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## The Ideas of Deceit and Lies

"All the world's a stage/ And all the men and women merely players."

-As You Like It II.vii.139

A large portion of the plot of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (Austen, 1814) describes the young gentlemen and ladies of the estate preparing a performance of the play *Lovers' Vows* (Inchbald, 1798). A play full of controversial subjects, it features ideas of love, illegitimacy, a disgraced woman, class differences, and imprisonment. When Sir Thomas Bertram, the patriarch of *Mansfield Park*, returns home from the West Indies to find his children and their friends acting out such controversial ideas, he immediately puts a stop to their antics, seeing "all the impropriety of such a scheme among such a party, and at such a time" (Austen 204). Although throughout *Mansfield Park* the young characters' participation in the theatrics is portrayed as taboo, overly sexual, and improper, Jane Austen is not condemning the theater or *Lovers' Vows*. Rather, Austen uses the theater as a forum through which she makes criticisms on society. Similar to her young characters, Austen is able to approach taboo subjects under the guise of theatrics. *Mansfield Park* examines the weighty subjects of imprisonment, slavery, and sexual misconduct, but does so in a light manner via theatrics, preserving Austen's own propriety.

Fanny emerges the dullest of heroines: meek, quiet, proper, and frightened. She is a surprising choice for Austen, who tends to favor more aggressive, outspoken female leads like Emma Woodhouse, Elizabeth Bennett, and Marianne Dashwood. What Fanny lacks in interest to the reader, however, is more than made up for in the characters of Miss Crawford and Miss Bertrams. Mary Crawford is the anti-heroine; she is equal to Fanny in perception, intelligence, and physical beauty (once Fanny fully blossoms), but the opposite regarding behavior. The Mary-Fanny dichotomy is exemplified in Edmund's regard for the two of them. He finds them similarly attractive although their personalities branch out in such opposite directions. Where Fanny is timid and submissive, Mary is outspoken and manipulative. Mary is sexually overt and obsessed with money and position. Although Mary is the much more interesting of the two characters, Fanny is presented as the central figure to aid in Austen's careful critique of society and the aforementioned controversial topics. She provides Fanny as the voice of decorum, modesty, and respectability in the face of constant impropriety; she is the only one guiltless in the performing of *Lovers' Vows*. Austen exonerates herself from the suggested impropriety of the book by having such a sterile character as the lead.

While *Mansfield Park* centers around Fanny, *Lovers' Vows* portrays a more realistic version of

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who is a heroine and who is a understudy. Fanny waits in the wings and is in service to the other actors, akin to her real station in life. The other characters are the stars acting with unabashed gusto. Fanny and Edmund are the only sincere main characters in *Mansfield Park*, and this is represented in their reluctance to perform. Maria Bertram, Julia Bertram, Henry Crawford, and Mary Crawford, however, all have hidden agendas involving marriage and wealth which are revealed towards the end of the novel. Since they are constantly performing in life, the transition to the stage is virtually seamless. The book parallels the plot of the play; Maria becomes a fallen woman and is shunned by her family and society (like her character Agatha) when she runs away with Henry Crawford. Edmund, true to his role of Anhalt in *Lover's Vows*, falls in love and marries his pupil, Fanny, in the end. Also, the class barrier which Anhalt worries will prevent him from wedding Amelia is indeed what causes the actors of those parts, Edmund and Mary, not to wed.

Paralleling the plot aside, the play is used by the actors as an awkward form of sexual indulgence. Maria Bertram and Mr. Crawford's physical attraction is gratified in front of everyone, including her fiance, camouflaged as rehearsal. Mary Crawford and Edmund are similarly gratified, although their actions are less perverse. Nonetheless Fanny has to witness their mutual attraction and becomes sandwiched between their flirting when they both request her help in rehearsing. In practicing *Lover's Vows*, the borders separating real life and the theater are obscured until they are virtually indistinguishable.

Austen further drives home this point with the structure and style of *Mansfield Park*. The book often assumes the tone of a play script. Austen infuses what appear to be stage directions into the dialogue, as in when Crawford is talking while playing cards (note the parentheses), "You think with me, I hope -(turning with a softened voice to Fanny). Have you ever seen the place?" (Austen 255). Also, characters take on speeches that are essentially monologues. Crawford's exiting speech in chapter 34 is an acted oration, complete with stage directions. Previously in that chapter he reads a speech from Shakespeare, and his words as he leaves the room are Austen's farce of a Shakespearian monologue. Crawford fancies himself Romeo, saying,

"Yes, dearest, sweetest Fanny Nay - (seeing her draw back displeased) forgive me. Perhaps I have as yet no right - but by what other name can I call you? Do you suppose you are ever present to my imagination under any other? No it is 'Fanny' that I think of all day and dream of all night. You have given the name such reality of sweetness, that nothing else can now be descriptive of you." (Austen 348)

Not exactly "a rose by any other name", but it suits Crawford's ego and grandiose manner (Romeo and Juliet II.ii.45).

Shakespeare often removes his characters from society and places them in an isolated setting

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in order to create a focus on individual human relationships and allow chaos to ensue. For example, in *Othello* (Shakespeare, 1604) the plot transitions from Venice to the island of Corsica, and in *The Tempest* (Shakespeare, 1611) the characters are removed from society and washed on the shore of an island. In both cases the drama unfolds in these remote surroundings. Similarly, Austen's use of Sotherton provides an isolated setting in which illicit behavior becomes excusable. The garden scene at Sotherton is wrought with sexual innuendo and misbehavior by all of the young characters except for Fanny. Mary describes a "serpentine course", a phrase that alludes to the Garden of Eden and sexual temptation (Austen 120). Edmund and Mary disappear behind the trees promising Fanny "to be back in a few minutes", but do not emerge again for nearly an hour (Austen 120). Miss Bertram and Mr. Crawford spend the entire day flirting in front of Miss Bertram's fiancé, Mr. Rushworth. Crawford, facetiously referring to Miss Bertram's engagement, proclaims in a theatrical reference, "You have a very smiling scene before you" (123). When the three happen upon the locked iron gate, Miss Bertram wants so badly to go through to the other side that Mr. Rushworth reluctantly walks back to the house to get the key (a rather phallic reference). Once he is gone, Miss Bertram wriggles over the side of the gate per the suggestion of Mr. Crawford. The two run off into the woods, again leaving Fanny behind to sit in the heat of the sun and the latent heat of sexuality.

The hot outdoors contrasts with the coolness of the chapel witnessed in the preceding scene. Here is another episode in which Austen uses theatrics to describe a facet of life; this time, marriage. As the group tours Sotherton's chapel, Julia exclaims to Mr. Crawford, "Do look at Mr. Rushworth and Maria, standing side by side, exactly as if the ceremony were going to be performed" (Austen 113). Austen comments not only on the acting of Miss Bertram in being engaged to Mr. Rushmore, but on the theatrics of marriage in general; of a man and woman playing parts rather than experiencing genuine emotions. While Austen is not condemning the institution of marriage as completely feigned, she is criticizing the fact that often marriage is not about love but rather fulfilling a role.

Austen's extensive use of the theater in *Mansfield Park* is not a criticism of theatrics but rather a comment on human nature. People act, and are expected to fulfill specific societal roles. These roles are constraining and a hindrance to freedom, especially to women of Austen's time. Fanny meets much condemnation from her relatives when she refuses Crawford's marriage proposal. This is not because he is a great man but because she is expected to accept the role of wealthy wife when it is offered to her, regardless of the factor of love. While the phrase "all the world's a stage" is pertinent as much now as when Shakespeare composed it, it especially applies to the decorum-obsessed society of Jane Austen (*As You Like It* II.vii.139). In *Mansfield Park* Austen tames the dueling beasts of theater and life in a masterpiece assessment.

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