

JANE AUSTEN AND THE THEATRE

Jane Austen was fascinated by theatre from her childhood. As an adult she went to the theatre whenever opportunity arose. Scenes in her novels often resemble plays, and recent film and television versions have shown how naturally dramatic her stories are. Yet the myth remains that she was ‘anti-theatrical’, and readers continue to puzzle about the real significance of the theatricals in *Mansfield Park*. Penny Gay’s book describes for the first time the rich theatrical context of Austen’s writing, and the intersections between her novels and contemporary drama. Gay proposes a ‘dialogue’ in Austen’s mature novels with the various genres of eighteenth-century drama: laughing comedy, sentimental comedy and tragedy, Gothic theatre, early melodrama. She re-reads the novels in the light of this dialogue to demonstrate Austen’s analysis of the pervasive theatricality of the society in which her heroines must perform.

PENNY GAY is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Sydney, where she also teaches performance studies. Her 1994 book, *As She Likes It: Shakespeare’s Unruly Women*, was the first feminist study of the performances of Shakespeare’s comic heroines, and she has since published separate studies of *The Merchant of Venice* and *As You Like It*. She has also published extensively on Jane Austen.

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Prologue

Jane Austen was fascinated by theatre. As a child she read plays, she watched and took part in the family theatricals at Steventon. As an adult she went to the theatre whenever opportunity arose. Generations of readers have observed that many scenes in her novels resemble plays, developing the plot through brilliant, witty, and psychologically acute dialogue. Little has been made, however, of the intersections between her theatrical interests and experience and the six mature novels. At most a notion reigns that because of the weight given to the episode of the theatricals in *Mansfield Park* she was herself – or she became – ‘anti-theatrical’.

This, as I shall argue in chapter 5, is a drastically simplified reading of a complex and assured text. Jonas Barish, authoritative historian of anti-theatrical prejudice (*The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981)), is right to conclude that ‘hostility to impersonation . . . assuredly hangs in the air’ in this novel. But when he goes on to claim that

uncomfortable personal memories . . . contributed to Jane Austen’s defection from the theater. . . . The former believer is not merely giving up her childhood diversions in the barn, she is disavowing them, burning them in effigy, setting them down as forbidden games, (pp. 306, 304)

he is pursuing his thesis in the face of facts. Austen never ‘defected’ from the theatre. In fact, there is a good deal of evidence to the contrary, which, when combined with Austen’s lively interest as a novelist in theatrical modes of behaviour, suggests that she found theatre – not just the dramatic text, but its embodiment in actors on a stage at a particular time and place – a curiously fascinating and thought-provoking experience. In this book I attempt to tease out both the theatrical context of Austen’s writing, and how she deals in each of her major novels with a society that she perceives to be inescapably theatrical.

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Most of this book was written during a Visiting Fellowship at Clare Hall, Cambridge; I would like to thank the Governing Body of Clare Hall for electing me to this privilege – the college and its President, Gillian Beer, created the perfect ambience for scholarly life and work. Several distinguished scholars have provided support, encouragement, and wonderfully useful comments and information for this project: I would particularly like to thank Margaret Kirkham, Kate Newey, and Juliet McMaster, and the anonymous theatre specialist who (along with Professor McMaster) read the manuscript for Cambridge University Press. The staff of the Cambridge University Library, the British Library, the Theatre Museum, and the V&A Picture Library have been admirably efficient and helpful. Special thanks must go, too, to Betty Brown and Ken Hall of Bath, who enabled me to spend a wonderful hour exploring the interior of the old Orchard Street Theatre (now a Masonic Hall). My editor, Sarah Stanton, has been an enthusiastic supporter of this project since it first gleamed as an idea. Parts of chapters 3 and 5 were first presented at Annual General Meetings of the Jane Austen Society of North America, and subsequently published in *Persuasions*; my thanks to the editors of that journal.

My colleagues at the University of Sydney, and the large Sydney membership of the Jane Austen Society of Australia, have enthusiastically followed the development of this project; JASA's President, Susannah Fullerton, was at an early stage a superbly helpful research assistant in tracking down the plays that we know Jane Austen saw or read. My family has contributed not only constant support but also expertise. My husband Robert Gay was a fount of information about eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music; my younger daughter Virginia brought her strong instincts for good theatre and good writing to bear on many issues; and my elder daughter Meg read the whole manuscript in draft with sharp and sympathetic editorial eyes. My profound thanks to them all.

As I complete this book I have an inescapable feeling that I have only scratched the surface of the terrain covered by 'Jane Austen and the Theatre'. I hope these first steps will encourage others to explore further in the rich fields of eighteenth-century drama and theatre, and the ways in which they engage in dialogue with the novels of the period.

A note on in-text references

References to Jane Austen's six major novels are keyed to *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd edn, vols. 1–v (Oxford University Press, 1932–4, repr. 1973); and vol. vi, *Minor Works* (1954, revised B.C. Southam, Oxford University Press, 1975). Page references are cited in the text and abbreviated thus:

Northanger Abbey as *NA*
Sense and Sensibility as *S&S*
Pride and Prejudice as *P&P*
Mansfield Park as *MP*
Emma as *E*
Persuasion as *P*
Minor Works as *MW*

References to *Jane Austen's Letters* are to the edition by Deirdre Le Faye, 3rd edn (Oxford University Press, 1995), abbreviated in the text as *Letters*.

References to plays, unless otherwise noted, are to the transcriptions of early editions on the Chadwyck-Healey *English Drama* Full-Text Database, copyright © Chadwyck-Healey, 1997.