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***Mansfield Park* Comes to Life: Teaching and Staging Elizabeth Inchbald's *Lovers' Vows* in an Austen Course**

Misty Krueger

University of Maine at Farmington, misty.krueger@maine.edu

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***Mansfield Park* Comes to Life: Teaching and Staging Elizabeth Inchbald's *Lovers' Vows* in an Austen Course**

Abstract

This essay discusses how I incorporated readers theatre into a senior seminar on Jane Austen and her contemporaries. The article recounts how my students read Elizabeth Inchbald's 1798 drama, *Lovers' Vows*, and Austen's 1814 novel, *Mansfield Park*, and then were inspired at the end of the seminar to take part in a readers theatre production of the play. In order to set up this pedagogical example, the essay addresses the theatrical episode of *Mansfield Park*, the controversies surrounding *Lovers' Vows*, and the ways in which I edited the play and prepared students to create a "little theatre"—to quote Austen character, Tom Bertram—at my university and become their own version of The Mansfield Players. The essay concludes by explaining what students can learn about drama and the novel by partaking in such an exercise.

Keywords

readers theatre, live text, theatricals, drama, Jane Austen, Elizabeth Inchbald, Mansfield Park, *Lovers' Vows*

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While *Mansfield Park* (1814) usually does not rank highly among students' favorite Jane Austen novels, students tend to enjoy reading its chapters on theatricality. These chapters, which close Volume 1 and open Volume 2, raise concerns about private theatricals—ones similar to those addressed in a 1788 *The Public Advertiser* piece, which advised parents to protect the “future and honour of their children” by not allowing them to act in plays, even at home (qtd. in Ford). Austen's clergyman in training, Edmund Bertram, lends a fictional voice to such criticism as he argues with elder brother and theater enthusiast, Tom, that “private theatricals are open to some objections, but as *we* are circumstanced, I must think it would be highly injudicious, and more than injudicious, to attempt any thing of the kind” (Austen 125). What is *their* circumstance? The Bertrams are “gentlemen and ladies” who “have not been bred to the trade” of acting, according to Edmund (124). Here Austen associates fears about acting with anxieties about socio-economic class, particularly as Edmund broaches the reason that “the future and honour” of the nobility and gentry might be at stake. Theatrical performance violates propriety, especially for young women who are supposed to emulate virtue, not the vices many dramatic characters portray. The problem, then, is performance. As Emily Hodgson Anderson notes, backlash against theater “condemn[s] the performance of plays more than the genre itself” (134). *Mansfield Park*'s theatrical chapters reveal much about characterization and plot development, too, for this section of the novel portrays immediate discord between the Bertrams and sets up interpersonal conflict as a result of the proposed staging as well the rehearsal of the play. These scenes foreshadow unforgivable breaches of decorum (e.g., Maria Bertram's illicit affair) that will materialize later in the novel. All in all, the theatrical episode foretells the unraveling of the social fabric that loosely holds together Mansfield Park.

What do students make of the actual play the Bertrams and their friends plan to stage at the family's estate before Sir Thomas returns from Antigua? It is likely students, even most readers, of *Mansfield Park* have little familiarity with Elizabeth Inchbald's 1798 melodrama, *Lovers' Vows*. Before proceeding, readers should know something about Inchbald's plot. Susan Allen Ford provides an excellent summary of the play:

Agatha Friburg, twenty years ago seduced by a young nobleman and now reduced to illness and poverty, reveals to her son, Frederick, that he is Baron Wildenheim's natural son; while begging for money to relieve his mother's needs, Frederick attacks the Baron and is imprisoned. The Baron, wanting his daughter, Amelia, to marry the foolish Count Cassel, sends her tutor, the clergyman Anhalt, to determine the state of her feelings; Amelia

confesses her love for Anhalt, who protests that their difference in rank is too great. Through Anhalt's agency, identities are revealed and the Baron is convinced to marry Agatha; Anhalt's reward is marriage to Amelia.

Surely a study of *Lovers' Vows*' characters can provide students with a lens through which to view Austen's characters, but students cannot reconcile these details without having read Inchbald's play. To fully appreciate Austen's theatrical episode, students should also consider *Lovers' Vows*' theatrical and political contexts. Students' knowledge of Inchbald's plot and characterization, as well as the playwright's role as translator and her radicalism, can help students examine the Bertrams' and Crawfords' contentious resolution to stage *Lovers' Vows*. This context might even shed light on Sir Thomas' decision to stop the play and burn the play texts.¹ While it is not uncommon for modern editions² of *Mansfield Park* to include the full text of *Lovers' Vows*, unfortunately some students never get a chance to read the text that inspired Austen's gang to stage a theatrical in the first place. Others might read excerpts or the full text while reading the novel or after reading the novel. Further, instructors might find it difficult to add Inchbald's play to reading lists due to scheduling constraints or even trepidation about whether or not they want to teach the play. *Lovers' Vows* is not everyone's cup of tea.

In this essay, I suggest two options for integrating *Lovers' Vows* into a course that also assigns *Mansfield Park*: 1) by reading and discussing the play *before* reading the novel, and 2) by staging a "readers theatre"³ version of the play *after* students read the novel. The first strategy allows students to fully understand the play before its appearance in the novel, and further to prompt students to appreciate the parallels between plots and characters as they are reading *Mansfield Park*. The second strategy encourages students to emulate the spirit of theatricality present in *Mansfield Park* and to enjoy the pleasure of performing in a play. I also address the instructor's role in helping students stage a play, and I explain how I edited Inchbald's play text and directed students in a staged reading at a small public liberal arts university.⁴ As my experience demonstrates, readers theatre gives students a chance to experience firsthand the kind of theatricality that excited Austen's characters; to think more about the novel and the play, particularly to contemplate the generic interconnectivity between drama and the novel; and to reflect on how *they* can make both texts—*Lovers' Vows* and *Mansfield Park*—come to life.

Teaching *Lovers' Vows* before *Mansfield Park*

The reading list for my senior seminar, "Jane Austen and Her Contemporaries,"⁵ which met twice a week, mainly focused on prose works, but the organizing concept of the class asked students to examine Austen as an author influenced by the writings of her contemporaries, rather than a mythic stand-alone, singular genius writing in a vacuum (a vision of Austen many students still have). I structured my course around three essential units and three novels, and the last unit focused on religion, female education, and *Mansfield Park*. I added Inchbald's play to this unit obviously because of its impact on the novel, but also because the play fit with the unit's thematic interests in charity, gratitude, duty, and women's education. Students were introduced to these ideas first through scholarship by Gary Kelly, Michael Wheeler, and Anne Mellor, and then through primary texts, including excerpts from conduct literature by Thomas Gisborne, John Gregory, and Hannah More.⁶

While these readings prepared students to read *Mansfield Park*, first they helped students interpret *Lovers' Vows*. This scheduling allowed *Lovers' Vows* to sit front and center in the course rather than playing second fiddle to Austen's novel. Students compared the play with Gisborne's and Gregory's manuals on female behavior (paying attention to propriety and performance) and More's *Thoughts on the Importance of the Manners of the Great to General Society* and *Cheap Repository Tracts*. To facilitate a focused examination of the play, I asked students to write a two-page response to the following prompt:

Read Elizabeth Inchbald's *Lovers' Vows*, and write a response paper in which you explain how the play addresses Hannah More's favorite topics: charity, benevolence, morality (both good and bad), and education. In the response, be sure to consider how the play addresses some touchy subjects: illicit affairs, illegitimate children, and broken vows. As you conclude the response, explain how this play might be viewed as didactic literature as well as unsuitable reading material for a young girl.

This activity prepared students for a lively classroom discussion, especially concerning the final directive in the prompt, which asks them to articulate how the play illustrates the tenets of didactic writings, yet critiques proscribed ideas about female education. Students would revisit issues of female education and morality when they read *Mansfield Park*, but first they examined them in *Lovers' Vows*. Most students were surprised by Amelia's assertive behavior in opposing her father's wishes for her to marry Count Cassel and in openly professing her love

for Anhalt. Also, students were interested in how the play both condemned Agatha's destitute position as the result of her past love affair with Baron Wildenheim, and made her the verifiable object of the audience's pity. Students concluded the female characters offer young girls who might see or read a play somewhat controversial models of conduct, even though both characters have redeeming qualities.

In addition to reading responses, my course included formal student presentations introducing additional scholarship on primary readings. With my approval, the presenter selected a supplemental text, summarized it, shared passages with the class, and generated discussion questions based on the scholarship. A presentation on Christoph Bode's "Unfit for an English Stage? Inchbald's *Lovers' Vows* and Kotzebue's *Das Kind der Liebe*" provided context on Inchbald's "translation" of Kotzebue's 1790 German play, as well as the production and print history of *Lovers' Vows*. For instance, students learned the Covent Garden theater manager first suggested Inchbald translate the play for an English audience (Inchbald 477).⁷

Because Kotzebue's work was popular with English audiences, Inchbald's adaptation was one of seventeen translations of his plays published between 1798 and 1799. Quickly following the opening of *Lovers' Vows* in London, other translators, such as Anne Plumptre, tried their hands at Kotzebue's play and challenged Inchbald's adaptation of the "broken English" (the phrase Inchbald uses in her preface) translation of *Das Kind der Liebe* (Inchbald 477). Bode explains that a 1799 letter in the *Monthly Magazine* labels Inchbald's adaptation an "absolute forgery" of Kotzebue's work (qtd. in Bode 306). The letter writer claims: "Poor Kotzebue . . . has been sadly disfigured; and his mutilated limbs, the *disjecti membra poetae*, have actually been exhibited on a London theatre!" (qtd. in Bode 297). As Bode suggests, it is very likely that Inchbald's confidently dismissive preface, which insults "the dull admirer of mere verbal translation," fueled the reader's fiery response (Inchbald 476). Ultimately, Bode's article helped students analyze Inchbald's preface and think about the problems associated with translation as adaptation.

Longstanding questions about fidelity and originality surrounding the practice of translating and adapting apply in the case of Inchbald. As adaptation scholar Linda Hutcheon indicates, "adapters are first interpreters and then creators," and their own "process of appropriation" often includes "taking possession of another's story, and filtering it, in a sense, through one's own sensibility, interests, and talents" (18). In changing the play's title and modifying Kotzebue's characterization, Inchbald appropriates the former playwright's work to fit a

different language and social climate, and also to adhere to the author's own sensibilities and style. For one thing, the choice of play title as *Lovers' Vows* instead of *Child of Love* or *The Natural Son*—other possible translations of Kotzebue's title—call students' attention to the complexity of translating literature and ascribing new meaning to the hypotext⁸ through an adapter's linguistic choices. Inchbald's title draws on the nature of relationships between people and the promises they make and break, rather than a single figure (Frederick) who is at the center of what Bode calls “the scandal” and the “remedy” in the play (Bode 305).

Beyond the adapted title, Inchbald's *re-vision*, to use Adrienne Rich's term, of propriety reads as controversial in its presentation of the ruined, unhealthy Agatha and the “independent and outspoken” teenager, Amelia—the character that Plumtre objected to the most because she felt Inchbald changed the “artless, innocent” girl into a “forward Country Hoyden” (qtd. in Jenkins 426).⁹ This inappropriateness spills over into *Mansfield Park*. It is problematic for soon-to-be-married Maria Bertram to play Agatha—the character who had an illicit affair with a young baron and then surreptitiously gave birth to his love child, Frederick (who was to be played by Henry Crawford)—but quite fitting for Mary Crawford to play Amelia—who pressures a young clergyman (played by Edmund) to succumb to her romantic advances. Inchbald is not the only adapter here: Austen, too, adapts Inchbald's play to show readers her own characters' desires and faults, as Paula Byrne has noted in her consideration of the play's presence in *Mansfield Park*. The parts they choose, and even the ones doled out to them (in Fanny's case), speak volumes about their personalities and relationships with other characters. We find Mary Crawford is a version of Amelia and Maria will become a version of Agatha.

It is worth asking students to consider why Austen chose *Lovers' Vows* for her characters' theatrical. My class hypothesized that Austen had seen the play and either loved or hated it. Byrne's research on Austen's play-going suggests it is possible Austen saw *Lovers' Vows* in Bath during its 1801-1806 run. William Reitzel speculates Austen might have read an 1801 review of the play, which questioned the play's morality and propriety, as well as its style.¹⁰ He believes Austen included it as her selection because she was aware of the critical backlash against the play. Perhaps, as Avrom Fleishman and Michael Karounos indicate, Inchbald's personal politics interested Austen and added another layer of apprehension to the Bertrams' play selection.

Another possible reason for Austen's interest in *Lovers' Vows*, and the most relevant one for my purposes, hearkens back to the issues I focused on in my unit:

female education, performance, and propriety. Elaine Jordan calls attention to both the play's and the novel's portrayals of "the obligations of patriarchy and its limits," but ultimately argues for Austen's inclusion on the grounds of her "concern" for "the strength and the usefulness of women in a changing society" (146-147). Likewise, Susan Allen Ford asserts that the play "offers insights into definitions of women and the power of courtship and seduction plots, into the role of the clergy, and, finally, into the tensions between parents and children." As Inchbald adapted Kotzebue's work, Austen appropriated Inchbald's play not only to incorporate theatricality into the novel, but also to allude to controversial images of young, powerful women who know what they want and fallen women who have succumbed to their desires. In reading Inchbald's play first, students can gain access to a social model resonating in Austen's novel. It was not difficult for my students to see how *Lovers' Vows* provides a parallel universe for, or a microcosm of, *Mansfield Park*. It became even more apparent, however, after the class staged *Lovers' Vows* and the students talked about their parts and how they re-enacted two narratives: Austen's and Inchbald's.

From Play to Novel and Back to Play Again: Staging *Lovers' Vows*

Beyond teaching *Lovers' Vows*, staging the play with students can offer instructors and students a truly rewarding experience. Early in the semester, I raved about the joys of performing in a readers theatre production at a regional eighteenth-century conference,¹¹ and my students did not forget this anecdote near the end of the course when we discussed Volume 1 of *Mansfield Park*. When one student exclaimed, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could stage the play?" I said, "Let's do it. Does anyone want to stage *Lovers' Vows*?" "The inclination to act was awakened," as Austen puts it (123). Like Tom Bertram, I took the lead in creating a "little theatre" (123) in a university classroom, and soon the students formed their own version of the Mansfield Players. With two weeks remaining in the semester, I abandoned my final lesson plans,¹² edited the play text to fit our one-hour-and-forty-minute class period, managed to squeeze in a rehearsal during one class period, coached my students on readers theatre techniques, and watched in awe in another class period as the class put on the play for an open audience on a May afternoon. Although in Austen's novel Fanny deems the play "improper for home representation," my students found it quite proper for a classroom performance (137).

While courses on the novel rarely lend themselves to readers theatre, the activity of "live text"—a method of bringing the words on the page to life through a performative recitation—occurs in the classroom every time students enthusiastically read aloud a passage from a novel. I regularly incorporate formal

staged reading assignments into my drama courses, but it had not occurred to me to try out this version of live text in a prose-centered class until the Austen course.¹³ Although scene reading is a form of live text that can occur spontaneously during a class meeting, a readers theatre production involves more planning than an impromptu class reading does. As shown in *Mansfield Park*, the director (in this case, the instructor) must consider time, space, availability of readers and management of multiple readers, the selection of a text, reading style (such as vocal projection and “onstage” or “offstage” focus¹⁴), use of costumes and props (if any), and audience.

Published guides, such as *Readers Theatre Handbook: A Dramatic Approach to Literature* and *Learning with Readers Theatre*, can help instructors navigate unfamiliar territory, as these books offer practical advice for working with students.¹⁵ Leslie Irene Coger and Melvin R. White, authors of *Readers Theatre Handbook*, offer a philosophy of readers theatre that instructors new to the activity should find useful. As Coger and White explain, “Readers theatre is an effective stimulant for understanding literature, for developing skills in reading aloud, and for adding to enjoyment into the aesthetic, cultural enrichment of the readers and their audiences” (3). Readers theatre is an “aesthetic experience” that provides an exceptional “way of vitalizing the study of literature, of achieving personal growth in students, and of enriching the cultural life of the community” (8). This “community” has the potential to be broad. It consists of the instructor and students, but it should involve an audience, and if open to the public, this audience might include other university students and instructors, family, and friends.

Instructors should find that readers theatre goes hand in hand with literary analysis. As Coger and White suggest, readers theatre “deepens the reader’s understanding of the text,” for to play a part a student must “understand not only what the author has said but also the structure of the literary piece” (10-11). Before performing in a readers theatre production, students must first closely examine a writer’s style, plot, and characterization—in this case, Inchbald’s first and foremost. They must also interpret how characters interact with each other, and help bring those interactions to life, if not through active staging at least in the audience’s imagination. By performing roles in *Lovers' Vows* after having read *Mansfield Park*, my students had the chance to deepen their understanding of both texts and “become one with [characters]” from the play and the novel (Coger and White 10).

Instructors will likely find students tend to gravitate toward characters for which they bear a likeness or have an affinity, or even love to hate. As I expected,

students chose parts they thought would be fun to play, but to my surprise and delight, some selected roles that seemed to match aspects of their own demeanors. A soft-spoken student played withering mother Agatha, while one of the more outspoken students in the course (one of the two males in the class) volunteered to play the derisive landlord who criticizes Agatha. Certainly, the pleasure of playing a “fun” part appeals to many students. Another student asked to perform Count Cassel’s role because she thought it would be fun to play a libertine fop, and on performance day she even sought out a small moustache to represent visibly his rakishness. The student who first suggested a class theatrical insisted on playing the loquacious and histrionic butler, Verdun, because she found him to be the funniest character in the play.¹⁶ As parts were cast, students became hyperaware of how their theatrical roles overlapped with the characters in *Mansfield Park*. It amused the student playing Verdun to recognize that this role associated her with Tom Bertram, whose judgment she openly questioned. I was pleased, however, to represent Tom, the “manager” of “a little theatre at Mansfield” by directing the play (Austen 123). Given that many readers of *Mansfield Park* love to hate Mary Crawford, the idea of playing a version of Mary became equally entertaining. The student who volunteered to play Amelia stated she disliked Mary Crawford and was not sure she liked Amelia. Though the student professed to be nothing like either character in *real life*, she claimed to choose Amelia’s role because she thought it would be fun. Sometimes casting can unintentionally provide humor. Within minutes of deciding the class would stage *Lovers’ Vows*, all of the major parts had been doled out with an exception: the cottager’s wife. As in *Mansfield Park*, we talked the most unlikely person into agreeing to take the role. One of my two male, mustachioed students agreed to play the role begrudgingly assumed by Fanny Price—a character with whom this same student had developed a love-hate relationship.

Depending on the play chosen for readers theatre, there might be a discrepancy between the number of parts and students present, or between the amount of female parts and the actual number of female students in a course. Because there were more women than men in my class, women played all but one of the male parts. This situation offered female students the opportunity to play strong leading roles otherwise reserved for men. For instance, a student with high school acting experience chose the Baron’s commanding role, and she captured well his authoritative persona. Another female student energetically played Frederick, the passionate love child, who manages to bring all of the play’s characters together by the end. Not every part has to be “fun” or even a starring role, but there are students who gravitate toward prominent parts and perform them well.

While some students will shy away from volunteering for a role, there are surely

minor parts timid students will be willing to play. For example, in *Lovers' Vows*, a country girl, a servant, and a gamekeeper each utter a few words and help manage some of the stage action. My least talkative students willingly took those parts. Ideally, instructors who adopt readers theatre will allow students to pick their own parts, but instructors must also be willing to ask students to take on minor roles. Thus, a readers theatre exercise might work best for some instructors at the end of the semester when they have gotten a chance to get to know their students well.

Of course, finding the time to add readers theatre to a semester's schedule can be a challenge. Without foresight, instructors who elect to stage a play outside of class time at the end of a semester will be hard pressed to find an entire class of students who will comply, for the production would have to be planned long in advance to accommodate students' schedules. In my case, we decided two weeks before the semester ended that we wanted to put on our theatrical, and I chose my class's one-hour-and-forty-minute period as an appropriate time. Due to limitations of classroom space, finding the appropriate place for a theatrical may also be an issue for some instructors. For our "theater" I chose a small auditorium with a large open acting space allowing for students to exit stage left and right; move upstage, center stage, and down stage; and use three chairs as props. Once we settled on a time and place, I created a playbill, as shown in figure 1, distributed it around campus, and invited the entire division to attend the performance. I encouraged students to invite friends and professors outside of English to watch the play, and we found an audience.

LOVERS' VOWS

A STAGED READING

DIRECTED BY MISTY KRUEGER

BARON WILDENHAIM	ABBY HERSOM
COUNT CASSEL	ABI CRUMP
ANHALT	MEGAN MILLETTE
FREDERICK	ZOE ESTRIN-GRELE
VERDUN THE BUTLER	LAUREN BRETON
LANDLORD	IAN GARCIA GRANT
COTTAGER	MONICA BRADLEY
SERVANT	EMILY HASKELL
GAMEKEEPER/FRANK	ALI JACOBS
FARMER	LAUREN KEANE
AGATHA FRIBURG	ALYSSA WADSWORTH
AMELIA WILDENHAIM	CIDNEY MAYES
COTTAGER'S WIFE	GUS FIELD
COUNTRY GIRL	NIKKI GIGLIA

UNDERSTUDY	KATIE MARSHALL
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THURSDAY, MAY 9
3:50 P.M.

ROBERTS LEARNING CENTER 023

MORAL.
HENCEFORTH LET THOSE WHO ALL HAVE SPENT,
AND WOULD BY BEGGING LIVE,
TAKE WARNING HERE, AND BE CONTENT.
WITH WHAT FOLKS CHUSE TO GIVE.

Figure 1: Flyer for Staged Reading of *Lovers' Vow*

Before I could direct the play, I had to edit it. Upon reading *Lovers' Vows* aloud on my own, I found I needed to edit the text to fit within my class period, and to allow time for a director's introduction and for students to take their bows in place of a curtain fall. I soon discovered I needed to cut words, lines, and even minor walk-on characters. To make these changes, I obtained a digital copy of the play, edited the text in Microsoft Word, added stage directions, and emailed students their scripts. This activity showed me readers theatre is truly a mode of adaptation.

In a process similar to Inchbald's translation, my redaction of *Lover's Vows* forced me to look closely at the hypotext (Inchbald's play) and figure out how to create a hypertext (a useable script for my students and a presentable play for our audience). I had to decide what was necessary to present to an audience unfamiliar with late eighteenth-century drama and the context of the play. I questioned how much of Inchbald's language, and at times dialogue, was necessary to convey to the audience regarding plot and characterization. In editing, I first removed punctuation I believed would confuse student performers. For instance, the digital text included a series of punctuation tags of combined dashes and semicolons, and I elected to remove the semicolons. I removed words that seemed superfluous to an audience's understanding of the play. As examples, Frederick feels the need to say "mother" repeatedly in a scene, so I took out a few

“mothers”; the cottager’s wife says “poor woman” a few times in another scene, so I pared those down.¹⁷

Some other linguistic omissions include references to things Susan Allen Ford argues might have made the play read as political or “objectionable.” For instance, I cut a reference to “German dominions” at the start of the play and a line in which Agatha says to Frederick that in a “time of war how often letters miscarry” (Inchbald 481; 485). For my audience, these phrases really had no referents. I also eliminated dialogue between Baron Wildenheim and his daughter that did not significantly further the plot, such as the Baron’s questions about how Amelia slept the night before and the weather. I removed a few stage directions, such as in Act 2 where Agatha is supposed to rise after “having revived by degrees during the scene” (Inchbald 491). I decided not to ask my student to have to act out this gesture repeatedly. Because I chose not to emulate the sound of a gun being fired in a university building in which classes were being held, I cut the direction for that sound in Act 3, and likewise the action of sportsmen running across the stage after the shots. I excised unnecessary characters, such as a countryman who has one line, and the aforementioned sportsmen who do not have any lines. To Act 4, Scene 1, the prison scene, and in Act 5, Scene 1, a scene depicting Agatha, the cottager, and his wife, I probably made the heaviest edits because these scenes repeated in dialogue many plot points already conveyed to the audience. Through edits that might surprise readers of this essay, in a few scenes I reduced Anhalt’s musings primarily to move the plot along in moments where his prattle seemed to slow it down. Contrary to Annibel Jenkins’ thoughts about the Butler, I did not cut any of his lines—even though he might have been a character to quiet down. My most eager student insisted on performing every word! Overall, I tried to keep as much as possible of the characters intact. Attached to the end of this essay is a copy of the edited text with my strikethroughs and directions present. The copy students received omitted the strikethroughs but included stage directions.

At our rehearsal, I gave my students my own bluffer’s guide to navigating stage directions, blocking, gesturing, and vocal projection. I did not ask students to find “period” costume, but a few students wore clothing reflecting aspects of their characters. The student playing Frederick, for instance, wore a military-inspired jacket to show the character is a soldier (figure 2).



Figure 2: Student Wearing Military-Inspired Jacket

One option for putting on a readers theatre production is to ask students merely to stand or sit and read their parts and not worry about “acting” per se. Even though readers theatre does not always include physical movement, I asked students to be mindful of how real bodies bring characters to life. I wanted students to understand how characters should interact with each other spatially and how this movement visually reveals emotion.

This visual aspect of staging *Lovers’ Vows* became salient as students imitated tableaux from Inchbald’s play. The play groups characters in twos and threes to different effects: in pairs, we see intimacy and sometimes discomfort. Take, for example, Frederick’s tender words to Agatha, Amelia’s wooing of Anhalt, or Amelia’s conversations with the Baron, as shown in figure 3.



Figure 3: Students Performing Parts of Amelia and Baron Wildenhaim

In three, we see the cottager and his wife caring for Agatha; or Amelia and Anhalt learning lessons from the Butler. Perhaps the most important tableau comes at the end of the play where the major characters surround Agatha. Earlier in the semester, I showed my students a published engraving of the last scene accompanying Inchbald's text (figure 4), and we recreated its visual appeal by having students flanking a seated Agatha and Frederick kneeling by her. The engraving came to life, thus making the textual elements of the play visible, too (figure 5).



Figure 4: *Lovers' Vows* Engraving of Act V, Scene II



Figure 5: Student Performance of Act 5, Scene

A meeting with my students during the course's final exam period confirmed students gained much from experience of readers theatre. For one thing, they reflected on *Lovers' Vows* as a play, not merely words on a page. At the end of the semester, readers theatre helped students bridge the gap between textuality and theatricality. It helped them think about the production of drama as they worked through stage movement, clarity of voice, facial expressions, and the balance between reading a script and making eye contact with their fellow actors and the audience. Readers theatre helped students see how drama relies on bodies *and* the dramatists' words to depict love, violence, frailty, and humor, and to see

how characters visibly react to other characters. Readers theatre also helped students rethink the function of *Lovers' Vows* in *Mansfield Park* and even the relationship between drama and the novel. Sidney Mayes, who played Amelia in our student theatrical, offered this insight:

When *Lovers' Vows* is taken outside the realm of the novel and performed in a readers theatre, the moral struggles in Austen's text come to life in a different form, as do the cultural relationships between reader and text. Performing *Lovers' Vows* in a readers theatre allowed for the class to develop an even deeper understanding of these social aspects of reading during the late 18th/early 19th century. The acts of choosing parts, reading through the play, staging rehearsal, and performing for an audience all mimicked the actions that Austen's characters took within *Mansfield Park*. They also mimicked the actions of many families and individuals, such as Austen herself, who engaged in the culture of readership and performance so popular in Georgian England. By performing *Lovers' Vows*, we were able to experience for ourselves the complex relationships between text, reader, and author while also forming a deeper understanding of the themes within the play and Austen's text.

Readers theatre allowed students to tear down a kind of fourth wall they first experienced as readers of the play and the novel, and it allowed them to step between the two worlds of *Lovers' Vows* and *Mansfield Park*. They were acting out Agatha and Frederick's reunion and Amelia and Anhalt's new union, while at the same time recalling the pairings evoked in Maria and Henry's illicit union and Mary and Edmund's potential union.

As Susan Allen Ford explains, Austen "involves both her readers and her characters in the contentious history of the play itself as well as the fears and pleasures of play-acting; in so doing, she implicates us in the processes of reading and viewing." In reading the play and the novel, students took part in the "pleasures of play-acting" as they became a part of the "processes of reading and viewing" and then acting out *Lovers' Vows* and in some respect *Mansfield Park*. As an instructor turned director, I found "the readerly audience of *Mansfield Park* must ... read the theatricals episode alive to the complex and contending voices and texts from which Austen constructs her fictional world" (Ford). On the spur of the moment, that is exactly what my class did. Students embodied what Lady Bertram says to Sir Thomas upon his return to Mansfield, "We have been all alive with acting" (Austen 181).

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my students for trying out readers theatre and for a wonderful performance.

Notes

¹ Emily Hodgson Anderson keenly recalls that Sir Thomas reacts strongly to the idea of his children acting at home, and not necessarily the content of the play. Other scholars have offered additional theories to account for Sir Thomas' reactions to the theatrical. See Penny Gay's *Jane Austen and the Theatre*; Paula Byrne's *Jane Austen and the Theatre*; Joseph Litvak's "The Infection of Acting: Theatricals and Theatricality in *Mansfield Park*"; Susan Allen Ford's "It Is about Lovers' Vows': Kotzebue, Inchbald, and the Players of *Mansfield Park*"; Emily Hodgson Anderson's *Eighteenth-Century Authorship and the Play of Fiction: Novels and the Theater, Haywood to Austen*; Elaine Jordan's "Pulpit, Stage, and Novel: *Mansfield Park* and Mrs. Inchbald's *Lovers' Vows*"; William Reitzel's "*Mansfield Park* and *Lovers' Vows*"; Joseph W. Donohue, Jr.'s "Ordination and the Divided House at *Mansfield Park*"; Avrom Fleishman's "*Mansfield Park* and Its Time"; and Michael Karounos's "Ordination and Revolution in *Mansfield Park*".

² The Oxford illustrated edition of the novel provides Inchbald's preface and play text, as does the student-oriented Norton critical edition edited by Claudia L. Johnson.

³ The term is sometimes represented with an apostrophe following the "readers" and sometimes "theater" is spelled as "theatre." I have chosen to follow spelling and punctuation of the two guides cited in this article.

⁴ Students in this course were pursuing degrees in English, education, or creative writing; some students double-majored in English and secondary education or English and creative writing.

⁵ My course title was inspired by a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Summer Seminar in which I participated in 2012 under the guidance of Devoney Looser. I am grateful to Devoney and my NEH colleagues for our wonderful conversations about Austen's novels and pedagogy.

⁶ See Gary Kelly's "Education and Accomplishments," Michael Wheeler's "Religion," and Anne Mellor's *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England, 1780-1830*. Excerpts from the primary text came from the Norton critical editions of *Mansfield Park*, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Sense and Sensibility*, as well as PDF files of More's writings downloaded from online databases. Students accessed secondary sources online or in *Jane Austen in Context*.

⁷ As Inchbald biographer, Annibel Jenkins notes, *Lovers' Vows* was a successful play. It had the second longest initial run of Inchbald's career with forty-five performances.

⁸ Here I invoke the word *hypotext* to refer to a previous text that an adaptation "imitates or transforms" (Genette ix).

⁹ Marcella Gosch has noted that Inchbald actually made her version of Amelia less coarse and less forward (177).

¹⁰ The review calls the play "the heaviest bundle of dramatic lumber ever tolerated on the boards of an English theatre" (qtd. in Reitzel 453).

¹¹ Whenever I attend the Southeastern American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (SEASECS) conference, I perform in the SEASECS Players' readers theatre production.

¹² In the two final class periods, I originally planned to teach materials on nineteenth-century anecdotes about *Mansfield Park* and *Sense and Sensibility*, illustrated versions of the novels, and sequels.

¹³ Students in my Shakespeare and Restoration/18th-century drama courses form small groups, select a portion of a play scene assigned on a given day, analyze the scene in writing, and then prepare a staged reading, i.e., readers theatre version, of that scene in front of their classmates. The combined staged reading and writing assignment are graded and count for twenty to twenty-five percent of each student's final grade. The concept of "live text" is analogous to readers theatre, but live text may also be applied to readings of non-dramatic literature. Thanks to Peter Staffel and Linda Troost for introducing me to this phrase and for organizing an American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies panel on "live text" and tragedy.

¹⁴ As Leslie Irene Coger and Melvin R. White explain in their readers theatre handbook, in “onstage focus” students perform their roles to their fellow readers, as if they were acting on a stage and not mindful of the audience’s presence. In “offstage focus” students speak directly to the audience and intentionally break the fourth wall (76).

¹⁵ While these handbooks tend to focus on students in primary and secondary schools, the advice offered applies to university-level teaching, too.

¹⁶ Jenkins calls Verdun “awkward and silly” and labels his part “far inferior to the other stage devices” (42).

¹⁷ Since sharing these edits with an audience at the 2014 meeting of the American Eighteenth-Century Studies conference, I have thought more about what it would mean to put some of those “mother” references back into the piece. Elaine McGirr encouraged me to keep all of the “mother” references. She spoke with me about her reading of the “mother” scenes with students and indicated the repetition of “mother” amplified the awkward nature of Frederick’s newfound attachment to Agatha.

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