

Theatricals and Theatricality in *Mansfield Park*

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Julia Bertram may have missed out on the starring role she wanted in *Lovers' Vows*, but her author compensates her with the fine melodramatic entry and speech which bring down the curtain on Volume I (or Act 1?) of *Mansfield Park*: 'the door of the room was thrown open, and Julia appearing at it, with a face all aghast, exclaimed, "My father is come! He is in the hall at this moment."' ¹ The theatricals play a complex role (it is hard to avoid such figures of speech) in *Mansfield Park*, and their placing as the chief concern and narrative climax of Volume I ensures that we are at least subconsciously made aware of their symbolic significance — not only for the moral conflict but also for the very form of the novel. Theatricality — the employment of the ambiguous idea that 'all the world's a stage' — works in this novel to crystallize a mode of apprehending the characters and their story as being other than what we normally expect of a novel — or to be precise, what we expect of 'The Author of "Pride and Prejudice"', as the title-page announces. A. Walton Litz makes the point that *Mansfield Park* deliberately sets out to *deny* the expectations raised by the novelistic perfection of *Pride and Prejudice*:

Fanny is the antithesis of the conventional heroine, the reverse of Pamela [or, as Trilling more aptly argues, of Elizabeth Bennet], a young woman who denies the role of Cinderella . . . [*Mansfield Park*] deprives the reader of wish-fulfilment . . . in the end the charming lover is rejected . . . the reversal of the fairy-tale may be seen as part of a general attack on the dangers of 'fiction'.²

This paper attempts to demonstrate one of the methods by which Jane Austen subverts our pleasant expectations of 'fiction', substituting instead, at one level of the prose, the sterner method of allegory, and specifically that of the English tradition typified by the morality play. One cannot of course argue that Jane Austen was familiar with the early Tudor 'interludes' such as *Lusty Juventus*, *Mankynde* or *Nice Wanton*: these *recherché* examples of the history of our drama were not rediscovered till the later nineteenth century.

- 1 *Mansfield Park*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford 1923: 3rd edn, repr. 1973), p. 172. All further page references incorporated into the text are to this edition.
- 2 A. Walton Litz, *Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development* (London, 1965), p. 129.

But their lively embodying of a spiritual lesson in a popular and strikingly apprehensible allegorical form established a tradition which had great force at least until Jane Austen's day, and indeed well into the nineteenth century.

The fifteenth-century morality dramas usually took the form of a conflict for the soul of an Everyman figure, naive and easily swayed, by characters personifying various virtues and vices. There soon emerged as a major and most entertaining character the 'Vice', a trickster figure, often very attractive, who enlists the sympathy of the audience through his wit and cleverness, but who is nevertheless clearly on the Devil's side. The play's content and the audience's moral engagement with the conflict thus become much more complex — in just the same way as *Mansfield Park* confronts us with the attractiveness of the world and the flesh (and perhaps the Devil also).

The moralistic and didactic tradition which these plays began in popular entertainment survived in forms which Jane Austen did know: in Shakespeare's employment of the 'Vice' figure (particularly of significance to *Mansfield Park* are the Vice's confrontations with the virtuous heroine: Iachimo and Imogen, Lucio and Isabella), in Jonson's satires (Volpone and the Alchemist are developments of the Vice), in the city and court comedies of the Restoration, and in prose from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* to Maria Edgeworth's *Moral Tales*. The pattern persists even in the rather enfeebled English comedy of manners of the second half of the eighteenth century: the characters retain allegorical qualities, even in the wholly secular world of *The School for Scandal*. But the revolutions in thought and feeling originating on the Continent at the end of the eighteenth century brought about a change in popular drama, and there emerged the form we know as melodrama — a type of play still moralistic in overall pattern, but providing primarily a great deal of sensation and sentiment in place of the rather threadbare 'wit' of the native form.

Kotzebue's *Das Kind der Liebe*, or *Lovers' Vows* (literally 'The Love Child' — Mrs Inchbald had to make even the title 'fit for the English Stage') is an excellent example of the new form. It had an enormous vogue in England in the 1790s and early 1800s; Jane Austen would probably have seen it performed during her residence in Bath. The elements that were to develop into full-blooded Victorian melodrama are almost all there: the exotic and/or rustic setting (Castle and Cottage rather than the Town of English comedy), violent action (Frederick's attack on the Baron),

a flirting with risqué subjects, and perhaps most significant, the clash of the classes, in which a 'new morality' is adumbrated: the poor are essentially virtuous, even when betrayed into breaking the moral law — they are always forced into this by depraved aristocrats — the upper classes are inevitably corrupt. Cobbett's objection to such plays as *Lovers' Vows* is well worth quoting for its illustration of the conservative objection to the new drama, and by implication, to where performances of it might lead:

It is the universal aim of German authors of the present day, to exhibit the brightest examples of virtue among the lower classes of society; while the higher orders, by their folly and profligacy, are held up to contempt and detestation . . . it would be equally easy, and more commendable, for [the author] to excite, in the minds of his auditors, respect, admiration, and love of our laws, our magistrates, and our religion, than to expose them to obloquy and contempt.³

It must be clear to any reader of *Mansfield Park* that, for all her basic conservatism, Jane Austen does use the novel to question the absolute right of Sir Thomas's way of doing things, particularly in the education of his family (it is significant that neither Mr Darcy nor Mr Knightley — Jane Austen's other two major examples of estate-owners — is also a father; neither of them possesses Sir Thomas's moral blindness, though they have faults of personality). The Crawfords, similarly of good family but weak upbringing, represent the worldliness and moral laxity of the town-bred upper classes: Mary's 'modern' comment on the possibility of social rehabilitation for Maria makes the point: 'In some circles, we know, she would never be admitted, but with good dinners, and large parties, there will always be those who will be glad of her acquaintance, and there is, undoubtedly, more liberality and candour on those points than formerly' (p. 457). The novel's heroine, by contrast, despite her poverty is the Biblical 'Pearl of Great Price', her father and brothers mere sailors (Jane Austen was one of the first to contribute to the literary popularity of sailors, who figure largely in nineteenth-century melodramas, always frank and manly, if a little rough in their manners). Fanny herself possesses nothing but her inalienable sense of what is right, not even beauty (although she is allowed a delicate prettiness), wit or charm; she is the perfect prototype of the melodrama heroine. But her moral strength allows her to stand as a true heroine, not just a shrinking

3 William Cobbett, in *The Porcupine*, 7 September 1801, quoted in W. Reitzel, 'Mansfield Park and Lovers Vows', *Review of English Studies*, IX (1933), 451-456.

violet: deserted at one critical point (the theatricals) by the man she looks up to as a mentor, beset at another by all the wiles of the world's temptations (Henry Crawford's courtship), she yet manages to maintain her integrity, and thus finally receive the reward of all the best that remains of the old establishment — its physical comforts, its civilized gentility, and its religious authority.

In contrast to this melodrama patterning in the novel's structure, Jane Austen firmly rejects that aspect of *Lovers' Vows* which Walton Litz identifies as 'Rousseauistic values and shoddy emotionalism'.⁴ Fanny's Romantic rhapsodies on star-gazing or shrubberies are treated with gentle irony; it is not her very active *feelings* that are important, it is her equally apparent faculty of *judgement*. The Bertram girls are an obvious contrast: despite their formal education, they let their hearts run away with their heads, with disastrous results. The course of events shows that the theatricals, and the choice of *Lovers' Vows* in particular, were an extremely unwise undertaking for excitable young persons in a fatherless household; but the novel itself echoes some (though decidedly not all) of the revolutionary sentiments of the vulgar contemporary play. This, however, is not the main significance of the theatricals in *Mansfield Park*: *what* is acted does have a local and specific importance, but the *fact* of acting has a much more fundamental general importance. It is in order to emphasize the moral ambivalence of our fascination with theatricality that Jane Austen plays up the relationship of the modern novel to the old English tradition of allegory, particularly as it is found in the drama. Certain peculiarities of her style in this novel point to a very deliberate didactic intention in the fable.

It has long been a commonplace to observe that *Mansfield Park* seems to use a greater number of abstract nouns, and use them with a greater weight, largely unrelieved by irony, than the other novels. David Lodge has singled out 'judgement' as the essential quality of Fanny's mind, lacking in all the other characters in various degrees. Mrs Norris's unconsciously ironic use of 'gratitude', and Sir Thomas's extreme formality in speech which indicates that he is unable to see the particular (the delinquency of his daughters) because of his regard for the general (the 'best education') are other examples of this tendency, indicating a prose habit akin to Jane Austen's admired Miss Edgeworth's, though infinitely more subtle. Her subtlety takes the form of an allegorical resonance, so that characters and situations become elements of a spiritual scenario,

4 Litz, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

without forfeiting their modern psychological reality. Narratorial turns of phrase have an edge that suggests Biblical originals; the abstract nouns on occasion carry not just a Johnsonian weight but the authority of the pulpit.

We are given ample verbal clues to place almost all the characters in the 'morality play' in chapter 2 of Volume I. Mrs Norris's every utterance displays her as the type of Self Conceit and Avarice; Julia and Maria's summary of their education and Fanny's lack of it only serves to show the inadequacy of Vain Learning; the narrator comments (without my explicit capitals but with clear didactic intent), 'it is not very wonderful that with all their promising talents and early information, they should be entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity and humility' (p. 19). Lady Bertram is a prime comic example of Sloth: 'She was a woman who spent her days in sitting nicely dressed on a sofa, doing some long piece of needlework, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children, but very indulgent to the latter, when it did not put her to inconvenience' (pp. 19-20). Tom, the elder son, is lightly sketched in as a version of Hogarth's Tom Rakewell, a type originating in the Biblical Prodigal Son:

He was just entering into life, full of spirits, and with all the liberal dispositions of an eldest son, who feels born only for expense and enjoyment. (p. 17)

His eldest son was careless and extravagant, and had already given him [Sir Thomas] much uneasiness . . . (p. 20)

Tom will undergo debauchery and a brush with disaster not unlike the 'progress' of Hogarth's protagonist, but (like Fielding's Tom) he will be saved from the Rake's ultimate end by the more optimistic Christian vision of the novelist, who chooses to let other pens dwell on guilt and misery: 'Tom . . . gradually regained his health, without regaining the thoughtlessness and selfishness of his previous habits. He was the better for ever for his illness. He had suffered, and he had learnt to think, two advantages that he had never known before' (p. 462).

Chapter 2, which opens with the image of 'the little girl', Fanny Price, who with her 'affectionate heart, and . . . strong desire of doing right' (p. 17) is clearly to be the heroine of a Christian fable, closes with another significant formulation. We have also met in this chapter Edmund, 'with all the gentleness of an excellent nature' (p. 15), the only character to be 'uniformly kind' to Fanny, and

Fanny responds by loving him 'better than anybody in the world except William; her heart was divided between the two' (p. 22). Here, at the end of the narrator's exposition, is a clear indication of the natural capacities of our heroine's heart: this is not to be a romance of the sexual attraction of opposites (as *Pride and Prejudice* was), but an exploration of the moral qualities which will eventually enable Fanny to receive the reward of a heightened sibling love in her unpassionate but deeply affectionate marriage with Edmund.

Sexuality is the principal characteristic of the Crawfords, and it is with their introduction (in chapter 4) that the novel moves beyond the mode of a simple Christian moral tale to a multi-dimensional mode in which qualities peculiar to the drama are called upon to show the complexity of the moral life in the modern world. It is clear from their first dialogue at the end of chapter 4 that the Crawfords, particularly Henry, do embody sexuality — they discuss matrimonial prospects with lively interest; it is clear also that they represent 'the World', impinging on Mansfield (there are even allegorical overtones in the estate's name — it is a field of battle for Everyman's soul, just as Hartfield is for Emma's heart) from a London chiefly symbolized by the 'vicious [sexual] conduct' of their uncle the Admiral. They have been brought up by this uncle and his wife, and Mary, in particular, has learnt the worldly lesson that 'every body should marry as soon as they can do it to advantage' (p. 43) — by which of course she means financial advantage.

Mary's chief function in the novel is to demonstrate the shallowness of this view of the sacrament of marriage, catalysed in her attraction to the clergyman Edmund and her refusal to be guided by the higher ideals of Christianity which he represents; the point is nailed home when Edmund expresses his final disillusion with Mary, that she should see the sacrilegious sin of adultery as mere 'folly . . . no reluctance, no horror, no feminine — shall I say? no modest loathings! — This is what the world does!' (p. 444). 'Her's are faults of principle, Fanny, of blunted delicacy and a corrupted, vitiated mind' (p. 446). Strong words, but they come from a clergyman who has himself undergone profound moral testing through his attraction to this worldly woman, and has just managed to remain firm — though the episode of the theatricals tries him almost à l'outrance.

Ever since women went on the stage in the 1660s there have been moralists fulminating against such an encouragement to

licentiousness, from Jeremy Collier to Thomas Gisborne,⁵ and clearly this is one of the major objections to *Lovers' Vows* in particular, as Fanny's reflections indicate: '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 to be aware of what they were engaging in' (p. 137) — a nice hint, here, of Fanny's sexual naivety. It is also the case that the Church, particularly since the Reformation, has had an uncomfortable relationship with the theatre: whereas the Roman Catholic Church has incorporated rituals very close to play-acting in its worship, the Reformed churches have always been deeply suspicious of any tendency towards show, entertainment, magic, or role-playing in man's relationship with his God. Acting, in short, is lying, is pretending to be other than one is; it is the work of the Devil, and the actor, as the Tudor edict had it, is by his nature no better than a rogue and vagabond, who would foment disorder in the commonwealth.

Edmund, the future clergyman, is the novel's spokesman for the Church, and it is he who expresses the novel's basic argument against what the theatricals symbolize.⁶ His objections to the proposed play-acting begin by being those of an eighteenth-century gentleman: he likes to see 'good hardened real acting', but cannot accept 'the raw efforts of those who have not been bred to the trade, — a set of gentlemen and ladies, who have all the disadvantages of education and decorum to struggle through' (p. 124). But within two speeches — this objection not having sufficient force — he is obliged to show his true vocation as one who aspires to 'the guardianship of religion and morals' (p. 92):

I think it would be very wrong. In a *general* light, private theatricals are open to some objections, but as *we* are circumstanced, I 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, absent as he is, and

- 5 Jeremy Collier, *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (1698); Thomas Gisborne, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1797). The latter is mentioned approvingly by Jane Austen in a letter, 30 August 1805. Sybil Rosenfeld ('Jane Austen and Private Theatricals', *Essays and Studies*, 15 (1962), 40-51) pinpoints puritanical opposition to the licentiousness of home theatricals at its height circa 1802.
- 6 A. Walton Litz offers the most thorough discussion of Jane Austen's own experience of private theatricals (as a child at Steventon) and the possible role of her cousin Eliza de Feuillide, instigator of those theatricals, as a model for Mary Crawford.

in some degree of constant danger: and it would be imprudent, I think, with regard to Maria, whose situation is a very delicate one, considering every thing, extremely delicate.' (p. 125)

'It would be taking liberties with my father's house in his absence which could not be justified.' (p. 127)

But, as in the oldest morality tale of all ('she gave me of the tree and I did eat'), sexuality is Edmund's undoing, and it is left to Fanny to carry the banner of absolute incorruptibility. It is the first test of the novel's heroine — a testing not of the qualities which make her suitable for marriage, but of her faith. She has declared repeatedly, in chapter 15, that she 'cannot act' — the repetition stresses not simply her modesty but more profoundly her moral steadfastness and refusal to enter the realm of deception (there may be a deliberate echo of Satan's tempting Jesus (Matthew, 4, 1-11) in her 'I could not act any thing *if you were to give me the world*' — p. 145). In chapter 16, when Edmund defects, she undergoes the dark night of the soul: 'Things should take their course; she cared not how it ended. Her cousins might attack, but could hardly tease her. She was beyond their reach; and if at last obliged to yield — no matter — it was all misery *now*' (p. 157). It is only, finally, the author's employment of the melodramatic peripetia of Sir Thomas's return which saves our heroine from the apparently inevitable fall into the corrupt world of the theatre.

Henry Crawford, the 'Vice'-figure of *Mansfield Park's* morality play, is the novel's supreme actor, both in art and in life.⁷ Jane Austen's placing of Henry within this tradition is consistent and emphatic. At his first introduction it is remarked that 'To anything like a permanence of abode, or limitation of society, Henry Crawford had, unluckily, a great dislike' (p. 41). This 'rootless' quality in Crawford, relating him to the Tudor actor's vagabond status, and, with a profounder resonance, to the condition of the Biblical Satan 'going to and fro in the earth' (Job, 1, 7), is emphasized tellingly in Henry's attempts to 'improve' Edmund's dwelling at Thornton Lacey (p. 242ff.). The entire house is to be turned topsy-turvy (as *Mansfield Park* is for the theatre), nothing is

7 Henry Crawford is a good example of a character who is both a 'personification' of a Vice, in the manner of the old plays, and an 'impersonation' of a real human being, in the post-renaissance fashion. But what complicates our response to him is that he is depicted as a person who indulges in theatrical activity, who treats all the world as a stage. (Elucidation of the useful distinction between 'personification' and 'impersonation' can be found in Elizabeth Burns, *Theatricality*, (London, 1972), pp. 162-170.)

to remain in the decorous ancient order in which it has grown. Mary's comment during this conversation is symbolically apt:

'Only think how useful he was at Sotherton! Only think what grand things were produced there by our all going with him one hot day in August to drive about the grounds, and see his genius take fire. There we went, and there we came home again; and what was done there is not to be told!' (p. 244)

In fact after Henry's overt display at Sotherton of his ability to play the role of seducer to any available young lady, Jane Austen's narratorial placing of him as the Vice becomes more marked. The particular vice that he embodies is that of Vanity — the word is used (with the Biblical overtones suggesting an idle and unprofitable life) consistently in connection with Henry Crawford from chapter 12 of Volume I to the novel's final chapter, and the condemnatory tone of the moralizing narrator is unmistakable:

... a fortnight of sufficient leisure in the intervals of shooting and sleeping, [ought] to have convinced the gentleman that he ought to keep longer away, had he been more in the habit of examining his own motives, and of reflecting to what the indulgence of his idle vanity was tending: but, thoughtless and selfish from prosperity and bad example, he would not look beyond the present moment. The sisters, handsome, clever, and encouraging, were an amusement to his sated mind; and finding nothing in Norfolk to equal the social pleasures of Mansfield, he gladly returned to it at the time appointed, and was welcomed thither quite as gladly by those whom he came to trifle with farther. (pp. 114-5)

... to a temper of vanity and hope like Crawford's, the truth, or at least the strength of her indifference, might well be questionable. (p. 328)

How evidently was there a gross want of feeling and humanity where his own pleasure was concerned — And alas! how always known no principle to supply as a duty what the heart was deficient in. (p. 329)

Henry Crawford, ruined by early independence and bad domestic example, indulged in the freaks of a cold-blooded vanity a little too long . . . He was entangled by his own vanity. (pp. 467-8)

The episode of the theatricals, by displaying Henry Crawford as an excellent and enthusiastic actor, symbolically emphasizes his role within the novel's morality play. As an actor he is quick, sensitive, and multi-talented: one guesses that his portrait is drawn partly from David Garrick, the great eighteenth-century actor who brought about modern revolutions in theatrical practice:

'I really believe,' said he, 'I could be fool enough at this moment to undertake any character that was ever 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.' (p. 123)

(Richard III was one of Garrick's most famous roles; he was also noted for his versatility in both tragedy and comedy. To similar effect, Mr Rushworth pointedly remarks on Crawford's slight size — Garrick was only 5' 6": 'to see such an undersized, little, mean-looking man, set up for a fine actor, is very ridiculous in my opinion' — p. 105.) But the narratorial comment which introduces this display of lively enthusiasm is unremittingly severe on the dissoluteness that Henry Crawford represents in the novel's moral scheme: 'Henry Crawford, to whom, in all the *riot* of his *gratifications*, it was yet an *untasted pleasure*, was quite alive at the idea' (p. 123, my italics). This is a typical example of the way the Crawfords' (especially Henry's) obvious charm, which even the most superficial readers recognize, is placed in the sternest of moral perspectives — the combination is one of the factors which have led to so much reader discomfort with the novel.

Henry's acting (and his role as the Vice, the deceiver or actor within the play) continues well beyond the episode of the theatricals. His discussion with Edmund of the virtues of clerical eloquence depends on his seeing himself in the role of fashionable preacher:

'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 . . . I never listened to a distinguished preacher in my life, without a sort of envy. But then, I must have a London audience. I could not preach, but to the educated; to those who were capable of estimating my composition. And, I do not know that I should be fond of preaching often; now and then, perhaps, once or twice in the spring, after being anxiously expected for half a dozen Sundays together; but not for a constancy; it would not do for a constancy.' (p. 341)

Gratification, *envy* and *audience* are words that point clearly to Henry's true avocation; and it is only Fanny, of all his present audience, who has the courage to challenge him concerning his frivolous admission of a lack of 'constancy' in such serious matters. Actors are by nature changeable, inconstant (as Henry again demonstrates in his pursuit of the various ladies in the novel); hence their threat to the established order. At another point Henry is momentarily taken with the idea of playing the heroic young sailor in emulation of William Price — but as the narrator comments 'The wish was rather eager than lasting' (p. 236).

Like the mischievous Vices of the old plays, Henry Crawford is a practised card-player and gambler, as is evident in the game of Speculation — significant title — in which only he and his sister are fully at home; by contrast, ‘though it was impossible for Fanny not to feel herself mistress of the rules of the game in three minutes, he had yet to inspirit her play, sharpen her avarice, and harden her heart’ (p. 240) — again there appear, in an apparently casual narratorial comment, terms which suggest the novel’s moralistic perspective.

Henry is most an actor in his courtship of Fanny — an episode which at one stage has all the *appearance* of sincerity, but which we must remember began as a cold-hearted game played by brother and sister (‘I cannot be satisfied without Fanny Price, without making a small hole in Fanny Price’s heart’ — p. 229); the good deeds he undertakes in order sincerely to win her are nevertheless undertaken not through a sense of ‘principle, active principal’ but in order ultimately to ‘force her to love him’ (p. 326). Henry Crawford’s vanity, ‘luxury and epicurism’ (p. 407) temporarily take the form of virtue, but all too easily revert to their former blatant immorality in the seduction of Maria. Once he moves on to a different stage, he adopts a different role. And Jane Austen the moralist is not going to permit him the ‘lead’ in a romantic comedy: her Cinderella has no soft spot for an erring Prince Charming.

Mary Crawford, though not a major figure drawn from the dramatic tradition like the Vice (there were no female Vices in morality plays, though her role is clearly that of Worldliness), is also, by her nature and upbringing, an accomplished actress with some striking scenes. That in which she manipulates Fanny into accepting Henry’s necklace (chapter 8 of Volume II) is perhaps the subtlest and most triumphant display of her art. From that point on, as first Fanny and then Edmund remain obdurately steadfast in righteousness, Mary becomes more desperate in her efforts to make things go her way, and more coarse in her acting. Observe for example, the stagey quality of her gestures and speech when she revisits Fanny’s east room for the first time since the rehearsal with Edmund:

‘Ha!’ she cried, with instant animation, ‘am I here again? The east room. Once only was I in this room before!’ — and after stopping to look about her, and seemingly to retrace all that had then passed, she added, ‘Once only before. Do you remember it? I came to rehearse. Your cousin came too; and we had a rehearsal. You were our audience and prompter. A delightful rehearsal. I shall never forget it. Here we were, just in this part of the room;

here was your cousin, here was I, here were the chairs. — Oh! why will such things ever pass away?’

Happily for her companion, she wanted no answer. Her mind was entirely self engrossed. She was in a reverie of sweet remembrances. (pp. 357-8)

The point that thus to confuse life and the theatre is morally dangerous — and not only to the speaker, but to the good man who comes under her influence — is made quite clear in the middle of Mary’s next rhapsodic utterance:

‘If I had the power of recalling any one week of my existence, it should be that week, that acting week. Say what you would, Fanny, it should be *that*; for I never knew such exquisite happiness in any other. His sturdy spirit to bend as it did! Oh! it was sweet beyond expression.’ (p. 358)

Edmund’s report of his last interview with her emphasizes the corruption of Mary’s moral being (embodied in her vulgar ‘actress’ gestures): she cannot distinguish between ‘folly’ (a term implying that she sees life as a comedy of manners) and ‘evil’, a word which suggests the spiritual perspective which Fanny and Edmund represent:

‘“A pretty good lecture upon my word. Was it part of your last sermon? At this rate, you will soon reform every body at Mansfield and Thornton Lacey; and when I hear of you next, it may be as a celebrated preacher in some great society of Methodists, or as a missionary into foreign parts.” She tried to speak carelessly, but she was not so careless as she wanted to appear . . . I had gone a few steps, Fanny, when I heard the door open behind me. “Mr. Bertram,” said she. I looked back. “Mr. Bertram,” said she, with a smile — but it was a smile ill-suited to the conversation that had passed, a saucy playful smile, seeming to invite, in order to subdue me; at least, it appeared so to me. I resisted; it was the impulse of the moment to resist, and still walked on.’ (p. 459)

‘How have I been deceived! Equally in brother and sister deceived!’ is Edmund’s conclusion — and it is a conclusion which reminds us, in the mouth of a clergyman just labelled ‘Methodist’ by the worldly Mary, of the old Puritan objection to acting which lurks at the back of many an English conscience: as it deceives and confuses us as to the true nature of people and situations, it is a sign of the Arch-Deceiver himself.

Applauding rather than deploring *Mansfield Park’s* ‘power to offend’,⁸ in Trilling’s terms, in no longer unfashionable; I have tried to show how the novel’s disapproving fascination with theatricality

8 Lionel Trilling, ‘Jane Austen and *Mansfield Park*’, *The Pelican Guide to English Literature* (1957), 5, pp. 112-29.

informs and indeed structures its moralizing intent. A. Walton Litz summarizes the importance of 'acting' in the novel thus: 'The play is brought from the outside world, like a moral infection, and must be taken as a symbol of the dangers that lurk within the imagination . . . At its deepest reaches,' he concludes, '*Mansfield Park* questions the motives and consolations of art itself.'⁹ It is a triumph — disturbing, but at bottom typical — of Jane Austen's genius that she can use the delights of 'art' at so many levels — the theatrical and the novelistic — in order, like our earliest playwrights, to deliver a fable for our soul's good.

9 Litz, *op. cit.*, p. 129.