, from a volume of sermons by someone such as Blair? (136).

Kelly spends a page and a half explaining how Mary Crawford exposes her ignorance and shallow understanding of the skill of speaking or that of preaching when she expresses her opinion that he would do better to read Hugh Blair’s sermons rather than his own. Kelly shows this by explaining who Blair is and what he wrote. Blair was known as an expert who made rhetoric known in the ethical school of rhetoric of Cicero, Quintilian, and Adam Smith, more than as a sermon writer and deliverer. Blair said that a man would be wrong to try to convince others of something one does not himself fully believe: “He who would work on men’s passions, or influence their practice, without

first giving them just principles, and enlightening their minds, is no better than a mere declaimer” (136-7). Blair’s words describe exactly what Mary and Henry Crawford recommend a clergyman should do. This very revelation of the Crawfords—that they lack a real understanding of the nature of sermons—shows mental and moral deficiency, according to Kelly. Henry has this unusual ability of reading aloud persuasively, acting persuasively, without having convictions of what he reads or acts at all. Mary believes a preacher should just read Blair’s sermons and not make any effort to convince anyone of anything. Mary and Henry, Kelly writes, are both good readers, but in a very limited sense. He says that by standards which Austen could count on her educated readers to know and accept, the standards of rhetoric of the day, they are bad readers because they are not concerned with belief but with “applause and admiration.”

That is why the novel makes so much, in its crucial scenes, of public speaking. That is why the Crawfords are consistently witty, and socially attractive, and why Edmund and Fanny are consistently silent, or earnestly candid when they do speak. That is why the reader of the novel is challenged to see the proper relation between them. (137)

Some of Kelly’s comments on this subject are directed toward Crawford’s speech which follows:

“A sermon, well delivered, is more uncommon even than prayers well read. [. . .] A thoroughly good sermon, thoroughly well delivered, is a capital gratification. I can never hear such a one without the greatest admiration and

respect, and more than half a mind to take orders and preach myself. There is something in the eloquence of the pulpit, [. . .] which is entitled to the highest praise and honour. The preacher who can touch and affect such an heterogeneous mass of hearers, [. . .] who can say any thing new or striking, any thing that rouses the attention, without offending the taste or wearing out the feelings of his hearers, is a man whom one could not (in his public capacity) honour enough. I should like to be such a man.” (J.Austen 309-10).

Kelly comments on Crawford’s superficiality. He points out the phrase “in his public capacity,” which shows that for Crawford, plays, preaching, eloquent speaking or reading are all the same: what is important is “not the text, but the performance and the applause” (142-3).

In his article in *Jane Austen’s Achievement*, B.C. Southam writes: “Undoubtedly, Jane Austen delighted in the sheer virtuosity of her performance in mimicking so many styles of writing and calling up such a variety of literary and social types” (21). He describes the drama which was rehearsed by the young people of Mansfield Park as an “elaborate sematic drama [. . .] playing with its technical vocabulary, and carrying these ideas into the mental and moral landscapes of the characters” (6), a very appropriate way to describe such a drama used by such an artist as Jane Austen to describe her characters through the roles they choose to play in this drama. He remarks on the artistic feat

accomplished by Austen in which the visit to Sotherton and the rehearsals for *Lover's Vows* foreshadow the pattern of events and relationships that develop later in the story. (21).

Roger Gard, in *Jane Austen's Novels*, makes a few comments, which might be relevant to insight into literary motives. In arguing that Fanny is correct in fearing for her cousins' morality, he says that there is sometimes an "awkward literary woodenness (what Kenneth Moler calls her bookish voice) in Fanny's necessarily sheltered emotional vocabulary" (125-6). This seems to agree with what Brown expressed about Fanny's thinking and expressing herself too much in a romantic literary style, as though all her opinions were formed by romantic interpretation of literature. Gard also calls Fanny "A literary critic, then," in reference to her exclaiming over all the meaning she gleans from Edmund's note which begins: "My very dear Fanny" (136). One might also apply Gard's label to her exclamations over *Lovers' Vows* when she reads it before the play begins to take shape.

Douglas Bush, in his book *Jane Austen*, makes a very interesting observation concerning the incidents in *Mansfield Park* when he replies to Charles Austen's comment that this novel "wanted incident." Bush observes, "But even more than in Jane Austen generally, incidents are psychological and ethical" (109) in *Mansfield Park*. I would add that in this book, as in all her books, some of the incidents are literary, and that these inspire some of the psychological and the ethical incidents. Bush also comments on what I have noted earlier in this paper when he says that one way Henry Crawford used to convince Fanny of his sincere love and steadiness was

through his expressive reading of Shakespeare, which compels her attention; it is significant that he could become every character in turn. It is even more significant that in his discussion of liturgical reading and preaching he treats these functions only as an actor's performances. (123)

Bush's view recalls Kelly's statement above that *Mansfield Park* is a "novel of education" —a sort of "romance of education." Kelly says that it starts with Edmund's giving Fanny her first literary education and the novel ending with their being in love. Kelly also had commented that her love for him began with the first letter the two of them, Fanny and Edmund, composed to William. Bush has a different slant, but still thinks *Mansfield Park* a novel of education: "[T]he central and comprehensive theme" of the book is "bad education, in the broad sense of religious, moral, and social environment." He states that Mary and Henry Crawford are the most conspicuous proof of this kind of bad education (131). My view is that this "bad" education is shown in each character's involvement in literature: reading and writing, correspondence, and participating in plays, as much as in any other way.

Mary Fahnstock-Thomas, in *Georgette Heyer: A Critical Retrospective*, comments on the fact that Fanny Price, of course, knows Cowper. She observes: "[D]rawing, music, literature, even amateur theatricals tend to be an organic part of life to the people Jane Austen writes about. Everyone in Bath goes to the theater and the concerts" (323). Because literature is so much a part of Austen's own life, it is one of her most clever ways to define the characters of those she creates.

So many critics have applied the theme of education to *Mansfield Park* that I believe this little quote from Richard Simpson in 1870 worth looking at in light of my own understanding of the education theme as linked to the literary education theme. In speaking of the wickedness of characters like Mrs. Norris and Mary and Henry, Simpson observes,

But in the much more subtle portraits of Crawford and his sister, in *Mansfield Park*, it is brought home to us throughout that their levity and want of principle is an ignorance—that, in spite of their intellectual brilliancy and good-nature, there is a want of moral understanding, analogous to the want of intelligence in the fool. So Mrs. Norris, in *Mansfield Park*, a bustling, managing, sharp, and odious woman, proves to be not only wrong, but also, and in a still higher degree, foolish, by the thorough collapse of her method, and the complete failure of all her undertakings. In the earlier novels wickedness is wickedness; in the later it is ignorance also. (18)

We have seen this lack of understanding about literary themes and purposes reflecting values and beliefs in the way Mary and Henry think of any type of reading aloud or writing letters as shallow experiences to add to their own popularity or plans for other people. And we have seen how this behavior is a show of their particular degree or flavor of wickedness. As Edmund often points out, it is the fault of their rearing by the aunt and uncle who brought them up.

Harold Bloom, in relating Fanny to her role in literature, says that Austen has put into Fanny the “Protestant will (as John Locke described the will), resisting the powers of association and asserting its very own persistence, its own sincere intensity, and its own isolate sanctions.” He argues that some critics have tried to “secularize” Fanny’s “Protestant will,” but adds that “secularization, in literature, is always a failed trope, since the distinction between sacred and secular is not actually a literary but rather a societal or political distinction” (6). Bloom makes much of the passage on pages 356-7 of the Oxford text, which illustrates the emotional anguish Fanny goes through while in Portsmouth, that is, her homesickness for Mansfield Park, which she has never recognized as her home before. The passage begins, ““ Such was the home which was to put Mansfield out of her head,”” and ends with ““Johnson’s celebrated judgment as to matrimony and celibacy”” (quoted earlier) which she changed to ““though Mansfield Park may have some pains, Portsmouth could have no pleasures””(8) Bloom explains that Fanny Price

really does favor a Johnsonian aesthetic, in life, as in literature. Portsmouth belongs to representation as practiced by Smollett, belongs to the cosmos of *Roderick Random*. Fanny, in willing to get back to Mansfield Park, and to get Mansfield Park back to itself, is willing herself also to renovate the world of her creator, the vision of Jane Austen that is *Mansfield Park*.” (9)

Gary Kelly more or less sums up these contributions from critics about *Mansfield Park*:

And so Austen deliberately challenges the reader to find Edmund, and especially Fanny, significant, to read them right, and therefore to read Austen herself right, [. . .] Thus Jane Austen examines the nature of true eloquence in *Mansfield Park* and shows the relationship between moral character and public utterance through the theme of reading aloud. (145)

CONCLUSION

“A woman especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing any thing, should conceal it as well as she can” (quoted in Tomalin 165). This statement by Jane Austen must have been her guiding principle in life. She wrote the following words in a letter to Mr. James Stanier Clarke, domestic chaplain to the Prince of Wales, on December 11, 1815, in reply to his letter to her, asking her to write about a certain type of clergyman that he had in mind:

The comic part of the character I might be equal to, but not the Good, the Enthusiastic, the Literary. Such a Man’s Conversation must at times be on subjects of Science & Philosophy of which I know nothing—or at least be occasionally abundant in quotations & allusions which a Woman, who like me, knows only her own Mother-tongue & has read very little in that, would be totally without the power of giving. —A Classical Education or at any rate, a very extensive acquaintance with English Literature, Ancient & Modern, appears to me quite Indispensable for the person who would do any justice to your Clergyman— And I think I may boast myself to be, with all possible

Vanity, the most unlearned, & uninformed Female who
ever dared to be an Authoress. (Le Faye 306).

Certainly, we have not found her to be so unread or unlearned as she professes to be here, and certainly she is capable of writing the “Good, the Enthusiastic, the Literary” man’s conversation as she has proved with many literary characters, several found in *Mansfield Park*. In fact, the description above is far from what her biographers and even her critics say of her.

I set out to prove that Jane Austen, in her novel *Mansfield Park*, uses literary incidents, such as reading, writing, performing drama, and discussing reading as an art, to reveal the character and moral fiber of the people in this little universe she has created. Of course, all writers of fiction who know what they are about will use every action and reaction of a given character to reveal something of that person’s nature, whether the incident is literary or otherwise. Jane Austen, however, distinctly uses literary incidents to develop her characters’ nature and disposition. This approach must have originated with her early practice of writing fiction through letters, a common way to write fiction for other writers of that day and time. Gary Kelly claims that “*Mansfield Park* is about reading as an act of the profoundest significance for the individual and for his and her society” and that the novel

presents us too with a challenge in reading, a challenge to
read mute eloquence and formal utterance correctly, to read
volubility and witty facility for what they are, above all to
read the play of fictional conventions and thus participate
in Austen’s own critical renewal of a social institution

which her work was, for us, instrumental in founding—the
institution of literature. (146)

We can always, as most of her readers do, read Jane Austen's novels for enjoyment and entertainment, and be happy with that profit. We may never understand her characters, especially those characters in *Mansfield Park* fully (and characters, in Jane Austen's novels, seem to be more important than plot) until we have learned to read them through their own reading and writing and acting.

Notes

¹ For consistency, I will observe the American convention of using double quotation marks to signify direct quotations, even if the quoted text is by a British writer. My primary text is the Oxford World's Classics 1998 edition of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, edited by James Kinsley and with notes by John Lucas. This edition of the novel is essentially based upon R.W. Chapman's edition (Oxford, 1923; revised by Mary Lascelles, 1966).

² Most critics do not take Henry Austen's reports regarding his sister Jane Austen extremely seriously, as they believe that he goes out of his way to make her appear more religious and less worldly than she may have been. For example, he does not name all the books she was fond of because some would seem a little too worldly for a protected female to read.

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Evelyn Loghry Richesin was born in Victoria, Texas, on July 20, 1950, the daughter of Joseph Jacob Loghry and Melvina May Wood Loghry. After graduating from Taylor High School, Taylor, Texas, in 1968, she entered Mary Hardin Baylor College in Belton, Texas. After completing the first semester of her junior year, she attended night school at the University of Texas at Austin. In 1971, Evelyn Loghry married Thomas Richesin, Jr. Later from 1978-1980, she attended Dallas Baptist College for one course, The University of Texas at Arlington for one course, and earned her B.A. in English at Texas Christian University in Ft. Worth in May 1980. She has been employed as a teacher in Living Word Christian School in Bastrop, Texas, and in Valley Christian School in Mission, Texas. She has taught her own children in home school for many years, and has conducted a school in her home as a supplement to other home schools for eight years. She has also tutored children in her home through the years. In August of 1998, she entered Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas.

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