




2020

“I shall be most happy to play”: Performance, Desire, and Spectatorship in Mansfield Park

Leah Dooley
Seattle University, dooleyl@seattleu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dooley, Leah (2020) "“I shall be most happy to play”: Performance, Desire, and Spectatorship in Mansfield Park," *The Macksey Journal*: Vol. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications/vol1/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Macksey Journal by an authorized editor of The Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal.

“I shall be most happy to play”: Performance, Desire, and Spectatorship in *Mansfield Park*

Leah Dooley

Seattle University

Abstract

“I shall be most happy to play’: Performance, Desire, and Spectatorship in Mansfield Park” explores textual examples of performance and expression of desire and agency in Jane Austen’s critically overlooked 1814 novel. Scholar Joseph Litvak notes that “theatricality inhabits Mansfield Park before, during, and after the theatrical episode” (Urda 282). Austen’s preoccupation with theatre permeates Mansfield Park; theatricality informs not only action and plot, but the characters themselves. Shown through a failed production of Lovers’ Vows, the flirtatious and bold Mary Crawford, and the performatively moralistic Edmund, Austen shows desire and performance to be one and same. But our heroine, Fanny Price, refuses to perform. How then can we parse Austen’s understanding of desire? In a novel that views desire through performance, what can we say about the audience of that performance? Fanny Price’s constant spectatorship and her role as a reader are tied to her expressions of desire and autonomy. This role of an affected spectator is both active and subversive for a woman. Through Fanny, Austen invites her readers to be active, desiring, empowered participants in the narrative, allowing the reader to see and experience the power of performances of desire. Overall, *Mansfield Park* encourages the reader to rethink spectatorship and readership as passive and instead imagine readers as active through their reactions and desires.

Keywords: English Language and Literature, Feminist, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Performance Studies

In March of 1814, Jane Austen took her favorite niece, Fanny Knight, to the Drury Lane Theatre to see *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Devil's to Pay* (Fisher). In July of that very same year, Austen published a novel so filled with theatrics it reads almost like a play. *Mansfield Park* tells the story of Fanny Price. Adopted into the family of her rich cousins, the Bertrams, Fanny Price grew up on the estate that is Mansfield Park. Among her wealthy and abusive family, her cousin Edmund is her only friend and ally. Soon, the interesting and cosmopolitan Mary and Henry Crawford come to stay at Mansfield Park. Despite her questionable character, Fanny and Mary become friends as Edmund and Mary begin to develop a romance; their marriage seems inevitable. At this point, Edmund's older brother Tom attempts to put on a private play, the 1798 *Lovers' Vows*, to no avail. Scholar Joseph Litvak notes that "theatricality inhabits *Mansfield Park* before, during, and after the theatrical episode" (Urda 282). Austen's preoccupation with theatre permeates *Mansfield Park*, and theatricality, and thus performance, inform not only action and plot, but the characters themselves. *Mansfield Park's* metatheatricality means characters perform desires through different kinds of performances, artistic performances like music and theatre but also performances of social expectations.

This essay will explore the performances of desire present in *Mansfield Park*, first through an examination of the desires and performances of Mary and Edmund. Then I will look at our elusive heroine Fanny Price who is a reader, audience member, and perpetual spectator in both the story and the location of *Mansfield Park*. In a novel that views desire through performance, what can we say about the audience of that performance? Fanny Price's constant

spectatorship, combined with her expressions of desire and agency, is a form of readership and through Fanny, Austen invites her readers to be active, desiring, empowered participants in her narrative.

Questions of desire in *Mansfield Park* must begin with Mary Crawford, a woman who performs both musically and theatrically; first is her harp-playing and second her role in *Lovers' Vows*. Through these performances, Austen portrays Mary's playful and flirtatious nature, her awareness of how public performances shape perception, and her multiple desires. When first arriving at Mansfield Park with her brother, Mary speaks of playing the harp for the Bertram family. This is the first example her how she is a performer, in this case musically. Playing an instrument is one of those ornamental skills garnered by upper-class women during the Regency era. Being able to play the harp, piano, or sing could attract a husband. Mary Crawford is "out," marriageable, and looking to be married, as a young and wealthy woman. However, Mary's harp goes beyond ornamental feminine education; her harp and her harp-playing is used to represent her character and to express coded desire.

Mary's harp and the following performances function as both a stand-in for Mary herself and a tool to express flirtatious desire to those around her. Early in the novel, Mary and Edmund have a conversation about the transportation of the large and fragile harp to Mansfield Park from London. Mary says that once the harp arrives, "I shall be most happy to play to you both...at least, as long, as you can listen" (Austen 56). The "both" here refers to Edmund and Fanny. In her piece "A Harpist Arrives at Mansfield Park: Music and the Moral Ambiguity of Mary Crawford," Juliette Wells argues that "playing [the harp] for Fanny is a way of reminding her of the intimacy that has grown up between Edmund and Mary" (Wells 110). The playing of the harp, both the artistic and public nature of the act, make it a performance with Fanny as the

audience, an audience member who experiences both pain and pleasure at the viewing. Wells also argues for this very tangible effect on both listeners, Edmund and Fanny. The flirtation between Mary and Edmund have begun and desire is embedded in the hypothetical strings, but I believe that flirtation extends to Fanny. Once the harp arrives, Wells points to the language that indicates “posing, not of actively playing” (105). The harp “rather added to her beauty, wit, and good humor” (Austen 61). This shows that “the primary effect of [Mary’s] playing, as the narrator makes clear, is to enhance her attractive qualities, both physical and conversational” (Wells 105). Harp-playing, as a musical performance, helps us understand who Mary is and what she wants. By tying musical performance to flirtation, Austen sets up a novel that will engage with other kinds of performance art and desire.

Through the example of Edmund, on the other hand, Austen engages with the performance of emotion and social expectation. Edmund may not be artistic, but he performs in his own way, with a false outrage. Edmund is one of several characters that decry the theatre; “I think it would be very wrong. In a *general* light, private theatricals are open to some objection, but as *we* are circumstances, I must think it would be highly injudicious” (Austen 117). Edmund here gives voice to the character of Sir Thomas, his tyrannical father, and many social critics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Edmund’s performance of anti-theatricality is not only ironic but disingenuous and hypocritical as he eventually agrees to join the cast of *Lovers’ Vows* and conveniently play the love interest of Mary’s character. Fanny, when alone and through free indirect discourse, conveys her surprise and disappointment that Edmund has succumb; “To be acting! After all his objections—objections so just and so public...Edmund so inconsistent” (Austen 145). Clearly Edmund does not genuinely believe in the dangers of theatre shown through his willingness to participate. But no one at Mansfield Park is immune to the thrill of

theatrics, except perhaps Fanny. And while Austen gives voice to the moralistic, anti-theatrical contemporaries, the novel itself does not condone theatre and performance. Instead, moralistic anti-theatricality is itself performance.

In agreeing to act in *Lovers' Vows*, Edmund performs desire on his beloved through theatre in the same way as Henry, Maria, Julia, and Mary. At the unexciting Mansfield Park, and within the stuffy Regency society, the young people feel repressed and lack the ability to appropriately express their inner desires. Private theatrics offers them the opportunity to express those sexually charged feelings through art. Theatre was considered scandalous because of the supposed sexual nature of the profession and the moral danger it put women in, as we see expressed in Edmund's diatribes. Judith W. Fisher, in her piece "'Don't Put Your Daughter on the Stage, Lady B': Talking about Theatre in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*," points out that Regency society would have seen danger particularly for Maria as the oldest daughter:

Maria's actual participation as an actress would place her in even greater danger, because, as [Thomas] Gisborne asserts, 'the custom of acting plays in private theatres, fitted up by individuals of fortune...is a custom...that it is almost certain to prove, in its effects, injurious to the female performers.'

According to Gisborne's 1797 book *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, one of the primary dangers of private theatrics was "the unrestrained familiarity with persons of the other sex" (Fisher). This "unrestrained familiarity" is shown explicitly through Mary and Edmund, with Fanny as the audience. Fisher also emphasizes the belief that audience members, particularly female audience members would also be in as much danger as the performers: "on the moralists' side of the argument, we must admit that not only Maria, but Julia, Fanny, and

Mary Crawford are all put at risk” (Fisher). And often, as Fisher points out, the line between actor and character and audience blurs, and the feelings blur along with it.

Austen uses this failed production of *Lovers’ Vow* to show our characters expressing desire through theatre. Mary and Fanny gossip about Maria and Julia’s attraction towards Henry, shown through the facade of rehearsals (Austen 149). But this desire is not restricted to the Bertram sisters; Mary and Edmund are equally responsible for acting out desire upon each other and Fanny in how they rehearse. This paints Mary and Edmund as desiring people and also makes Fanny the audience member and receiver of their emotions. One extensive performance of desire occurs when Mary comes to rehearse her lines with Fanny. Mary speaks about her role *Lovers’ Vow* to Fanny, who is not cast in the show:

Have you ever happened to look at the part I mean?...Here it is. 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? Could you do it? But then he is your cousin, which makes all the difference. You must rehearse it with me, that I may fancy *you* him, and get on by degrees. You *have* a look of *his* sometimes...You are to have the book, of course. Now for it. We must have two chairs at hand for you to bring forward to the front of the stage. There—very good school-room chairs, not made for a theatre, I dare say; much more fitted for little girls to sit and kick their feet against when they are learning a lesson. What would your governess and your uncle say to see them used for such a purpose? Could Sir Thomas look in upon us just now, he would bless himself, for we are rehearsing all over the house. (156-157)

Mary’s questions and declarative statements dominate this conversation with little input from Fanny who has consistently expressed a discomfort with acting. Nonetheless, Mary insists that

Fanny rehearse with her because Fanny looks like Edmund, her true scene partner. Mary here tells the reader about an extraordinary similarity between Fanny, her friend, and Edmund, the proclaimed object of her desire, and muses about the scandalous nature of the play-text.

Edmund's expressions of anti-theatricality have shown that Regency England saw theatre as morally corrupting. Now, we see Mary acknowledge the same fear, though with wit and playfulness. The play-text is almost too scandalous for Mary to even name; she refers to it as "*that*" (156) over and over again. The italics further emphasize the shocking and sexual content. By saying Sir Thomas would "bless himself," (157) Mary uses a polite turn of phrase meaning an "exclamation of surprise, vexation, or mortification" (bless, v.1). "Rehearse" is a double entendre, referring to not only to the literal reading and memorizing of lines but also something sexual and erotic, given the eroticization of theatrics throughout the novel. Without Sir Thomas the overbearing father, Fanny and Mary, and the rest of the residents of Mansfield Park, are free to "rehearse" as they please.

"Rehearse" can also refer to practicing (rehearse, v.). Mary, more so than Fanny, is practicing her lines in this quote but I believe she is also practicing flirtation. Both women are. Both women love Edmund deeply and each has barriers keeping her from expressly declaring that love. Mary's practicing of a heterosexual desire (to Edmund) onto a same-sex person (Fanny) is another example of a performance of a social script, with a queer twist. When Austen chooses to portray performances of desire, she is as interested in homoerotic as heterosexual desire. Mary acts out this erotic fantasy onto Fanny, asking "How am I ever to look him in the face and say such things?" (Austen 156) apparently forgetting or ignoring that fact that she will be playing a character speaking to another character. And despite the scandalous content, she is comfortable speaking the lines to Fanny. This display of sexuality is acceptable only because it is

coded through the play, and through rehearsal, much like the coded desire expressed through harp-playing. The rehearsal scene is an opportunity to see the performative side of Mary's personality, to again see her expressions of same-sex desire charading as literal performance.

Additionally, this passage paints a picture of the physical space that metaphorically conveys the women's transition into adulthood. Mary animatedly gestures to passages in the play-text and points to objects in the room. Her concern with the near-by material objects extends to the presence and hypothetical reactions of people who are not literally surrounding them. Mary comments on the chairs they sit in, chairs meant for little girls and school lessons. By using them as rehearsal props, Mary and Fanny transform and cross the threshold into womanhood. They move from boisterous little girls into women with desires. Their expressed, though coded, sexuality makes them unlike those girls who sat in those "very good school-room chairs" (157). Performance then becomes tied to a changing self and changing desire.

Unlike Mary and Edmund, Fanny is an observer. She will not act, or at least refuses to act, during the rehearsal scene and earlier in the novel as well. "I really cannot act," (136) she proclaims twice and then grows "more and more red from excessive agitation" (136) as the others ignore her pleas. Fanny's resistance to performance, and the effects it has on her body, expresses her comfort in that role of spectator. Once the play rehearsals begin, "Fanny began to be their only audience, and — sometimes a prompter, sometimes as spectator — was often very useful" (153). But Fanny observes not only the play but the residents of Mansfield Park; "Fanny looked on and listened, not unamused to observe the selfishness which, more or less disguised, seemed to govern them all, and wondered how it would end" (123). She is not without judgement or opinion. Fanny is a spectator who thinks and feels. Being in the audience is an emotional experience for her. Wells shows how Fanny experiences pain and pleasure in viewing Mary play

that harp. But Fanny experiences pleasure at performance too, specifically Henry's Shakespearean monologues; "Austen demonstrates through Fanny a love of theatre, her knowledge of the 'pleasure a play might give'" (Urda 295). The experience of being a spectator is emotionally complex and active.

I do not call Fanny a spectator in an attempt to deny her agency, quite the contrary. Critics often see Fanny as morally stable though exceedingly passive, a character upon whom fate and good will bestow a happy ending. George E. Haggerty states that "even Fanny can be irritating in her unrelieved passivity" (177). Kathleen Urda, in her article "Why the Show Must Not Go On: 'Real Character' and the Absence of Theatrical Performance in *Mansfield Park*" cautions us on labeling Fanny as merely a spectator, or passive in any way. She attempts to intervene, as am I, in the critical discourse that says Fanny is "little more than an observant stillness" or that she "never speaks her mind" (Urda 296). Urda here is quoting Nina Auerback and Leo Bersani respectively, two examples of the many scholars who read Fanny as lacking agency and interiority.

But Fanny is not a passive character. She does not fail to speak her mind, nor does she remain still. Her abusive upbringing at the hands of elitist and cruel family members may have attempted to silence her, but she takes an active role in the events happening around her, often as an emotional spectator but also in major life choices. A significant example of Fanny's agency is her continuous refusal of Henry Crawford's marriage proposal and when she says "no" to Sir Thomas. Fanny's ability to say no is an intense expression of agency. Henry is wealthy and upper class; he offers Fanny a comfortable, leisurely life, but she refuses because she cannot love him and Henry's character is quite false. That is enough to inspire Fanny to dissent, which she does in the face of Henry's relenting persistence. Beyond her refusal of Henry is her refusal of

Sir Thomas. A terrifying and imposing figure, he stomps into her room and demands that she accept the proposal. She is stupid, ungrateful, every insult is thrown that the weeping and shaking Fanny. Even so “he saw her lips formed into a *no*, though the sound was inarticulate” (Austen 292). As Urda says “Austen does not leave Fanny trapped in the position of silent spectator and spectacle; instead, she shows Fanny struggling to raise her voice” (297).

Understanding Fanny as overwhelming passive fails to acknowledge Fanny’s expressions of agency and refusal in times of immense stress and pressure.

Urda argues that Fanny is like the narrator of *Mansfield Park* and that this comparison allows us to understand Fanny’s interiority and see her agency (299). I propose an alternative analysis—that Fanny Price is an empowered and active audience member like Austen’s audience, us, the readers of *Mansfield Park*. This metatheatricity, us as Fanny, or Fanny as audience to her own story, fits neatly into a reading of *Mansfield Park* as a necessarily theatrical piece of work. Like many Austenian heroines, Fanny is a reader. Her room is filled with “her book—of which she had been a collector” (Austen 140). She reads the residents of Mansfield Park as they perform and rehearse. Her reading extends to her spectatorship and her desire. Fanny is a reader, and a spectator, and a desirer and that is what grants her agency. To be an emotional, affected, and empowered reader and spectator is a way of expressing agency. To be a desiring spectator, particularly to be a woman desiring, is an active and subversive role in and of itself. By writing Fanny as both a viewer and a person filled with desire and agency, Austen encourages the readers of *Mansfield Park* to fill that role as well. She invites a rethinking spectatorship and the role of audience by encouraging us to be empowered, desirous, active readers.

In the end, the reader can see and experience how theatricality infuses itself within the novel and its story. All throughout *Mansfield Park*, characters perform desire through the lens of art, artistry, and performance. The triangulation of desire, art, and performance allows for a variety of desire as well as a variety of methods of expression. And however performative, these desires are certainly very real and felt deeply. Austen's subtle but fierce portrayals of desire and romance invite, necessitate even, an active reader, at a time when even just reading was considered dangerous or subversive.

Works Cited

- Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park*. Edited by Kathryn Sutherland, Penguin Books, 1996.
- "bless, v.1." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/20165.
Accessed 6 June 2019.
- Corbett, Mary Jean. "'Cousins in Love, &c.' in Jane Austen" *Family Likeness Sex, Marriage, and Incest from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2008. Web.
- Fisher, Judith W. "'Don't Put Your Daughter on the Stage, Lady B': Talking about Theatre in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. (Miscellany)." *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal*, vol. 22, 2000, p. 70+. *Literature Resource Center*,
<http://link.galegroup.com.proxy.seattleu.edu/apps/doc/A80370740/LitRC?u=seat38459&sid=LitRC&xid=d49ac0f0>. Accessed 21 May 2019.
- Folsom, Marcia McClintock. "Power in *Mansfield Park*: Austen's Study of Domination and Resistance." *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal* 34 (2012): 83. Web.
- Haggerty, George E. "Fanny Price: 'Is She Solemn?—Is She Queer?—Is She Prudish?'" *The Eighteenth Century* 53.2 (2012): 175-88. Web.
- "rehearse, v." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2019,
www.oed.com/view/Entry/161472. Accessed 6 June 2019.
- Urda, Kathleen E. "Why the Show Must Not Go On: 'Real Character' and the Absence of Theatrical Performances in *Mansfield Park*." *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 26 no. 2, 2013, pp. 281-302. *Project MUSE*, muse.jhu.edu/article/534125.
- Wells, Juliette. "A Harpist Arrives at *Mansfield Park*: Music and the Moral Ambiguity of Mary Crawford." *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal* 28 (2006): 101. Web.