

“My house . . . turned topsy-turvy”:
Order and Acting in
The Loiterer and *Mansfield Park*

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Between January 1789 and March 1790, James and Henry Austen, along with some of James’s friends at Oxford, published a modest periodical they called *The Loiterer*. Its original audience was small—James intended to confine the subject matter to Oxford themes and a primarily male, Oxford audience. But the journal caught on, as the expanding list of distributors on its title pages indicates, and James soon widened his plan to include topics less strictly Oxonian.¹ After sixty numbers, publication ended with information on procuring tables of contents and errata, and with a collected edition in 1790, bound in two volumes. A later edition in 1792 was, presumably, the last anyone thought of the journal until this century.

It is tempting to credit the journal’s lack of genius for its disappearance: James himself “used to speak very slightly about” *The Loiterer* (Austen-Leigh 280). In any case, it is certainly impossible to credit its genius with its revival. Though John Thomas Hope declares truthfully that the magazine was “written with considerable ability, vivacity, and humour” (113), *The Loiterer* was resurrected in the 1960s not on its own merit, but rather because Zachary Cope began exploring the possibility that Jane Austen might have contributed a letter to *The Loiterer*’s ninth number under the pseudonym “Sophia Sentiment.” Cope argued that stylistic similarities and the almost-brotherly, “mild response” to what he terms Sophia’s “impertinent letter” (149) suggest that though “it is unlikely the writer of the letter will ever be identified *with certainty*,” the then 13-year-old Jane Austen probably did compose it (143). Many of the articles about *The Loiterer* published afterwards attempt to solidify Cope’s argument, often by noting further similarities.² However, it is an earlier essay which suggests a perhaps more complex distinction for the short-lived journal: in Walton Litz’s opinion, “[b]ecause of their connexions with the juvenilia some of *The Loiterer*’s essays deserve detailed attention” (254).

“Connexions” essentially equal influence, and though influences are notoriously difficult to trace, Austen scholars have pointed to *The Loiterer* and said, following James Edward Austen-Leigh’s lead in his *Memoir*, “there can be no doubt of [her brothers’] influence on Jane Austen” (Litz 252).³ Critics have in the past confined their discussion of these influences primarily to Austen’s writing “at the

time when that influence was the greatest": that is, to her juvenilia, or her early novels (252). I believe, however, that some of the ideas *The Loiterer* discusses thread through the later novels as well. Her brothers' journal influences Austen's thought even in *Mansfield Park* (written 1811-1813), and, indeed, helps shed light on the difficult problem of play-acting in the novel.

Many critics have addressed Jane Austen's attitude towards acting in *Mansfield Park*. They have often said, essentially, that given Austen's own foray into writing plays and acting in private theatricals as an adolescent, as well as her later enjoyment watching professionals act in London, *Mansfield Park*'s "condemn[ation of] drama" (Gillis 118) seems somehow outside Austen's own feelings on the subject. As I see it, Austen's difficulty with drama in the novel derives at least in part from her intimacy with *The Loiterer*, particularly its twelfth number. That issue's playful elaboration of the nuisances an elderly wool-draper and his family suffer because traveling actors visit their town develops in *Mansfield Park* into a serious discussion of acting.

On Saturday, April 18, 1789, James, as editor of *The Loiterer*, published "several letters, none of which, separately . . . constitute[d] a paper" (3). The first of these letters, the one that addresses theatricals, evokes Austen's novel most strongly. In situation, if not perhaps in tone, it is very similar to *Mansfield Park*. A father named "Abraham Steady" writes it; he is a merchant with three daughters and three sons. One of the latter is, like Edmund Bertram, destined for the clergy. When "a company of strolling players obtained leave to exhibit in" his small town, his children attend, and "have been downright mad ever since" (4). They think they are actors constantly in rehearsal for parts they would like to play, but which their real, rather mundane, provincial lives make impossible. They play kings, lovers, oracles for Macbeth; the eldest son, like Mr. Yates, "rant[s]," and tosses things about; the daughters greet their father at the door with "brooms in their hands, thrice exclaiming, 'All hail, MacBeth!'" and brushing him back out the door, surely much as the Misses Bertram would like to do to Sir Thomas when he returns from Antigua. When Mr. Steady warns his daughters about absconding with a member of the troop—their neighbor has left town with the lead male actor—they protest as good Juliets should that Romeo being gone, "they shall take up with no Mercutio" (5-6). The young people's behavior and the props they need for their scenes, the "crowns, daggers, chains, pistols, and everything of that kind . . . scattered up and down the rooms" have turned their father's "house, which was until lately the most regular, best disposed house in town . . . topsy-turvy" (5).

But perhaps most evocative of *Mansfield Park* is the elopement of one of the Steady family's acquaintances with "the hero of the company" (6). This episode clearly parallels Maria Bertram's flight from Mr. Rushworth and her marriage, with Henry Crawford: he is, since Fanny tells us he "acted well . . . [and] was considerably the best actor of all" and "on this point there were not many who differed from her" (165), the "hero of the company" at *Mansfield Park*, as well as of Kotzebue's *Lovers' Vows* in playing Frederick (*Loiterer* 6). Much as Sir Thomas fears the influence of Maria's elopement on Julia and Fanny (Julia believes the "certain consequence" of Maria's elopement would be "greater severity and restraint" from her father [466]), Abraham Steady dreads the influence of his neighbor's example on his female children: "he expects every day to hear a similar account of one of his daughters" (6). But only in *Mansfield Park* does the realization of Steady's fears—now Sir Thomas's—occur when Julia elopes with Yates, a kind of bombastic Mercutio to Henry Crawford's Romeo.

The problem with acting in Steady's letter, if we can take it for a moment more seriously than it at least superficially encourages us to do, is similar to the problem with acting that Austen elaborates in *Mansfield Park*. In the first place, acting literally makes both houses chaotic. Abraham Steady's is "topsy-turvy"; in order to put on the play at *Mansfield Park*, Tom has to authorize the employment of carpenters and scene-painters, the transformation of the billiard room into a theatre, and the use of his father's private quarters as a green-room, which necessitates the shifting of bookcases. When Sir Thomas comes home, not only are his children abstracted and disordered, but on "looking into his own dear room," he finds candles burning there, "symptoms of recent habitation," and "an air of general confusion in the furniture" (181-82).

Acting creates a specific kind of chaos, however, the chaos of order reversed. The scene in Sir Thomas's vacated study underscores Steady's word choice: "topsy-turvy" or "upside-down" and shows us what we have known all along about the younger Tom: his impatience with and for authority, his desire to displace Sir Thomas and control *Mansfield Park*, or at least its funds. The same desire is manifest in Mary Crawford's not-very-subtle hopes for Tom's demise and Edmund's usurpation of his rights as eldest son. When Fanny reveals to Edmund that Mary was charmed with the idea that he might take Tom's place and then Sir Thomas's, she points out the problem at *Mansfield Park* and gives us a clue to the uneasiness the novel has with play-acting. Mary, like Tom, wishes to hurry the transfer of power by bringing the lower suddenly to heights—making the younger son head of the house.

This is obviously dangerous; it is also exactly what “acting” allows and exactly what the Steady children’s acting fosters. Their father is a woolen-draper by trade, a follower in his father’s footsteps, and a believer in “constant application and diligence” through which, after thirty years, he has “place[d] his children above want” (4). His letter also indicates that he wishes his children to have inculcated his attitude towards work: his middle son, Charles, has been apprenticed to the business, and his daughters take care of the housekeeping. None of the children is in a position of authority; they are, after all, children in their father’s house, dependents on his largesse. However, the characters which they assume—respectively Prospero (himself a father) and the Witches—give them both temporal and magical powers. As *Macbeth*’s witches, the daughters advise and confuse a king, and see his death in the future. Transformed into a father, the son becomes his father’s equal; as Prospero, with the power to conjure spirits and Olympic deities, the son occupies a pinnacle no mere woolen-draper could ever reach. And so, without endangering their mode of living, without behaving in ways which would cause their eviction and therefore their penury, the children effectively empower themselves. They overcome, however fleetingly, a father who circumscribes their independence with “injunctions,” who confines them in his mind to such pedestrian aspirations as the clergy, the wool-draping business, the law, and marriage (5). In this letter, to act means clearly to rebel against tradition and authority, to offend and alarm the father, with all his metaphorical weight, and, as children, to arrogate power.

It is a rebellion, an arrogation, that lacks permanence and refuses responsibility, however, and it is just this that raises questions about the “rightness” of play-acting. The children’s “power” comes without consequences and without risk—none of the Steady children would dare act in their own characters like they do when playing Shakespeare’s parts for fear of the consequences of writing off their father’s values, or wishing him away, or refusing his commands. The Steady children’s personifications allow them to do and to be things which, without play-acting, would be either impossible or extremely uncomfortable for the actors. But even more insidiously perhaps, it also allows them to avoid having to do anything very serious at all. Prospero rants and is lazy; the witches scratch and reject Abraham Steady. The children, however, simply impersonate.

Steady confirms his children’s, and our, sense of their freedom from responsibility by blaming the traveling actors, “the nest of thieves” who has made them “mad,” and not the children themselves for their behavior (6). Gary Kelly suggests this very problem is behind the narrator’s—and Fanny’s, and initially Edmund’s—condemnation of home theatricals in *Mansfield Park*:

Of course the subject matter of the play, sexual seduction and "liberal" social views, is relevant . . . but it is the enactment of the play's love texts without any consequence, or without responsibility for any consequence, that is improper and inappropriate[.] . . . [A] deliberate blurring of the line between life and text is not only being allowed but actually sought after, to the extent that several of the actors confess difficulty or embarrassment in delivering certain lines of dialogue to certain other persons in the play. (39-40)

The chaos that results from the appropriation of authority without the concomitant sense of personal responsibility, especially for truthfulness in one's dealings with other people, is in part the basis for *The Loiterer's* and *Mansfield Park's* anxiety about acting.

NOTES

- ¹ *The Loiterer* begins distribution through C. S. Rann in Oxford; by the end, Prince and Cooke were distributing it in Oxford, Egerton (Jane Austen's future publisher) in London, Pearson and Rollason in Birmingham, Meyler in Bath, and Cowslade and Smart in Reading.
- ² See for instance, Gore, Jenkins, and Le Faye.
- ³ Cf. page 280 (*Memoir*), in a paragraph that describes James's work on *The Loiterer*: "He [James] was more than ten years older than Jane, and had, I believe, a large share in directing her reading and forming her taste."

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