JANE AUSTEN READING AND READING JANE AUSTEN: EXERCISING AUTHORITY

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> To silence and expel self, to contemplate and delineate nature with a clear eye, is not easy and demands a moral discipline. A great artist is, in respect of his work, a good man, and, in the true sense, a free man. The consumer of art has an analogous task to its producer: to be disciplined enough to see as much reality in the work as the artist has succeded in putting into it, and not to 'use it as magic'.[1]
>
> —Iris Murdoch

Jane Austen provided her contemporary readers with scenes or characters that they were likely to meet with in their ordinary daily lives. That is to say, Jane Austen's characters are themselves the very people whom she assumed would read her novels. This strategy is interesting, not least because it suggests that the society of her novels is continuous with the society in which her readers lived. Her tacit purpose, then, was not to broaden the scope of her reader's world, but to deepen the readers' perception and perhaps even to modify their habitual ways of thinking about themselves and their own lives. In her own unemphatic way, Jane Austen, while accepting her own authority in her work, challenges her readers to be authorities on her chosen subject.

In a scene that at first glance might seem desultory, even insignificant, Jane Austen suggests the way in which the consumers of a work of art bring their own authority, their expertise, as it were, to bear on the work of art

itself. Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* comes upon Admiral Croft examining a picture in a shop window in Bath. The Admiral comments upon the picture:

> 'Here I am, you see, staring at a picture. . . . But what a thing here is, by way of a boat. Do look at it. Did you ever see the like? What queer fellows your fine painters must be to think that any body would venture their lives in such a shapeless old cockleshell as that. And yet, there are two gentlemen stuck up in it mightily at their ease, and looking about them at the rocks and mountains, as if they were not to be upset the next moment, which they certainly must be. I wonder where that boat was built! . . . . I would not venture over a horsepond in it.' (P 169)[2]

Admiral Croft's authority comes from his knowledge of the subject of the picture. He derives his judgement form his perception of three different kinds of form: ideal form (his idea of a good vessel), real form (boats he has seen and sailed in) and the image of the form (the artist's rendering of a boat.) He finds the picture absurd because his knowledge of boats tells him that the imaged vessel is not seaworthy. He perceives a meaning the artist did not intend: the boat is about to sink. Admiral Croft laughs at the picture for much the same reason that Jane Austen laughed at many of the novels that came her way: the forms imaged in the novels could never exist in nature as they are made to do in art.[3]

We find this as the law from which derive some of Jane Austen's comments as a reader of the novel that her niece Anna was writing in 1814. The remarks that have been most often noticed are those that show a close attention to detail—who would be introduced to whom, what town would be talked of in Dawlish, how long it would take characters to travel a hundred miles. Such insistence on accuracy is summed up in Jane Austen's famous advice: "Let the Portmans go to Ireland, but as you know nothing of the Manners there, you had better not go with them. You will be in danger of giving false representations."[4] Certainly such close attention to detail is interesting to us

in our coming to understand the particular qualities of Jane Austen's art, but her remarks on characters in Anna's novel carry us back to Admiral Croft's judgment of the boat. Let us consider three examples—the "we" referred to are Mrs. Austen, Cassandra, and Jane herself:

> We are not satisfied with Mrs. F[orester]'s settling herself as Tenant & near Neighbour to such a Man as Sir T. H. without having some other inducement to go there; she ought to have some friend living thereabouts to tempt her. A woman, going with two girls just growing up, into a Neighbourhood where she knows nobody but one Man, of not very good character, is an awkwardness which so prudent a woman as Mrs. F. would not be likely to fall into. (L 400)

> Your G[rand] M[other] is more disturbed at Mrs. F's not returning the Egertons visit sooner, than anything else. They ought to have called at the Parsonage before Sunday. (L 400)

> Mrs. F. is not careful enough of Susan's health;—Susan ought not to be walking out so soon after Heavy rains, taking long walks in the dirt. An anxious mother would not suffer it. (L 401)

Jane, Cassandra, and Mrs. Austen read Anna's novel as Admiral Croft looks at the picture. Just as he takes the imaged boat to be a real boat, the Austens take the imaged characters to be real people. Like Admiral Croft they perceive things about Mrs. Forester that they presume Anna does not intend: that the character is imprudent, careless about her daughter's health, and negligent of fulfilling the correct social form. Such a person in the real world would, like Admiral Croft's boat, probably sooner or later suffer the consequences of her character. A novel, in the Austen view, must take into account the operation of moral and social law acting on its characters as the picture must take into account the physical laws of nature acting on a boat. Jane Austen was no admirer of old cockleshells got up as real people in

novels. Her scrupulosity about factual detail finds its analogue in her scrupulosity about moral and social forces acting on human characters.

Jane Austen recognized the characters in Gothic novels as images of human nature about on a par with the image of the boat in Admiral Croft's picture. She considered it as unlikely that one would find such creatures in Bath and the home counties as it would be to find such a boat upon the sea. Of course in her burlesque of Gothic novels in *Northanger Abbey*, she is having a bit of fun, but it seems to me that she took her vocation as an artist seriously enough to consider just how much power a work of art has over the consumer. Is the influence of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and other novels of that ilk over the ways in which Catherine Morland and Henry Tilney perceive reality of any significance? I think that *Northanger Abbey* answers that question in the affirmative by showing how Catherine and Henry, albeit in opposite ways, have their understaning of the real world distorted by their response to Gothic novels. Both neatly illustrate Iris Murdoch's remarks that "even great art cannot guarantee the quality of its consumer's consciousness."[5] It seems to me that in *Northanger Abbey* Jane Austen does not waste much time on serious criticism of Gothic novels; her first concern, her first interest, is in the quality of the consumers' consciousness. At the same time, however, Jane Austen saw the capacity of good novels to be taken very seriously, as the narrator in *Northanger Abbey* remarks in the famous defense of novels:

> 'It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda;' or in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language. (NA 38)

Catherline Morland's naive acceptance of Gothic fiction as a reflection of

real possibilities in her world is contrasted with Henry Tilney's denial of their being any element of reality in such novels. Catherine and Henry are, in antithetical ways, limited both in their understanding of the real world and in their understanding of the world of the Gothic novel. Catherine conjures fantastical possibilites for her visit to Northanger Abbey and a villainous character for General Tilney. Henry has no such fanciful expectations of the unusual and improbable and has no fear of his father's being worse than unpleasant in a civilized and decorous way. He has what he calls a "rational" lack of Gothic expectations. The limitations of Henry's imagination and understanding, which are less apparent than those of Catherine's, appear when he challenges the suspicions Catherine has been entertaining:

> 'What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own obsevation of what is passing around you—Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them?Could they be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?' (NA 197–98)

Henry's words *seem* very sensible. The elements of the real world that he raises in confirmation of his view may all ideally exclude the probability of the reality Catherine has imagined. But the real is all too often somewhat removed from the ideal. Henry underestimates the imperfection of human nature and overestimates the power of society, of social codes and social forms, to check those imperfections. General Tilney's callous behaviour in sending Catherine away from Northanger at hardly a moment's notice and without a responsible person to attended her as a protector reveals that

Henry has failed to admit ideas that are distinctly possible.[6] Jane Austen's criticism of the consumer, the reader, appears even more distinctly in the *Sanditon* fragment.

In the brief space of those chapters of Jane Austen's last, unfinished work, she addresses, again through burlesque, an even more subtle problem, but one also concerning the imaging of reality. Sir Edward Denham is the consumer, a reader—but a stupid reader. He uses "all the impassioned & most exceptionable parts of Richardson's [novels]; & such Authors as have since appeared to tread in Richardson's steps, so far as Man's determined pursuit of Woman in defiance of every opposition of feeling & convenience is concerned" (MW 404) as sort of handbooks for seduction and incentives to immorality. What Jane Austen seems to have intended exploring here is the way in which an image can be dissociated from the meaning the author intends. (This is, of course, a variation on Admiral Croft's perception of the unintentional meaning of the picture.) Jane Austen perceived in Richardson that prurience that has become a commonplace charge against the novelist. Readers like Sir Edward Denham find it quite easy to dissociate the fictional seduction as imaged by Richardson from the moral import, real or perfunctory, with which the author invested the image.[7]

The art of the novelist is by no means an easy one, as the quotation from Iris Murdoch that I have used as my epigraph suggests. Jane Austen draws our attention to one of the complexities of imaging reality, of putting as much nature as possible into the work of art. The artist has to select forms suitable for representation because he is faced with the well-nigh impossible task of maintaining control of the meanings the images embody. Jane Austen —as her account of Sir Edward's misuse of novels suggests—knew and in some measure feared the peculiar ambiguity of the imaged form. If we look at the seductions in her novels we find that Jane Austen never images seduction in any detail. Folly was another matter altogether. Jane Austen circumvents

the problem of exploring the psychological and moral complexities of such situations without imaging the situations themselves in concrete detail.

Just how Jane Austen might have developed Sir Edward's attempted seduction of Clara is useless to speculate.[8] She removes any dramatic suspense—and with it any prurient expectation on the reader's part—by remarking that Clara perceived Sir Edward's scheme and did not mean to be seduced. Jane Austen's focus seems to be on the stupidity of the seducer rather than on the innocence of the lady. The seductions in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* give a good indication of how Jane Austen incorporated into her art action that she morally disapproved of. The first thing we notice is that in neither novel is the lady unwilling to be seduced but on the contrary apparently consents to, even conspires with, the design of her lover. The affair of Lydia and Wickham is reported and is given unimaged reality by what we know of their characters and of their past actions. The couple is never shown together establishing their relationship. Yet the reader is convinced of reality of their liaison because it is so much the natural outcome of the juxtaposition of their two characters. To our sense of their characters Jane Austen adds a few substantiating contingencies—both Lydia and Wickham being in Brighton, Wickham's gambling debts, and the existence of the disgraced Mrs. Younge. These concrete details do not image their love affair but make it plausible and probable.

Jane Austen takes a greater risk in *Mansfield Park*. The personalities of Crawford and Maria do not come into conjunction entirely off-stage, as it were.[9] We see the effects they have on one another both at Sotherton and during the theatricals. There is, however, an increasing vagueness of detail in these two episodes. Jane Austen gives us their conversations, full of double meanings, in the chapel at Sotherton and again in the scene by the palisades in the park there. But though we are told of their constantly rehearsing together during the theatricals, we never hear their conversations

and see them directly only at the moment of Sir Thomas' return. In the day at Sotherton Jane Austen creates a strong sense of the attraction between Maria and Crawford, but she neatly dissociates it from the consummation of that attraction. Their adultery at the end of the novel depends, like the affair of Lydia and Wickham, on our knowledge of their characters. To this Jane Austen adds the imaged flirtation which we see in retrospect was the mutual seduction in which Maria and Crawford engaged. Their adultery itself is imaged only in fragmentary details reported at second-and third-hand: their meeting at Mrs. Fraser's party, Crawford's seeking entrée into Rushworth's house in Wimpole Street, Maria's going to Twickenham at Easter and Henry's going to the contiguous Richmond at the same time, and finally the lax moral character of Maria's friends at Twickenham. The details suggest rather than coherently image a love affair. Jane Austen makes the ethical and psychological import of the action more vivid than the action itself, thereby diminishing the power of the image itself while retaining the unequivocal moral import with which she invests the action.[10] Sir Edward Denham would have found *Mansfield Park* very dissatisfying, not at all to his purpose.

Jane Austen does, then, seem to have felt some responsibility in attempting to control the moral import of the actions, imaged or unimaged, in her novels. As this implies, she tries to manipulate the readers' response to coincide with her own. She wears her responsibility fairly lightly as the famous opening of the final chapter of *Mansfield Park* announces: "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery" (MP 461). Jane Austen saw her task to be the creating of images that lead the reader to the meanings that lie behind the images. That something does lie behind the images of art is also noted by Admiral Croft in his comments on the picture. His knowledge of the imaged form works in conjunction with his understanding of the laws of nature, the effect the sea would have on such a boat. It is from the conjuction of form and the knowledge of the laws of nature that the unintentional truth of the picture

emerges. Jane Austen does not take too grave an attitude towards the readers' understanding of the laws of nature because she recognized that though her job was to bring to her work as much nature as talent made possible, each individual would read by the light of his own perception of nature. In *Emma* Jane Austen gives an amusing commentary upon the consumer's knowledge of nature in Mr. Woodhouse's comment on Emma's portrait of Harriet Smith.

Mr. Woodhouse compliments Emma's skillful drawing but is obliged to point out an unsettling element in the picture: "'The only thing I do not thoroughly like is, that she seems to be sitting out of doors, with only a little shawl over her shoulders—and it makes one think she must catch cold'" (E 48). To Emma's pointing out the tree and that "'it is supposed to be summer; a warm day in summer'" (E 48), Mr. Woodhouse can only reply: "'But it is never safe to sit out of doors, my dear'" (E 48). I think we may easily imagine the horror of poor Mr. Woodhouse upon innocently picking up one of Jane Austen's novels to read of Jane Bennet's ride to Netherfield in the rain or of Lizzy's walk through the fields to visit her; of Fanny Price's having to walk twice to the White house in the hot sun; or of Marianne Dashwood's twilight walk in the wet grass at Cleveland. He would have set down the lady who wrote these novels as far too disturbing his taste! Jane Austen would not, curiously enough, have wholly disapproved of Mr. Woodhouse's method, for she implicitly asks her readers to exercise the same authority in reading her books as Admiral Croft does when viewing the picture in the shop window. Although Mr. Woodhouse does not recognize, as Mr. Knightley does, that Emma has distorted Harriet's physical form in the picture, he does understand that the picture is meant to image the real world and in the real world nothing is of more concern to Mr. Woodhouse than the operation of nature, however limited is his understanding of nature.

Most of the social forms imaged by Jane Austen are morally neutral; that

is, the way in which the characters use these forms gives moral import to them. We usually see quite clearly how the forms are used or misused by the characters. But there is one instance in Jane Austen's work that is somewhat troubling in this respect. I do not think that anyone reads the theatricals episode in *Mansfield Park* without coming away with a strong impression that Jane Austen is there saying something more than merely that careless young people can use private theatricals for their own selfish purposes. When we think of the picnic at Box Hill, the outing to Lyme Regis, even the visit to Sotherton, we dont't feel that whatever happens during these episodes Jane Austen finds such amusements in themselves morally reprehensible. John Bayley has remarked apropos of Lionel Trilling's essay on *Mansfield Park*[11]: "Professor Trilling assumes that to Jane Austen the idea of morality was complex and intriguing in itself, but it was people whom she found complex and intriguing—morality was simple eough."[12] This seems to me to be patently true from her disapproval of Frank Churchill's thoughtlessness to Maria and Crawford's adultery. But somehow the private theatricals occupy a unique place in Jane Austen's novels. The theatricals are morally ambiguous, complicated in precisely the way that Trilling argues that all morality is complicated for Jane Austen.

Although subsequent critics such as Stuart Tave and Tony Tanner[13] have effectively challenged Lionel Trilling's claim that the private theatricals in *Mansfield Park* reveal Jane Austen's "atavistic, almost primitive, fear of acting,"[14] the focus of attention has remained where Trilling's argument placed it: upon *acting* rather than upon private theatricals *qua* private theatricals. Discussions of acting can tell us much about Jane Austen's use of the theatricals as a metaphor conveying theme and much about the characters' use of the theatricals as a vehicle enabling them to pursue their own personal ends.[15] But we learn little about private theatricals themselves. Jane Austen shows private theatricals to have a distinct personality, quite

independent of the meaning with which either she or her characters invest them. Private theatricals have qualities of their own which give them something very like the status of a character in the novel. They exert an infuence on the characters analogous to the influence the characters have on one another.

The Mansfield theatricals are usually spoken of as though they are the only example of the form in the novel, but Jane Austen makes certain that the reader has more than one example from which to judge. By juxtaposing the Mansfield and Ecclesford schemes, she enables us to deduce some general characteristics of private theatricals. The loquacious Mr. Yates's details about the Ecclesford production mark its similarities to the one at Mansfield:

> 'A trifling part . . . and not at all to my taste, and such a one as I certainly would not accept again; but I was determined to make no difficulties. Lord Ravenshaw and the duke had appropriated the only two characters worth playing before I reached Ecclesford; and though Lord Ravenshaw offered to resign his to me, it was impossible to take it, you know. I was sorry for *him* that he should so mistake his powers, for he was no more equal to the Baron! A little man, with a weak voice, always hoarse after the first ten minutes! It must have injured the piece materially; but I was resolved to make no difficulties. Sir Henry thought the duke not equal to Frederick, but that was because Sir Henry wanted the part himself; whereas it was certainly in the best hands of the two.' (MP 122)

There is no indication that the Ecclesford party was involved in the sort of double-dealing, private meanings so prevalent at Mansfield. Jane Austen emphasizes something else—the qualities that the two schemes do have in common and that have nothing to do with the deception that acting makes possible. An atmosphere of discontent and dissatisfaction characterizes both the Mansfield and the Ecclesford theatricals. We are given an image of a Hobbesian microcosm in which people are molecules constantly and heedlessly bumping into one another. Although the atmosphere owes

something to the selfishness of the participants both at Mansfield and at Ecclesford, Jane Austen imples that private theatricals tend to give free play to the expression and exercise of selfishness in one of its cruder forms.

The Mansfield party is first divided over whether they should present a comedy or a tragedy. Even after that disagreement is resolved, Fanny Price discovers "before many days were past, that it was not all uninterrupted enjoyment of the party themselves. . . . Every body began to have their vexation" (MP 164). Edmund is annoyed because his opinion carries no weight, even after he has agreed to act. Once the frenetic activities of moving the billiard table and bookcases, unlocking doors, and ordering carpentry and scene painting are over, Tom Bertram begins "to be impatient to be acting; and every day thus employed, was tending to increase his sense of the insignificance of all his parts together, and make him more ready to regret that some other play had not been chosen" (MP 164). Fanny continues to note how pervasive is the discontent: "So far from being all satisfied and all enjoying, she found every body requiring something they had not, and giving occasion of discontent to the others—Every body had a part either too long or too short—nobody would would attend as they ought, nobody but the complainer would observe any directions" (MP 165). The Mansfield party, like Yates when describing the Ecclesford scheme, continually insist on the pleasure of the pursuit, but in reality the theatricals stimulate a lot of discontent and vexation.

The self-gratification, the bustling excitement, and the indulgence of vanity offered by private theatricals generate an even more insidious tendency than that towards petty discontent. The Ecclesford theatricals were abandoned because of the death of the host's grandmother. But the driving desire to act aroused by the theatricals is coupled with Yates's insensitivity to family ties, thus leading him to remark:

> 'It is not worth complaining about, but to be sure the poor old dowager could not have died at a worse time; and it is impossible to help wishing, that the news could have been suppressed for just the three days we wanted. It was but three days; and being only a grand-mother, and all happening two hundred miles off, I think there would have been no great harm, and it *was* suggested, I know; but Lord Ravenshaw, who I suppose is one of the most correct men in England, would not hear of it.' (MP 122)

Yates's enthusiasm and callousness are comical, but the Mansfield scheme indicates that private theatricals encourage rather than check such insensitivity. Lest we think Jane Austen exaggerates in her fiction, we need only note that Dickens, who was an indefatigable amateur actor, resumed on 22 April 1851 rehearsals for a play even though his father had died on 31 March and his little daughter Dora on 13 April. Una Poe-Hennessy's biography records a comment from one of Dicken's contemporaries which suggests that his behavior did not meet with universal approval: "'Oh, Mr. Dickens makes a habit of acting with a dead father in one pocket and a dead baby in the other.'" Jane Austen seems to object not so much to acting itself as to the effect acting has of hardening one's real feelings.

Edmund objects at the outset that to put on a play "would show great want of feeling on my father's account, absent as he is, and in some degree of constant danger" (MP 187). His objection is ignored, but when Sir Thomas returns he himself acnowledges the callousness towards his situation. He determines to try to "forget how much he had been forgotten himself" (MP 187). The party's disregard for the absent Sir Thomas is more understandable, however, than their want of feeling for each other. Julia, Fanny, and Mr. Rushworth all suffer, but their suffering is ignored. The cause of Julia's pain is also the cause of the most overt breach occasioned by the theatricals:

> The sister with whom [Julia] was used to be on easy terms, was now

> become her greatest enemy; they were alienated from each other, and Julia was not superior to the hope of some distressing end to the attentions which were still carrying on there, some punishment to Maria for conduct so shameful towards herself, as well as towards Mr. Rushworth. With no material fault of temper, or difference of opinion, to prevent their being very good friends while their interests were the same, the sisters, under such a trial as this had not affection or principle enough to make them merciful or just, to give them honour or compassion. (MP 162–63)

The theatricals, though not the first cause of the sisters' discord, bring to the fore, giving form to and nourishing, their disregard for one another's happiness and well-being.

The excitement, confusion and discontent lead to self-absorption that blinds to what is actually happening during the rehearsals even those who are not directly responsible for the pain of Julia and Rushworth. Julia's anger and Rushworth's jealousy ought to have roused Tom, Mrs. Norris, and Edmund, and alerted them to the dangers of the theatricals. All are, however, too much involved in their own interests to notice the extent of Julia's suffering and to perceive that her bitterness has a deeper cause than her disappointment at not getting the role of Agatha. Tom thinks of nothing but the theatre, and since Julia is not a part of his company, he gives her no attention.[16] Mrs. Norris is too busy making little economies "to have the leisure for watching the behaviour, or guarding the happiness of [Sir Thomas'] daughters" (MP 163). Edmund is so intent on conflicts within himself between "his theatrical and his real part. . . Miss Crawford's claims and his own conduct. . . love and consistency" (MP 163) that he thinks of little else. The concerns of the scheme so engage most of the participants that they are unaware of the emergence of the destructive tendencies of their amusement.

Ironically, in spite of so much discontent, most of the party expect

gratification beyond the ephemeral pleasure an amusement is designed to provide. The hyperbolic expectations of the participants are again comically expressed in Yates's reaction to the dissolution of the Ecclesford scheme: "To be so near happiness, so near fame, so near the long paragraph in praise of the private theatricals at Ecclesford, the seat of the Right Hon. Lord Ravenshaw, in Cornwall, which would of course have immortalized the whole party for at least a twelvemonth!" (MP 121). Edmund is enticed into acting by the promised pleasure of intimacy with Mary Crawford. Maria sets in conflict the amusement with her engagement, a social form meant to have emotional—if not moral—import. She believes that the theatricals will enable her to establish a relationship of such intimcy with Crawford that he will ask her to break her engagement to Rushworth in order to marry him. Ironically, Crawford has no expectations of the theatricals beyond ephemeral self-gratification. He is the only true, hardened actor among the party.

The theatricals arouse in most of the participants the same sort of expectations as a visit to Brighton does in Lydia Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. To Lydia such an amusement offers "every possibility of earthly happiness" (PP 232). Elizabeth Bennet objects to her sister's going to Brighton because, though not in itself morally wrong, such a visit would expose the girl to the tempations of "a situation of such double danger as a watering place and a camp" (PP 237). The theatricals turn Mansfield Park into a place similarly dangerous. The parallels are further enforced by Mrs. Forster's being no more suitable as a companion for Lydia than Mrs. Norris is as a guide to her nieces.

Elizabeth Bennet's own scheme for pleasure contrasts sharply with those of Lydia and the Mansfield party. She is to travel to the Lake District with her aunt and uncle Gardiner, respectable people who have the deepest concern for her happiness and right conduct. Lizzy expects neither inordinate happiness nor perfect felicity from her scheme: "But it is

fortunate. . . that I have something to wish for. Were the whole arrangement complete, my disappointment would be certain. But here, by carrying with me one ceaseless source of regret in my sister's absence, I may reasonably hope to have all my expectations of pleasure realized. A scheme of which every part promises delight, can never be succesful; and general disappointment is only warded off by the defense of some little peculiar vexation" (PP 237–38). Jane Austen does not deny the pleasure of novel amusements. But like Emma Woodhouse and Mrs.Weston in *Emma*, she places her dependence on "all those little matters on which the daily happiness of private life depends" (E 117).

Such amusements—balls, dinner parties, and outings such as those to Box Hill, Lyme Regis, and Sotherton—seem perfectly acceptable, even though they, like private theatricals, offer only ephemeral pleasure and sometimes generate great excitment and unreasonable expectations. Within *Mansfield Park* itself the theatricals and the visit to Sotherton are juxtaposed to show that all social intercouse contains the possibility of initiating a relationship that can end in wrong conduct. But between the private theatricals and the visit to Sotherton there exists a crucial difference which finally determines why private theatricals are an amusement to be avoided.

The visit to Sotherton is a limited version of the theatricals. At Sotherton Maria and Crawford establish their intimacy; Julia is excluded from the party; Rushworth is duped and made jealous; Fanny is ignored and neglected; and Edmund's infatuation with Mary blinds him to everything that is happening around him. Precisely the same pattern is repeated in the theatricals episode. In the chapel scene at Sotherton the party even establishes the rudiments of play acting by turning the chapel, in effect, into a stage on which they perform. The parallels forestall a condemnation of the theatricals on the grounds of their being the origin of the relationship between Crawford and Maria. Common sense prevents the judging of visits

to estates inherently morally dangerous. The Sotherton visit, however, lasts but a few hours, whereas the theatricals carry on for several weeks. The crucial difference lies in the time span each amusement requires. The dangerous tendencies that emerge at Sotherton are the same as those that reappear during the theatricals, but time contains and limits the tendencies at Sotherton. The latitude in behavior that the visit allows creates opportunities that brevity will not let develop. But the longer time span of the theatricals establishes and strengthens tendencies towards wrong conduct. The impediments of time drop away.

Brevity can make an experience such as the day Sotherton, however potentially dangerous, ultimately benefical. After the visit Maria and Julia should have perceived Crawford's true nature and the faults in their own behavior. Emma Woodhouse at Box Hill, Captain Wentworth at Lyme, and Catherine Moreland at Northanger Abbey all have painful and mortifying experiences from which they emerge with a clearer understanding of their own actions and ideas. It is a measure of their moral obtuseness that the day at Sotherton makes Maria and Julia want nothing but another scheme that will extend the action begun at Sotherton. Later, when Crawford makes Rushworth's house in London his object, Julia removes herself, indicating that she did benefit from the experience of the theatricals. But Maria yet again resumes her intimacy with Crawford. In *Persuasion* Wentworth withdraws from Lyme when he learns that his friends think him engaged to Louisia Musgrove. Her accident in Lyme provides him with time, if he remained there, to establish a deeper intimacy with her than his feelings dictate, so to prevent further misapprehension he leaves. But the promise of establishing such intimacy with Crawford during the theatricals leads Maria and Julia, with Crawford's encouragement, to surrender themselves to the power of time

Before we see how time acts in conjunction with the dangerous tendencies

Jane Austen has shown to be inherent in private theatricals as a form, we should note that the characters have the opportunity to benefit from the time that elapses between the Sotherton visit and the initiation of the theatricals scheme:

> Crawford went to Everingham for a fortnight; a fortnight of such dullness to the Miss Bertrams, as ought to have put them both on their guard, and made even Julia admit in her jealousy of her sister, the absolute necessity of distrusting his attentions, and wishing him not to return; and a fortnight of sufficient leisure in the intervals of shooting and sleeping, 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. (MP 114–5)

By three times reiterating the unit of time here, Jane Austen calls our attention to its importantce. Maria, Julia, and Crawford ignore the truth time should have revealed to them, and they seize the chance offered by the theatricals to exercise their vanity in the intimacy of the theatricals.

The time scheme of the theatricals allows the tendencies towards confusion to gain increasingly greater impetus. On the most literal level the plan rapidly moves from a desire to act, to a desire for a curtain, to a desire for a stage, a theatre, sets and painted scenery; from a family entertainment to an amusement for the county. On a deeper level the power of the momentum is manifested in the increasing involvement of Edmund and Fanny, even though they disapprove of private theatricals. Edmund is drawn both by a

desire to limit the scheme and by the wish to please Mary Crawford. Fanny is at first uninvolved but soon becomes a listener to complaints, then prompter and seamstress. She is at last pressed into acting. The episode is in one sense complete when Fanny agrees to act, because all of the young people at Mansfield have, at some point, consented to perform. Fanny's capitulation is not just a sign of her own weakness or of the power the other people have over her. It is a clear indication of the inherent power of the theatricals themselves, a power arising from the length of their duration.[17]

Sir Thomas' return dramatically saves Fanny from the continued participation for which she seems destined, given the complaints about Mrs. Grant's acting. Although it might appear that Jane Austen has engineered the plot to save Fanny, Sir Thomas' fortuitous arrival in a sense saves the whole party. His presence casts a new light on the situation and brings Maria to what ought to have been an abiding understanding of Crawford's insincerity. Sir Thomas' return, with its clarifying effects, allows the characters yet another chance to examine their conduct and to come to a better understanding of the dangerous tendencies of the theatricals.

Although the momentum of the theatricals is broken by Sir Thomas' return, the feelings to which they have given form outlast the scheme itself. At the end of the novel the narrator remarks of Tom Bertram: "He had suffered, he had learnt to think, two advantages he had never known before; and the self-reproach arising from the deplorable event, to which he felt himself accessary by all the dangerous intimacy of his unjustifiable theatre, made an impression on his mind" (MP 462). Private theatricals create a situation of intimacy, and their time span fixes that intimacy. Jane Austen objects to private theatricals in general, not because acting is evil or in any way morally reprehensible, but because the form of private theatricals is inherently dangerous. If the amateur theatricals in which Jane Austen herself participated at Steventon parsonage had no catastropic results (and one

could argue that in fact they did, being the origin of the relationship of Henry Austen and Eliza de Feuillide[18]) it was, as she remarks of the success of a marriage made out of resentment and without love, "the effect of good luck, not to be reckoned on" (MP 464).

NOTES

1 Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'" in *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 64.

2 *Persuasion*, p. 169, Vol. 5 of *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 6 vols., 3rd edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1932–1934); hereafter references to Jane Austen's works are referred to in the text using the usual abbreviations of the titles.

3 See Stuart M. Tave, *Some Words of Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), pp. 62–63. Professor Tave's comments on the dangers of extreme pictures of human nature are particulary instructive.

4 *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 2nd edn., corrected reprint (London, Oxford University Press, 1959); hereafter referred to in the text as L followed by the page number.

5 Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts," collected in work cited above, p. 85.

6 For more detailed discussion of this interpretation of *Northanger Abbey*, particularly regarding the role of Henry Tilney, see J. K. Mathison, "*Northanger Abbey* and Jane Austen's Conception of the Value of Fiction," *ELH*, 24 (1957); Frank J. Kearful, "Satire and the Form of the Novel: The Problem of Aesthetic Unity in *Northanger Abbey*," *ELH*, 32 (1965); and Robert Kiely, "*Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen 1803," in *The Romantic Novel in England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1972). A. Walton Litz is less willing than these critics to consider Henry Tilney as the object of the author's irony; his discussion of Tilney in his *Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Developement* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 63–66, suggests that Henry's account of the impending "riot" in London is consciously (on Henry's part) constructed from the actual details of the Gordon Riots of 1780. I am inclined to think that the joke is on Henry himself, an

interpretation which lends further support to the arguments of Mathison, Kearful, and Kiely.

7 See Gerard A. Barker, "The Characterization of Sir Edward Denham," *PLL*, 12 (1976); he takes Sir Edward to be an attack on the critic-moralists who insisted upon unmixed characters. His quotations from such critic-moralists as Vicesimus Knox show an awareness of the problem of dissociation of image and meaning among writers with whom Jane Austen was familiar.

8 Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1952), sees a change in Jane Austen's treatment of seduction when she writes *Sandition*: "The fact is that Jane Austen is finally resisting the extraordinary conventional pressure, the moral imperative in effect, to which in her published novels she has always yielded, that actual seduction or planning of seduction must never be represented comically. . ." (p. 244). He remarks earlier in his book that Jane Austen used seduction as a part of the plot "provided she did not have to regard it as actual and achieved" (p. 215). He cites the Jane Fairfax-Mr. Dixon imaginary romance as an example of seduction neither actual nor achieved.

9 Mudrick, cited above, notes that "in the frigid atmosphere of *Mansfield Park*, she did not hesitate to present several stages of the intrigue between Maria and Crawford" (p. 216). One must, however, consider how Jane Austen presents these stages; her boldness was surely made possible by more than the moral chill of the novel.

10 Although Baker, cited above, is correct in arguing that Jane Austen insists on presenting mixed characters, he fails to note precisely how far Jane Austen is willing to go. From her presentation of Henry Crawford we know her willing to draw the character of a seducer and to make him a man with a distinct capacity for benevolent feeling and virtuous action. But she has no intention here—or I suspect with Sir Edward Denham—of imaging the machinations of the seducer in such detail that the reader will be caught up in the pleasure of the projected seduction. Jane Austen distinguishes, in short, between presenting a man's moral character and actually imaging vicious action.

11 Lionel Trilling, "Masfield Park," in *The Opposing Self* (New York: Viking, 1955), pp. 206–30.

12 John Bayley, *The Characters of Love* (London: Constable, 1960), p. 216.

13 See Tave, cited above, and Tony Tanner, "Jane Austen and 'the Quiet Thing'," in *Critical Essays on Jane Austen*, ed. B.C. Southam (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986). .

14 Trilling, cited above, p. 210. See also Ellen Jordan, "*Mansfield*," correspondence in TLS, 23 June 1972, p. 719, which further suggests that it was not acting in itself that Jane Austen disapproved of.

15 See for this argument David Lodge, "The Vocabulary of *Mansfield Park*," in *The Language of Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966) and Denis Donoghue, "A View of *Mansfield Park*" in *Critical Essays*, cited above.

16 Tom is not designedly wicked. His fault is not unlike that which Lizzy Bennet sees in Bingley: "'I am far from attributing any part of Mr. Bingley's conduct to design. . . but there may be error, and there may be misery. Thoughtlessness, want of attention to other people's feelings, and want of resolution, will do the business,'" (PP 136).

17 Although Jane Austen is ambiguous as to whether or not Fanny actually acted, we are certainly meant to see her agreeing to act as a compromise of her principles. Fanny does not yet have the experience and the confidence to enable her to sustain her right judgement. For an opposing view see Joseph Wiesenfarth, *The Errand of Form: An Assay of Jane Austen's Art* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1967), pp. 86–108.

18 See Walton Litz, "The Chronology of *Mansfield Park*," N & Q, 8 (1961) in which he persuasively argues that the novel is based on the 1796–97 calendar, the year of the theatricals at Steventon and the beginning of the flirtation between Henry Austen and Eliza de Feuillide.