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"A faithful performance": The Gaze of Theatre towards Society in Jane Austen's Novels

Eloïse Wenger

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Faculté des lettres

UNIVERSITÉ DE LAUSANNE
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"A faithful performance": The Gaze of Theatre towards Society in Jane Austen's Novels

par

Eloïse Wenger

sous la direction du Professeur Enit Karafili Steiner

Experte: Professeur Valérie Cossy

Session de Janvier 2023

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INTRODUCTION

As William Shakespeare once wrote: "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players" (2.7.139-140). With this assertion made by the character of Jaques in his play *As You Like It*, the playwright transcends the boundaries of theatre as a confined and limited space, only consisting of a stage that encapsulates the entire essence and the materiality of performing. This idea of performance as not constrained to the theatrical space but in contrary as something that spreads through society appears particularly interesting to explore regarding Jane Austen's work for various reasons. Firstly, several scholars like Penny Gay or Paula Byrne have examined the relation between theatre and Austen's novels, demonstrating the acknowledgeable bonds between the novelist's universe and the theatrical one. Indeed, in all her novels, it is possible to notice from the dialogues, the descriptions of the characters, or even the places in which they evolve that Austen's writing can be compared to the one of a playwright whose universe slips form the pages and widens to become a living material. In addition, the recent staged adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* (*Austen's Pride: A New Musical of Pride and Prejudice*, Lindsay Warren Baker & Amanda Jacobs, 2016), *Sense and Sensibility* (*Sense and Sensibility: A New Musical*, Paul Gordon, 2015) or even *Northanger Abbey* (Robert Kozlaric & George Howe, 2016) seem to reveal a theatrical substance in her fiction. In the same direction, the numerous screen adaptations of Austen's work over the decades demonstrate the visual potential contained in these novels which allows their transposition into a new artistic form to enlarge the ideas already present in their original form. They are not confined to the reading material but break its boundaries and can be expanded to the three-dimensional world of the stage.

This mémoire will explore the relation between Austen's work and the theatrical format in all its dimensions, examining its influence on her novels in order to question the relevance

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of the theatrical material in the conveyance of specific ideas, not only towards the audience of her period, but also to our contemporary time with its own particular context. My main corpus on which I will base my analysis is composed of five of her novels, which I thought particularly relevant to compare because despite their differences in terms of tone, plots or even genres, each of them contains themes and features that are relevant to investigate regarding the ideas of performance and acting. The novels which will be examined are *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1816), *Northanger Abbey* (1817) and *Persuasion* (1817). The decision to not incorporate *Sense and Sensibility* (1813) was motivated by my desire to remain concise and to avoid repetitions that could be caused by focusing on too many pieces of work. Moreover, it is a novel that – in my opinion – offers less obvious examples of theatricality than the others. In addition to these novels, I will also focus on three little playlets taken from *Juvenilia* – a collection of Austen's early writings – due to their visible relevance concerning the theme of theatre in Austen's work. Indeed, starting my investigation with the analysis of these playlets will be a good way to try to understand how Austen uses the dramatic format before expanding my research to her novels in which the theme of theatre is less concrete and needs to be untangled.

Now that the broad topic of my mémoire and the corpus attached to it have been explained, it appears important to have a look at its structure in order to have a first glance at the approach taken. The first chapter will explore the relationship between Jane Austen and theatre, providing firstly a biographical explanation of the relation she maintained with theatre, especially in her childhood, as when she "was aged seven to fourteen, her older siblings regularly organized home theatricals" (Penny Gay 4). This examination of Austen's life will be a relevant starting point to investigate the overlapping of theatre and performance present in her novels. The second section of the same chapter will focus on Austen's early works and particularly on three little playlets all present in *Juvenilia*: "The Mystery", "The Visit" and "The

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First Act of a Comedy". Indeed, despite the fact that some are not even finished, these three texts are extremely interesting to analyse as they demonstrate Austen's interest for theatre as well as its relevance as a tool that conveys information and knowledge to a certain audience. This part could also be useful to create different links between plays, stage directions and the novel format. Therefore, the first chapter is a first entrance inside Austen's world which will help to understand the presence of theatricality within the more mature works that are her published novels.

The second chapter will be the opportunity to address what could be called the 'frame' of Austen's novels. Indeed, this part of the mémoire entitled "The Space of Theatricality" will investigate the various places in which these different novels are set, the central thread of my analysis being the examination of Austen's settings as environments which, from their implicit dramatic nature, will allow the conveyance of performance and acting. However, the first section of this chapter will demonstrate what I call a "displacement of acting" that happens frequently. Indeed, it is possible to notice a revocation of the traditional theatrical stage at different moments in Austen's novels. As we will observe, what would be supposed to be the place that welcomes performance seems deserted to the benefit of offstage acting. The aborted project of *Lovers' Vows* in *Mansfield Park* demonstrates this removal of performance from its common environment. Even though the play is not performed in front of an audience due to the unexpected early return from Sir Thomas Bertram, it does not mean that acting dies with it. Indeed, as Joseph Litvak asserts it, "theatricality inhabits *Mansfield Park* before, during, and after the theatrical episode" (Urda 282). This idea of "displacement of acting" is also present in other novels like for instance *Persuasion*, during the concert in chapter 20 in which the onstage performance is totally silenced and eclipsed by the audience space which contains the heart of the action, with the different exchanges between the characters and the gazes bonding them together. The same kind of displacement appears in chapter 12 of *Northanger Abbey*, when

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Catherine goes to the theatre to watch a play one evening, and after being mesmerized by the performance on stage for the first four acts, the space of acting slips and as she finds herself unsettled by the grave look of Henry Tilney whom she perceives in a box at the other end of the room.

The second section will examine a different aspect of the frame of acting, focusing on balls as spaces in which performance takes place through various forms, whether through the act of dancing, playing music or even conversing with others. Indeed, balls, whether public or private, play an important part in Austen's novels. In the early nineteenth century, they were events in which people needed to show the best version of themselves due to social as well as gender expectations in order to assert the wealth of their family. Young people were usually introduced to society during these balls, and they were absolutely pivotal in the finding of someone suitable for marriage. Therefore, they are events that represent a stage on which people need to act just like in a play. The metaphor of theatrical stage is quite obvious in this context and there are several instances of it in all Austen's novels. There will be a particular focus on the Netherfield Ball in *Pride and Prejudice* because it illustrates perfectly the acting nature of such event. In addition, I will examine the various dancing events which compose the first volume of *Northanger Abbey* as well as the ball in *Emma* that occurs in chapter 38 which also contains a lot of interesting elements concerning the way in which ballrooms convey an atmosphere of theatricality, whether inside or outside the dance floor.

Finally, this chapter will conclude with a section examining the "overlapping of theatre in everyday life". This section will echo what was previously mentioned in section 2.1, concerning the displacement of the act of performing within the novels, adding the idea that everyday scenes can have the potential to become the frame of acting. Indeed, the stage is no longer the main place in which theatre occurs. On the contrary, performance spreads into the entire universe of the novels, even in everyday scenes that, at first glance, do not appear

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particularly theatrical. However, if we examine them closely, the theatrical influence seems evident. A really good example which illustrates that is the visit at Sotherton and more precisely chapter 10 of *Mansfield Park*. In this part of the novel, the Bertrams and the Crawfords are all invited by Mr Rushworth who wants to show them his estate and after a long walk, Fanny is left alone on a bench while Edmund and Mary continue together. After this moment, the central element of the "scene" will be Fanny and the different characters that will encounter her, entering and exiting like in a play. The moment when Fanny waits at the ha-ha demonstrates it in a good way. In *Persuasion* as well we can remark scenes like that. In chapter 10, when she is out for a walk with the rest of her family, Anne catches the conversation between Captain Wentworth and her sister-in-law Louisa while she is hidden from their sight. This moment, therefore, is also interesting to analyse in terms of theatricality and more specifically regarding scenography and how each element of the scene is placed to create dramatic irony and tension.

After a deep examination of the frame of Austen's narratives, or in other words the 'stages' in which her characters perform, chapter 3 will analyse what is happening inside the frame, focusing on the 'actors' themselves, the different roles they play and their respective motivations. The first part of this chapter called "Austen's Women: Accomplishing Gender Performance" will focus on different female characters and examine if their way of performing gender corresponds or not to gender expectations and what are the consequences that result from it. As we can see, Austen's variety of heroines and female characters provides several points of view on gender norms. From Emma Woodhouse to Mrs Bennet, I will analyse Austen's diverse depictions of femininity and observe how their different conscious or unconscious performances makes their characters elevate themselves or on the contrary regress within their extremely codified patriarchal society.

The second section of this chapter will investigate Austen and her relationship with a specific form of theatre: the *commedia dell'arte*. It is possible to unite Austen to this Italian

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genre with two key elements: the notion of comedy and the one of stereotyped characters. Through "the use of distinctive masked and unmasked stock characters" (Katritzky 20), the *commedia dell'arte* genre might have had an influence on Austen's process of writing some of her characters. The stereotype that will be analysed in this section will be what I call the 'handsome lying suitor', defining male characters who, though charming at first glance, hide themselves and their motivations behind appearances of virtue. Therefore, this trope corresponds to characters such as George Wickham, Frank Churchill, William Elliot or John Thorpe to a certain extend. Their respective motivations as well as the way each of them acts in order to obtain what they desire will be examined and compared.

Eventually, this chapter will end on the topic of genuine characters and their bond with the notion of theatricality. Indeed, in order to contrast with gender performance, the figure of the handsome lying suitor and scheme-making and consciously performing characters like Charlotte Lucas, it seems relevant to address the issue of 'authentic characters' who are not inclined to act voluntarily. Analysing dualistic characters like Miss Bates or Catherine Morland, this section will demonstrate the complexity that surrounds the notions of acting and genuineness. This section will also compare the 'theatrical roles' of sincere Austenian characters with Anne Sharp's role of playwright and stage director in Gill Hornby's *Godmersham Park.*

Finally, the last chapter's task will be to understand the place of Jane Austen and her work in the context of the world of performance. Firstly, the question of political theatre will be investigated through the examination and the analysis of several scholars and literary thinkers like Hannah Arendt who perceives theatre as the most political art of all. The second section will focus on *Pride and Prejudice* (*sort of)* and *Austentatious: An Improvised Jane Austen Novel*, two stage adaptations of the last decade which address in a way or another the subject of Jane Austen and her writings. With this final chapter, the angle chosen will allow to

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finish with an opening of the different elements that were developed in the previous chapters into a more concrete dimension, demonstrating the way in which these novels can be perceived as a living material that is not fixed in stone but, on the contrary, evolves, changing shape in order to remain meaningful throughout time and contexts.

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CHAPTER 1: JANE AUSTEN AND THEATRE

Jane Austen is an author whose writings display with a humorous – but no less critical – gaze, the society of her era. Through her lines, the reader encounters a variety of characters whether noble, proud, narcissistic, hypocritical or even ridiculous, whose meetings and interactions with each other can be compared to scenes taken from a comic play. Indeed, despite theories and suppositions attributing "anti-theatrical" dispositions to Austen, which are mainly due – as Penny Gay explains – to "the weight given to the episode of theatricals in *Mansfield Park*" (ix), it seems difficult not to perceive an influence from theatre and performance in her novels. In *Northanger Abbey* for instance, Catherine, who is fascinated by Gothic novels but also reads "poetry and plays" (104), makes a reference to William Shakespeare, quoting lines from Othello: "Trifles light as air, /Are to the jealous, confirming strong, / As proofs of Holy Writ" (17). The anti-theatrical argument seems even more contradictory if we take into consideration the words of the writer herself. Indeed, the most relevant way to investigate in order to find a likely hypothesis concerning the opinion of an author like Austen who passed away more than two-hundred years ago seems to be through the consultations of her correspondences with her close circle. This approach appears more relevant than a hypothesis mainly based on the plot of a piece of fiction. For instance, in a letter to her beloved sister Cassandra dated from the 25th of April 1811, Austen writes:

> "We *did* go to the play after all on Saturday, we went to the Lyceum, & saw the *Hypocrite*, an old play taken from Moliere's *Tartuffe*, & were well entertained. Dowton & Mathews were the good actors. Mrs Edwin was the Heroine – & her performance is just what is used to be. – I have no chance of seeing Mrs Siddons[1]. – She *did* act on Monday, but as Henry was told by the Box keeper that he did not think she would, the plans, & all

[1] Sarah Siddons. Famous actress. Her and her brother John Philip Kamble were the "reigning stars of the London Stage". (Penny Gay, 6)

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> thought of it, were given up. I should particularly have liked seeing her in Constance, & could swear at her with little effort for disappointing me." (275)

This fragment of letter provides clues concerning Austen's attendance at theatres. Indeed, she appears to have a good knowledge of the actors, as she comments on the acting of "Mrs Edwin", saying that "her performance is just as what is used to be" and her disappointment as she was not able to see "Mrs Siddons" in "Constance". In other words, her familiarity with the performers seems to reveal that she has seen other plays featuring them. In addition to that, the fact that she mentions Molière and his play *Tartuffe* demonstrates her intimacy with dramatic pieces of work, even French ones. Moreover, as it will be mentioned later, it is not the only letter in which Austen provides information about her bond with the theatre. With this in mind, the thesis of the anti-theatrical writer appears shaken. On the contrary, as it will be demonstrated in this chapter, Austen's novels have been influenced one way or another by the theatre and plays she has seen. And it is not because some of her characters claim that they "cannot act" (*Mansfield Park* 182), that her work should not be examined through the paradigm of theatre.

1.1 Early Years and Theatre

A first step providing a better understanding of the bond uniting Jane Austen to the world of performance and drama is her childhood. Indeed, as Paula Byrne explains, little Jane was properly introduced to plays and theatre in "1872" when she was only seven (10). This interest by the Austen family for private performances was probably partly due to "the fashion for private theatricals that obsessed genteel British society from the 1770s until the first part of the nineteenth century" (9). In other words, the young Jane grew up witnessing the infatuation of her society for theatre. In addition, she imbibed that love for theatre within her own house, as her elder brothers' ""itch for acting" . . . "result[ed] in a series of domestic productions in 1782-

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1790" (Penny Gay 1). It seems interesting as well to highlight the fact that despite his role of clergyman, George Austen, the father of the family was not against theatrical performances, but on the contrary let his children read various plays "both contemporary and classic" (Gay 1). Therefore, it would be a mistake to attribute any biographical evidence to the episode of theatrical in *Mansfield Park* regarding the fatherly figure of Sir Thomas Bertram and his animosity towards acting.

At the Stevenson parsonage, these private theatricals were not only an opportunity to act, but also to write, as James Austen, the eldest of the family used to write prologues and epilogues for the plays they performed (Byrne 11). Even though Jane was probably not part of the cast for the home theatricals due to her young age, she did not leave the monopole of writing to her brother, as it is at this period, when she was only twelve years old (Steiner 27), that she started to write her own playlets, as well as other little pieces of writing (Byrne 18). Some of these little scenes like for instance "The Mystery" (which will be examined in the next chapter) might have been performed as "afterpiece[s]" following the main performance (*Juvenilia* 415). She even dedicated some of her playlets to her brother and, furthermore, her father, asking for their "Patronage" and already signing her work as "The Author" (*Juvenilia* 69). Therefore, it is possible to observe that Jane Austen's family was rather open concerning the idea of women performing on stage as well as writing. In this same direction, the open-mindedness of the Austen family is perceptible in the choice of plays performed by them. Paula Byrne underlines this aspect, examining their production of Susanna Centlivre's comedy[2] *The Wonder: A Woman Keeps a Secret*:

[2] *Comedy*: A genre of drama or any literary work designed to amuse, appealing to the audience's sense of superiority over the characters depicted, and ending happily for the leading characters. In *Oxford: A Dictionary of Media & Communication.* Edited by Daniel Chandler & Rod Munday.

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> The Austen's family clearly had no objection in Centlivre's comedy of strong, powerful women who claim their rights to choose their own husbands and show themselves capable of loyalty and firm friendship (15).

Thus, it is really interesting to notice the acceptance of strong female figures in their home theatricals as this acceptance might foreshadow Austen's interest in writing strong or powerful heroines like Elisabeth Bennet or Emma Woodhouse.

During these home theatrical years, the two Austen sisters were sent to a boarding school in the town of Reading (Gay 1). Even though Jane was still quite young, she "insisted on going along too" as she could not bear to be separated from her sister with whom she was extremely close (Corley 115). Thereby, from July 1785 to December 1786, Jane and Cassandra attended the Abbey School, which was their only schooling experiences, that "lasted only 18 months" (115). However, this short period of Jane's life is extremely interesting to investigate in the context of this work, as the time she spent at this school allowed her to continue her approach to the world of acting. The main reason was the headmistress who, as Paula Byrne explains, "was notorious for having a cork leg, for dressing in exactly the same clothes every day, and for her obsession with every aspect of the theatre" (12). In other words, Austen's removal from her theatrical-enthusiast family circle was compensated by the passion of Mrs. La Tournelle who would "[enthrall] her young charges with lively accounts of plays and play-acting, greenroom anecdotes, and gossip about the private lives of leading actors" (12). Thus, as we can observe, through the passionate gaze of the headmistress, this school encouraged her students to develop interest in the art of performance and acting, which seems unusual for a girls' boarding school of that era. Furthermore, "[p]lays were performed as an integral part of the girls' education" (12), which could also have been regarded as peculiar. As Thomas A. B. Corley mentions it, there were "evidence that this was more than an ordinary school" (118). One of the main reasons of this hypothesis was "[a]n inventory of the school's contents in 1794"

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(118) after the closure of the school, in which it is possible to remark a wide range of props and instruments that were used for the different subjects:

> There were also terrestrial and celestial globes, "Scenes for Theatrical Exhibition" (obviously of interest to students of *Mansfield Park),* a "magic lanthorn with historical plates, barometer, thermometer, excellent charts and maps, amusing and instructive, uniting every improved system of private tuition and public education (118).

Therefore, it appears that the Austen sisters received an uncommonly open and varied education during their stay in Reading, in which they probably had the opportunity to study a wide range of topics like for instance "handwriting" or the "piano" (122). However, it is noteworthy that, as Corley adds, the school was nevertheless perceived as "socially respectable" (122). The reason why Cassandra and Jane spent only a year and a half at the school was due to financial problems that forced their father to renounce to their schooling. However, this should not be understood as the endpoint of their learning. Indeed, with books and plays accessible at home, Austen probably continued to study even after being removed from school. Moreover, as they came back home, the domestic theatricals might have brought back memories of the school and the enthusiasm of Mrs La Tournelle. Thereby, one might argue that everywhere she went, theatre followed Jane's steps throughout her young years and consequently, had a strong impact on her writing style.

It is thus not surprising if, years later, remains of the performing life of the family are still perceptible in their habits. For example, a letter from Jane to Cassandra dated from the 4th of February 1813 in which she talks about the recent publication of *Pride and Prejudice*, indicates that the family read her novel aloud:

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> Our second evening's reading to Miss Benn had not pleased me so well, but I believe something must be attributed to my mother's too rapid way of getting on: and though she perfectly understands the characters herself, she cannot speak as they ought. (299)

As this letter demonstrates, the acting of the family persists within the act of reading aloud which can be compared to a certain extent to stage performance. Indeed, this practice requires a good diction and a certain knowledge of how to "act" in order to transmit the proper emotion to the different characters who are being represented in front of the audience listening. In addition to that, Austen's critical gaze on her mother's reading skills and the fact that she has a clear opinion regarding how her own characters should sound like while speaking reveals the theatricality present in her novels. It seems like her characters are meant to become alive with on-stage performances and Austen is the stage director who knows how to guide the "actors" who would try to impersonate the living creatures of her own world.

1.2 Juvenilia: The Premises of Performance

After having examined the relevant parts of Austen's biography and especially her early interest in performance arts and acting, as well as writing, it is now time to focus on a concrete work of the author herself. If one desires to study her relation to theatre, a good way is to have a look at her early writings, which are nowadays gathered in a collection called *Juvenilia*. Indeed, from 1787 to 1793, she wrote "twenty-seven pieces in prose" (Steiner 27). The tone of these early works is quite different from that of her novels, as well as more experimental. Donna R. White describes them in the following terms:

> The humor in most of these pieces is strikingly different from that of Austen's six published novels; although satire and irony are present in both the juvenilia and the mature works, the former also contain a linguistic playfulness that appears to be absent in the later works. (1)

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Her exploration of language and literary genres combined with her irreverent tone allowed the creation of several short pieces of works that are worth a look and which already testify the knowledge of the author in terms of writing, even at her young age. Among her early writings, three parodic playlets stand out from the crowd. These three little plays called "The Mystery", "The first Act of a Comedy", and "The Visit" represent the first written evidence of Austen's interest in theatre. As previously mentioned, some of these are dedicated to members of Austen's family, "The Visit" to her brother James, and "The Mystery" to her father. This section will provide an analysis of each playlet and discuss them comparatively in order to investigate Austen's writing style and her relationship with theatre and plays.

If we examine at first "The Mystery", which is the shortest of all her playlets, it is possible to observe Austen's humour as well as her knowledge of theatrical devices and practices. Indeed, this unfinished playlet composed of one act and three scenes entirely evolves around the principle and trope of "stage secrecy" (Gay 2) with the characters talking together about something, while the public is set aside, because the main topic of the play remains – as the title suggests – a "mystery". The very first scene only displays one character called Corydon, who declares a single line: "But Hush! I am interrupted" (71). Thus, from the very opening of her playlet, she refuses speech to her characters, or rather reduces it at such a degree that it is impossible for the spectators of the scenes to understand the topic discussed between them. Moreover, Austen deliberately opens the second scene *in medias res*, with two characters (Mrs Humbug and Fanny Elliot) chatting, without any clue provided concerning the subject of their discussion:

> Mrs Humbug. You understand my Love?
>
> Fanny. Perfectly ma'am. Pray continue your narration.
>
> Mrs Humbug. Alas! It is nearly concluded, for I have nothing more to say on the Subject. (71)

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As we can notice from this extract of exchange between the two characters, an explanation was given to Fanny. However, this "narration" does not appear on stage and is left to the imagination of the audience. In addition to that, more than avoiding the subject with vague speeches, Austen fragments her characters' lines, cutting the part in which the audience could find a relevant piece of information. It is happening during the second part of the second scene, when the character of Daphne arrives on stage:

> Fanny: Then t'was to no purpose that I . . .
>
> Daphne. None upon Earth.
>
> Mrs Humbug. And what is to become of? . . .
>
> Daphne. Oh! That's all settled (whispers Mrs Humbug) (72)

This interaction between the three characters is particularly interesting because, as previously explained, only one part of the line is provided, which, on the one hand is a clear constraint for the understanding of what is happening on stage, but on the other hand, nourishes the curiosity of the public, who tries to untangle the mystery with the small quantity of clues and details that can be found. Furthermore, devices like whispers that Austen indicated in the stage directions add another layer of mystery to this theatrical riddle, as she not only plays with language but also movements. With this playlet, Austen turns the concept of dramatic irony on its head. Originally, this effect places information that some characters ignore in the hands of the spectators, while in the case of "The Mystery", the imbalance of power is at the advantage of the characters. Refusing knowledge to her public, she appropriates herself a theatrical tool and explores the possibilities of interpretations it contains. Another interesting element to point out in the third and last scene is the paradoxical act of Colonel Elliot who wants so much to talk about "the secret" (72) that, when he finds Sir Edward Spangle asleep on the sofa, after asking himself if he should reveal the mystery to him, he eventually decides to whisper what he knows

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to him, reassuring himself with a sentence displaying the entire irony[3] of the scene: "he is asleep and won't hear me" (72). Therefore, it is remarkable to notice Austen's knowledge of comedic tropes and to analyse the manner in which she plays with them to create a variety of scenes and compositions full of irony. Indeed, while she makes her characters evolve around the same knot, each scene proposes a different approach to the situation. As already mentioned, the first scene displays a character who appears alone on stage, while the second scene is a conversation between two and then three characters. The final one can be considered as a mix of the two first scenes as it features a character 'alone' with another one who is asleep. A tension is thus created here as the mystery cannot be revealed to the sleeping character. However, as previously evoked, the character of Colonel Elliot will overcome this problem, not waking his fellow to then tell him the secret but using a very unconventional method of whispering to his ear while still asleep, creating a comical effect.

"The first Act of a Comedy" is another unfinished playlet only composed of a single act. This parody[4] of a "burletta[5] or comic opera" (Gay 2) sets its plot inside an Inn in which the different characters are separated into three public rooms (The Lion, The Moon, and The Sun) without being aware of the presence of the others, providing an example of comedy of situation, as all these characters are on the road in order to meet the others with the same project in mind: marriage. Like it was the case in "The Mystery", this playlet confirms Austen's knowledge of the contemporary theatre of her era and its common features. However, this time, she does not

[3] *Irony*: Typically, the expression of one's intended meaning through language which, taken literally, appears on the surface to express the opposite—usually for humorous effect. The intended meaning is not in the message itself: the audience has to refer to context cues (for instance, nonverbal signals) in order to interpret its modality status (as literal, ironic, or a lie). Where only some members of the audience are able to identify the intended meaning, it can be seen as a form of narrowcasting. In rhetoric, it is a figure of speech and in semiotics, a kind of double sign (*see* double coding). Understatement and overstatement can also be ironic. In *Oxford: A Dictionary of Media & Communication.* Edited by Daniel Chandler & Rod Munday.
[4] *Parody*: A mocking imitation of the style of a literary work or works, ridiculing the stylistic habits of an author or school by exaggerated mimicry. In *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Ediated by Chriss Baldick.
[5] *Burletta*: (It.). A name used in England from the late 18th century for Italian comic operas, then for English imitations of them (by such composers as Samuel Arnold and Charles Dibdin). In *The Oxford Companion to Music*. Edited by Alison Latham.

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focus on a single trope but parodies a whole genre. Indeed, in this one-act playlet, Austen creates a mimicking of the behaviours of characters of Italian comic operas. For instance, the character of Chloe, who is presented as alone in The Sun, apart from a "chorus of ploughboys" (220) – whose presence and role could rather be perceived as extradiegetic – speaks in an artificial manner:

> Chloe. Where am I? At Hounslow. – Where go I? To London – What to do? To be married –. Unto whom? Unto Strephon. Who is he? A Youth. Then I will sing a Song. (220)

This scene is clearly a parody of the soliloquy and the artificiality that comes from this theatrical device, with the character talking to herself and explaining with precision elements of the plot that she obviously knows but that needs to be announced to the spectators in a really unnatural way to speak, in order to allow them to understand the story. In addition to that, her line is then followed by a song in which she repeats the same information she already gave to the audience. This redundancy is strengthened by the apparitions of the chorus who emphasizes the last words sang by Chloe:

> Chloe. And that to me will be fun.
> Chorus. Be fun, be fun, be fun,
> And that to me will be fun (220)

As it is noticeable, the chorus does not have any particular role in the plot but is rather present to support the singing parts. Therefore, their presence underlines a certain artificiality and ridicule in the theatrical genre Austen is parodying. Another example of this artificiality is the scene inside the Moon during which the characters of Pistoltta and Popgun are introduced:

> Pistoltta. Pray papa how far is it to London?

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> Popgun. "My Girl, my Darling, my favourite of all my Children, who art the picture of thy poor Mother who died two months ago, with whom I am going to Town to marry Strephon, and to whom I mean to bequeath my whole Estate, it wants seven Miles". (219)

This long and useless explanation provided by Popgun to a very simple questions lampoons the grotesque ways of presenting a character and background information important to understand the stakes of the plot in theatre. As it is observable from these two moments that were analysed, there is a clear shift between this playlet and one that was previously examined that can be pointed out. Indeed, while in "The Mystery", Austen refused to provide any pieces of information for the understanding of the events happening on stage, in "The first Act of a Comedy", she does the clear opposite, providing too many details that are not necessary. This demonstrates her ability to play with the various tropes and features that can be found in the theatrical performances of her period. Furthermore, the names of her characters like Strephon who is "traditional name for a lover in pastoral poetry" (*Juvenilia* 478), or Chloe who traditionally is the name of "his beloved" (478) are another instance of Austen's knowledge of classical literature.

Finally, "The Visit", which is the longest of her playlets, is probably the one that could be perceived as the most satirical as it is a comedy of manners[6] that exposes to the spectator's humorous gaze the behaviour of characters of the nobility, mocking the etiquette and their way of talking, and contrasting these with absurd actions. This playlet is set in the House of Lord Fitzgerald in which all the characters are coming and gathered for a visit. Two families are represented: on the one hand, the Fitzgerald siblings and their cousin Stanly, and on the other hand Sir Arthur Hampton, his wife, daughter, nephew and niece. Despite the apparent complexity of the dramatis personae, which does not provide information concerning the family

[6] *Comedy of manners:* noun. a play, novel, or film that gives a satirical portrayal of behaviour in a particular social group. In *The Oxford Dictionary of English* (3rd edition). Edited by Angus Stevenson.

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bonds between the different characters, "The Visit" manages to end on three proposals, pairing six characters out of eight, which raises the question of heterosexism that could be assimilated to the notion of gender performance that will be explored deeply in chapter 3. It is also interesting to point out that in the dramatis personae, the different characters are listed in a specific manner, separating the men and the women, like it is the case in "The Mystery" and "The first Act of a Comedy". In this last playlet, the main focus of Austen's comedy is the contrast between the characters who are lords, ladies and sirs, and the situations in which they are involved, which are absurd, especially for people of their rank and social class. Several paradoxes can be observed during the dinner. Indeed, in this scene, there are constant gaps due to the mix between the formality of hosts and guests, and the meals which are served on the table. For instance, the "fried Cowheel and Onion", "Tripe" (66) and "suet pudding" (67) were considered at that time as "coarse dish[es] consumed by labourers" (*Juvenilia* 413). In the same manner, "red herrings" (66) were perceived as "inferior to fresh fish" (*Juvenilia* 414). It is therefore curious and unusual to find such meals served for this kind of party. Moreover, the fact that the formality of the scene is not totally set aside, as the little assembly is seated properly, with "Miss Fitzgerald at the top" and "Lord Fitzgerald at the bottom" (66) – as it should be the case in their quality of "hosts" (*Juvenilia* 413) – strengthens the paradox between ceremonial and casualness. However, not all the protocols are respected in this playlet, as it is explained in the end notes concerning Willoughby's behaviour who proposes: "Come Girls, let us circulate the Bottle" (67). Indeed, the end notes explain that "the custom of passing a bottle of wine around a dinner table after the meal, [was] normally [practiced] among men only, after women have adjourned to the drawing room" (*Juvenilia* 414). Thus, Austen's "The Visit" plays along the spectrum of formality and informality, constantly moving the cursor. Another good example that displays the contrasts of this playlet is the first scene of Act 2 in which the

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characters are all gathered in the drawing room, when the characters want to sit down but realise that there are not enough chairs:

> Miss Fitzgerald. Bless me! there ought to be 8 Chairs and these are but 6. However, if your Ladyship will but take Sir Arthur in your Lap, and Sophy, my brother in hers, I believe we shall do pretty well. (65)

In addition to the gender implications of this quotation in which gender expectations are mocked and revisited, it is possible to observe that, once again, the respectability of the characters is opposed to their behaviour, turning this whole party to a real joke. At other moments in the playlets, Austen's does not even need to use the card of absurdity but rely completely on the stereotypical precious language and way of talking of the aristocracy to create comedy and to make the audience laugh at them. It is remarkable during the discussion between Stanly and Miss Fitzgerald in the second scene of Act 1, when they talk about the incline of Lord Fitzgerald towards Sophy Hampton:

> Stanly. Is not your Brother attached to the later?
>
> Miss Fitzgerald. He admires her I know, but I believe nothing more. Indeed I have heard him say that she was the most beautifull, pleasing, and amiable Girl in the world, and that of all others he should prefer her for his Wife. But it never went any farther I'm certain. (64)

In this extract, the stress is placed on the opposition between the powerful depiction of Lord Fitzgerald's feelings and the last sentence that tries to soften them, probably to parody the etiquette and the restrained behaviours attached to it. Thereby, as it is noticeable from all the different scene that were analysed, Austen's "The Visit" plays with the conventions and the limits of what is acceptable for a certain social class in order to lampoon the nobility and their manners, resulting in a parody mirroring the society of her era.

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In conclusion, what can be drawn from the analysis of these three playlets is the keen sense of observation Jane Austen had, even at an early age. Indeed, despite their difference in terms of focus and themes, these early writings undeniably share similarities, their main common feature being the fact that they are the result of the author's habit to watch plays and to look at the society she is living in. Whether parodying a trope, a theatrical genre or even a social class, her playlets are a mirror whose purpose is to display the comedy that is encapsulated inside certain practices and behaviours of the society of her time. It is also possible to perceive in her early works a certain critique of the artificiality linked to the norms of society, especially regarding gender and social expectations. In other words, this glance at Austen's early writings was important as it will help to understand the manner in which theatre and plays have a strong influence on her novels and the way she deploys them to address subjects and problems that are important to her.

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CHAPTER 2: THE SPACE OF THEATRICALITY

Before discussing the content of Austen's novels focusing on their characters, who constitute an important part of her writing regarding theatricality and performance, it is necessary to examine the different frames inside which those same characters evolve and interact with each other. Indeed, it appears essential to firstly understand the environments which are depicted in these novels in order to, afterwards, analyse their influence upon the characters and their respective behaviour. Therefore, this chapter will have the major task to 'set the stage' and explain the dramatic role that can be attributed to places and environments in Austen's novels. As it will be argued, Austen uses spaces, reinterpreting and redefining them to make them the plinth on which the performances of the characters come alive, sometimes even through the deprivation of other spaces that could be judged as more dramatic than others like actual theatre or concert stages. In other words, ballrooms, gardens, theatre boxes or drawing rooms are environments that turn into a stage under the pen of the writer and acquire in the process a new meaning and value. The second purpose of this chapter will be to understand the interest of these frames in terms of theatricality, and in which way they allow the questioning of the social formation depicted in these writings. As P. S. Baber argues: "The stage is a magic circle where only the most real things happen . . . A truer and more real place does not exist in all the universe" (*Cassie Draws the Universe*). This quote seems particularly relevant regarding the topic of this mémoire, as it highlights the crucial – and nevertheless strangely paradoxical – bond between what happens on stage and in real life, or in other words, between fiction and reality. The separation between these two notions is not as impermeable as it appears at first glance and what happens on stage should not be reduced to a fantasy disconnected from everyday life, as, on the contrary, it is a space that conveys it. As it will be investigated in chapter 4, the theatre does not convey a simple entertainment disconnected from the real world.

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On the contrary, it can be a political device deployed to place under the spotlight societal problems whether during Austen's era or our current one. Therefore, the upcoming chapter will serve as a starting point, focusing on the frame of Austen's novels, and from which the analysis will shift towards the characters and their behaviour within this same frame.

2.1 Playing Offstage: The Displacement of Acting

> Austen looks from the stage of her public art *at* her society, the consumers of that art which mirrors themselves. If patriarchal society – such as that of eighteenth-century England – objectified women such that even the marriage-plot of the ('feminine') novel is a tool of oppression, then a woman who turns her own gaze back on this society is actively deconstructing the authority it claims to have. (Penny Gay 23)

To look or to be looked at. In this quote, Penny Gay displays the reversal that takes place in Austen's novels in terms of representation of performance. The world of her novels confronts the theatrical standards through the removal of the acting stage, or rather its displacement towards other environments, dramatically different from the original one. Indeed, in several novels, Austen plays with the notion of space and the questioning of meanings attached to it. Throughout her writings, the reader witnesses an alteration of the different places depicted. While the picture of the stage becomes dispossessed of its most important feature, which is the notion of acting, other spaces receive a new function through the assimilation of performance inside their boundaries. Therefore, in a certain manner, it is possible to argue that these places become the receptacle of theatricality by proxy. This substitution of the dramatic power is what the following chapter calls the 'displacement of acting'. This displacement that evicts the act of performing from its 'natural' environment creates a tension between real life and the fiction usually attached to the theatrical space. Through the meeting of these two different worlds, performance reaches real life and thus, associates with it, creating through spatiality the

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embodiment of the paradoxicality between realism and acting. Indeed, as previously said, reality and fiction are deeply linked in the theatrical world despite their apparent opposition. In addition to that, the notion of frame is extremely important in Austen's novels because it is an element that allows the audience to enter properly into the diegesis that is proposed to them and, as Karen Valihora writes, "Austen seems to be drawing attention to the frame, her frame, the sign of her imposition of an idealised point of view on us, her readers" (114). In other words, the reader is fundamental in Austen's conception of her writings as those latter are meant to educate her audience on societal questions. Relevant examples of the displacement of acting can be found in *Mansfield Park*, *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*. While, in *Mansfield Park*, the focus remains mainly on the erasure and the collapse of the place of theatricality, or in other terms on the starting point of the process, the two later novels rather stress the direction and the destination of this same displacement as well as the reversal of roles between two opposed but nevertheless connected environments: the stage and the audience. The examination of these two distinctive techniques will allow the questioning of the spatiality of the theatre in its globality, analysing at the same time its deletion from the stage, and its appropriation by the audience space.

The novel that has been the centre of all the interrogations and arguments about the place of theatricality within Austen's writing is with no doubt *Mansfield Park* because of its famous and controversial episode of the aborted home theatrical. Indeed, this particular moment that takes place between chapter 13 and 19 has created great ado and many critics have attributed this element of the plot to a clear despise from Austen towards the art of performance. This is the case for Lionel Trilling, who attributes to her novel, and furthermore to Austen, "a traditional, almost primitive, feeling about dramatic impersonation" (501). Trilling seems particularly severe towards Austen, accusing her to go against the model of thought of the

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American philosopher George Mead who argued that the "assumption of roles" had a major importance in the defining of oneself:

> Involved as we all are in this mode of thought and in this method of self-definition, we are not likely to respond sympathetically to Jane Austen when she puts it under attack as being dangerous to the integrity of the self as a moral agent. (502)

In other words, Trilling firmly perceives Austen as an anti-theatrical whose novel's purpose is to "condemn" (496) the people who are taking part in plays in the name of a certain "virtue" (496). This, however, is not the opinion of Kathleen Urda, who writes that "*Mansfield Park* has a deeply theatrical nature" (282). For her, as it was previously mentioned, "theatricality inhabits *Mansfield Park* before, during, and after the theatrical episode" (282). In other words, for Urda the idea of acting seems to be detached from the boundaries of the stage space which does not have the monopole of theatricality anymore. Indeed, with the cancellation of the play by Sir Thomas Bertram, it is not the act of performing that dies with it, but rather the idea of a single and immutable place that encompasses the entire substance of theatre. A good example that illustrates it is a passage in the 2007 television film adaptation of *Mansfield Park*[7] during which, Thomas Bertram's rejection of theatre appears remarkably 'staged', when he casts the script of the theatrical to the fire (00:27:40 – 00:27:47). In other words, his attempt to annihilate the stage space is a failure, as he nourishes it with his involuntary performance.

Moreover, it is probably not a coincidence that Austen chose *The Lovers' Vows* – a play written by August von Kotzebue – to make the theatrical space collapse on its foundations. As Deirdre Le Faye explains it:

[7] Mansfield Park (2007) LEGENDADO PT-BR. Accessed, 27th September 2022. Youtube link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0i20dzyWXLY

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> This play has been so long forgotten that the significance of its choice for performance in the Bertram household is something we modern readers do not understand, but Jane's contemporary readers would at once have realized that trouble was bound to follow. (241)

Therefore, the audience of that era would have understood Austen's choice better than modern readers, as Kotzebue was "a figure of controversy" (Kirkham 93) at that time. Many contemporary writers reproached him for being overly dramatic and not realistic enough in his plays:

> The chief complaint against him was that he pandered to the public love of sensational plot, created characters who did not resemble human beings as we know them to be, and through excesses of sentimentality, aroused disgust rather than compassion. (Kirkham 93)

Remarkably, the style of Kotzebue stands in drastic contrast to Austen's whom Kirkham associates with Shakespeare, "the touchstone of truth and nature in art" (96). Indeed, what interests Austen above all in her novel is everyday life. The characters she depicts are human beings, with complex feelings and behaviours. Thus, it is possible to perceive in Austen's choice of making the young people of *Mansfield Park* try to perform a Kotzebue play, a revocation of an extremely specific theatrical space confined to the stage and on which the fiction does not depict a certain reality but, on the contrary, remains artificial and does not provide any questioning for the audience. However, it does not mean that her decision should be perceived as a contemptuous gaze on theatre and the art of performance in general. On the contrary, her choice allows the theatricality to expand throughout the novel and to slip from its original frame. Indeed, as it will be analysed more deeply in the third section of this chapter, places of everyday life that, like Mr Rushworth's estate Sotherton, on the face of it are not spaces of performance, transform to become the stage on which the different characters will have a part to play.

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Now that the idea of the displacement of acting through the cancellation of the stage space has been discussed with the example of *Mansfield Park*, it seems interesting to examine the shift that occurs between the stage and the audience space. Indeed, these two opposite environments are nevertheless deeply linked by their relation of looking and being looked at. However, this relation becomes slippery at two moments in Austen's novels, in the theatre scene in *Northanger Abbey* in chapter 12 of the first volume and in the concert scene at the end of *Persuasion* in chapter 20. Before entering into the analysis of each scene, it is important to contextualise them. In *Northanger Abbey*, the evening at the theatre follows a series of events during which Catherine cancels meetings with the Tilneys because of Mr. Thorpe who actively tries to sabotage her relationship with them. Because of that, Catherine is worried that she might lose the friendship of the Tilney siblings and after some hesitation, she eventually decides to go to the theatre as she "was without any excuse for staying at home" (88). In addition to that, she is extremely enthusiastic about assisting to the play and as it is described in the novel, she is not disappointed in any way during that evening:

> She was not deceived in her own expectation of pleasure; the comedy so well suspended her care, that no one, observing her during the first four acts, would have supposed she had any wretchedness about her. On the beginning of the fifth, however, the sudden view of Mr. Tilney and his father, joining a party in the opposite box recalled her to anxiety and distress. (88)

This extract is really interesting as it displays a real turn regarding the focus of Catherine's gaze. Indeed, she is at first completely mesmerised by the performance that occurs on stage for most of the play. Furthermore, she is so captivated that she forgets about her trouble and shame concerning Mr. Tilney and his sister. However, her state of mind and focus suddenly change when she notices the presence of Henry and his father in the box at the opposite side of the

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room. The theatrical space thereby loses its initial power over Catherine's gaze and is replaced by the drama that is happening within the audience:

> The stage could no longer excite genuine merriment – no longer keep her whole attention. Every other look upon an average was directed towards the opposite box; and, for the space of two entire scenes, did she thus watch Henry Tilney, without being once able to catch his eye. (88)

The tension no longer arises from the play but from the game of gazes between Catherine who desperately wants to catch Henry's attention and him who remains focused on the stage performance. And when he finally sees her from the opposite box, he remains cold in his behaviour and greets her without a smile on his face:

> At length, however, he did look toward her, and he bowed – but such a bow! no smile, no continued observance attended it; his eyes were immediately returned to their former direction. (88-89)

This lack of familiarity towards Catherine totally eclipses the rest of what is happening in the scene. The theatre and the play itself are reduced to an element of the background, a setting for the real drama of the novel that happens between the two main characters. Therefore, the displacement that occurs in that particular moment allows theatricality to develop and reach new horizons. The stage is no longer the centre of the dramatic attention, even though in the example of *Northanger Abbey*, the stage space is not completely cancelled like it was the case in *Mansfield Park*. More than a mere extension of the theatrical space, the reader witnesses a transfer of acting and dramaturgy from the original stage to a new metaphorical one, leaving the first disembodied and empty.

A very similar moment can be found in *Persuasion*, in chapter 20, during the concert "patronised by Lady Dalrymple" (216). This moment is particularly relevant to examine as an

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instance of displacement of acting as the on-stage performance that takes place in this chapter receives a similar treatment to the one in *Northanger Abbey* that was analysed above. The tension linked to the gazes is even more present in this example, as this time, there are more characters involved. In *Northanger Abbey*, the tension remained between Catherine and Henry, who were looking at each other from their respective theatre box and the stage was grabbing her attention for almost the entire performance. In the concert scene of *Persuasion*, the music is totally set aside, if forgetting the moment when Anne translates the Italian lyrics to Sir William Elliot. Moreover, the narration focuses on several characters talking to each other, some of them even making comments about other people present in the room while looking at them. It is the case of Sir Walter Elliot and Lady Dalrymple who have a conversation about Captain Wentworth, calling him respectively "[a] very well-looking man" and "a very fine young man" (226). This comment from Anne's father displays his hypocrisy and the importance he attributes to appearances. Now that Captain Wentworth's social status has elevated, he is no longer perceived by Sir Walter Elliot in the same way as seven years ago, when he was strictly against the match between him and his daughter. His vanity is also easily perceived just before the concert when he welcomes Lady Dalrymple:

> [T]he entrance door opened again, and the very party appeared for whom they were waiting. 'Lady Dalrymple, Lady Dalrymple', was the rejoicing sound; and with all the eagerness compatible with anxious elegance, Sir Walter and his two ladies stepped forward to meet her. (221)

This extract demonstrates that the music concert is clearly not the only performance that will be seen during the evening. The urge of the Elliots to make a good impression to Lady Dalrymple due to her higher social status is also put in contrast with Anne's genuine behaviour as she thinks that Captain Wentworth "must love her" (224) after telling her that "a man does not recover from such a devotion of heart to such a woman" (219), when they were discussing

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Captain Benwick's inclination for Louisa that he judged too sudden after the death of his fiancée. The contrast is clearly exposed through the comparison between both Elliot sisters: "Very, very happy were both Elizabeth and Anne Elliot as they walked in . . . the origin of one all selfish vanity, of the other all generous attachment" (222). Anne is, indeed, far from the artificiality of her sister. However, another character that is defined by his acting skills and his plots is William Elliot. At this moment, Miss Smith has not yet revealed the truth about his character, but it is already noticeable that he is playing a part and does all his possible to stay close to Anne:

> The party was divided and disposed of on two contiguous benches: Anne was among those on the foremost, and Mr Elliot had manoeuvred so well, with the assistance of his friend Colonel Wallis, as to have a seat by her. (224)

In addition to the fact that he tries to keep her close to him, he clearly interferes when he sees her talking with Captain Wentworth during the break after the first act: "He begged her pardon, but she must be applied to, to explain Italian again" (229). Again, the main performance does not happen on stage but within the public and all the different characters plays their own part.

It seems interesting to demonstrate the idea of the displacement of acting through a more visual example in order to understand how Austen's writing can be adapted to another format and especially a visual one. In the 2007 television film adaptation of *Persuasion*[8] directed by Adrian Shergold, it is possible to remark that with the use of different cinematographic devices, the film follows Austen's shift from the stage performance to focus on the audience. More than a simple switch, this adaptation revokes the stage performance in a similar way than in *Mansfield Park*. Indeed, at the beginning of the scene, the camera follows the characters

[8] Lady Darlymple's concert – *Persuasion* (2007). Accessed, 5th October 2022. Youtube link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGNN_LMbwP0

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entering the concert room while the musicians can be heard, tuning their instrument, while nevertheless remaining off screen for a long time before a short appearance in the lower left part of the shot. It is followed by a rather long shot of twenty seconds in which the characters sit down at their places. This shot itself provides a lot of details concerning the characters and who they are. At first, Anne appears in the foreground, looking behind her, trying to see Captain Wentworth. She is quickly called out by her neighbour Mr Elliot who after a passing glimpse behind him tries to grab her attention. At this moment, the focal length of the lens is really short, as apart from Anne and Mr Elliot, all the characters in the background are blurry. However, the focus suddenly changes and the characters in the background, like Elizabeth who is looking at Lady Dalrymple and puts herself forward, probably to be seen, become clear while the others turn blurry. This change of focus is particularly clever as it displays the temper and nature of the two sisters, one most of the time left behind while the other does all she can to remain at the centre of the attention. It is then followed by a tracking shot showing the audience, stopping in front of Captain Wentworth with a severe face. Once again, the stage is forgotten for the benefit of the spectators, the musicians reappearing only in the next shot. Nevertheless, they remain in the inferior third of the shot, leaving the space for the public. But before the orchestra may play the first notes of the Symphony no. 25 in G minor by Mozart, Captain Wentworth stands up and leaves the room, quickly followed by Anne who runs after him, leaving the performance as the doors of the room close behind her. As it is observable, this scene is slightly different from the novel, with Captain Wentworth leaving before the end of the first act and Anne following him out of the concert room to ask him the reason of his early departure. However, it seems that the most important elements and in particular the revocation of the stage in favour of the audience are transposed to the cinematographic format. The artificiality of characters like Elizabeth, who tries to outshine everybody is also well presented, which demonstrates a displacement of acting from its original space towards the spectatorial space. In

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this case, Austen displays to the gaze of the reader the behaviour of a social class that absolutely wants to be recognised and praised by others. The aim for such people's attendance of social events is not as much to see, as to be seen.

Thereby, all these examples of displacements of acting demonstrate Austen's faculty to play with the boundaries of 'fiction and reality' and to gather these two apparently opposed notions. The theatrical environment largely represented by the image of the stage here widens, slips and develops into new forms and questions the perception of artificiality usually linked to acting and therefore to the theatre. This analysis seems to demonstrate that the purpose of Austen's change of focus is not to annihilate theatrical performance like some critics of *Mansfield Park* might suggest, but to use it in a different manner, in order to, on the contrary, provide a larger spectrum of acting, that is no longer confined to the boundaries of the stage, putting stress on other environments inside which the notion of theatricality is displaced.

2.2 The Ballroom as the Display of Public Performance

If there is one special environment in Austen's novels that possesses an undeniable theatrical substance, it is with no doubt the ballroom. Meaghan Malone pithily demonstrates the bond between the ballroom space and the dances performed inside it, and on-stage performance:

> To dance'' meant ''to be watched''— by one's partner, by fellow dancers, and by Austen's all-seeing chorus of onlookers. Through dance, men and women performed to these spectators, regulating their bodies according to social expectations expressed and enforced through these multiple gazes. (434)

The key word here is the word 'gaze'. Indeed, like the connection between the public and the stage discussed previously, the dancing environment encloses two poles: the dancers who are watched, and the spectators of the scene who are the ones watching. Therefore, it is noticeable

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that this complementary relationship is once more at the centre of the question. Focalising on the dances, the music and the gender implications attached to their performance, this section will examine in which manner the transposition of theatrical features into the ballroom environment does provide a new understanding of the codes and social behaviours of Austen's era.

The first element that needs to be investigated is the set of rules and practices that were common during balls of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century. Before anything else, it seems important to point out that Austen's novels contain many different instances of balls, with their respective protocol and distinctions:

> private London parties and balls . . . public dances at the Bath Assembly Rooms, such as those that Catherine Morland attends; a gentleman's private country house ball, such as that given by Mr. Bingley at Netherfield; and informal family dances, held after dinner to the playing of one amateur musician, such as those held in the Musgrove's parlor. (Thompson 1-2)

Therefore, the etiquette was not the same for all these events, which were extremely codified as we will observe later. The main object of interest of all these assemblies were obviously the dances which, just like the ball itself "were conducted with great formality" (Thompson 4). An important type of dance in Austen's novel is the country dance that her heroines seem to "enjoy" (2). These dances became indeed very popular after the publication of "John Playford's *The English Dancing Master* in 1651" (2). It is a manual that taught English country dances. This kind of work was important because, as Molly Engelhardt points out, "Dance instruction was included as a means of differentiating peasant dancing from court and inculcating stability and upward movement into court life" (24-25). In other words, dance was a manner to 'perform' a certain character or social status. Other manuals of that kind like, for instance, Thomas Wilson's *An analysis of country dancing* published in 1808 would not only talk about the dances

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themselves but also about the moral rules attached to them. At the end of his manual, a section entitled "Etiquette of The Ball Room" (133) provides several rules that must be followed during a ball, whether public or private. One of them, for instance, concerns the dancers as being part of a group: "It is a great breach of good manners for any couple to leave a dance before it is finished" (137). Indeed, it is important to understand that, as Thompson explains, "[b]y the late eighteenth century, most country dances were performed in a "longways" set for five to eight couples, with partners standing opposite each other" (2). Therefore, one can easily observe that dancing was not about individuals, but once again about a group of people, all bonded together. Indeed, some couples would remain extremely passive while waiting for the original first couple to "[work] its way back to the "top" or the beginning of the set" (2) before being allowed to leave the dancefloor. This means that even during a dance, the different roles and norms are extremely codified, like in society. Moreover, the titles and rank of the participants would play a major role in the running of the dance. For instance, "the most important lady present—distinguished by rank, debutante, or bridal status—opened the ball by dancing at the top of the first set in the room" (4). This rule can be perceived in *Emma* during the ball scene. Though Emma is used to be the lady of the highest rank in Highbury, she must leave the lead to Mrs. Elton, as she is newlywed to Mr. Elton:

> Emma must submit to stand second to Mrs. Elton, though she had always considered the ball as peculiarly for her. It was almost enough to make her think of marrying. / Mrs. Elton had undoubtedly the advantage, at this time, in vanity completely gratified (305)

Emma's reaction to the loss of her privileged social status demonstrates the importance it has for her. The very first sentence of the novel describes her as a "handsome, clever, rich, with a comfortable home" (7). Thus, from the beginning, she is defined by her social status and her wealth. Moreover, as she tries throughout the novel to find a good match for her friend Harriet,

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devaluating Robert Martin whom she finds not her worth, she displays her knowledge of society and of how to play within its frame.

In *Northanger Abbey*, the codification of the dances and the ceremonial of the dancing space become the subject of derision. Molly Engelhardt points out Tilney's behavior saying that, "Henry Tilney does his own parodying of dance manners during his first encounter with the social neophyte Catherine Morland at the public assembly in Bath" (38). Just like Emma Woodhouse, Mr. Tilney has great knowledge of conventions. He displays it, for example, the first time he meets Catherine and tries to chit chat on some superficial topics of conversation:

> I have hitherto been very remiss, madam, in the proper attentions of a partner here; I have not yet asked you how long you have been in Bath; whether you were ever here before; whether you have been at the Upper Rooms, the theatre, and the concert; and how you like the place altogether. I have been very negligent – but are you now at leisure to satisfy me in these particulars? If you are I will begin directly. (25)

In this extract, he mocks the ridiculous superficiality and the repeatability of the conversations that dance partners share during dances, which suggests that he does not like to play the part that society attributes him. Therefore, the great difference between Henry Tilney and Emma Woodhouse regarding conventions is how they react to them. While Emma uses these conventions to maintain her social position or to improve her friend's, Tilney mocks them, creating through the process of parodying a confusion in the mind of Catherine who is a spectator as well as a first-time visitor in Bath and its entertainment scenes. Indeed, as Engelhardt continues:

> "Tilney's mock-seriousness concerning Mrs. Allen's question about muslin is so exaggerated that Catherine has trouble differentiating the performance from the real, the fop from the gentleman" (38)

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Henry's acting skills create a tension in Catherine's perception of him. She is not capable of knowing when he is being serious or not, remaining constantly in a state of uncertainty towards him. Thus, this example demonstrates the performing aspect of the ballroom. The permanent codes and rules do not leave a space of freedom to the characters. They must stick to them if they want to keep their social status and reputation intact. Otherwise, they risk to be perceived unsuitable for any potential partner in life.

Despite the masculine dominance that one might assume concerning gender and dances during Austen's time, the ballroom was a place in which the norms and expectations diverged from the ones in other environments and were the traditional dichotomised masculine and female roles were reversed. In her essay "Jane Austen's Balls: Emma's Dance of Masculinity", Meaghan Malone highlights this reversal of gender norms, arguing that Austen "depicts female power" (429) in the ballroom space. Indeed, in the ballroom, the women are in possession of the gaze while the men undergo it. Therefore, in such environment, the traditional dominance of "the male gaze" (19) described by Laura Mulvey[9] leaves place to the female one. Engelhardt follows this assertion, writing that "Austen strategically genders the ballroom in such a way that women are invested with the authority to "read" the dance, with male bodies operating as their primary texts" (26). In other words, the ballroom is a place inside which the male body will be at the centre of the attention, which appears unusual, as this state is usually attributed to women. A good example can be found in *Emma*, when, noticing that Mr. Knightley is not dancing, she analyses his posture and body:

> He could not have appeared to greater advantage perhaps any where, than where he had placed himself. His tall, firm, upright figure, among the bulky forms and stooping shoulders of the elderly men, was such as Emma felt must draw every body's eyes. (305)

[9] British film theorist. She describes the relationship between gender and gaze as followed: "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (19).

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Here, Emma is looking at Mr. Knightley. However, it is possible to perceive an attempt from him to avoid being the object of the gaze, as he does not want to dance, but to be the one observing the dancers. Nevertheless, his body and attitude are fully described during this passage as he cannot escape from Emma's female gaze. The reversal of power goes even further as Malone adds: "these ballrooms are places where women enjoy a degree of influence that is not available to them elsewhere" (429). Indeed, it is a space in which they would not only be invested with the power of the gaze towards the male body, but would also be able to make choices, like the running of the dances for instance:

> [I]n my readings of Austen's texts, women set the scene for the dance, and the leading lady's personal preferences dictated the movements of the bodies around her. She choreographed—quite literally—her social space. (431)

This example is striking as it displays the relative 'freedom' and power that women had within the ballroom environment. The words freedom is however to put in parenthesis as all the dancers – whether male or female – were nevertheless expected to obey to a lot of different codes:

> Regency ballroom was governed by strict rules that regulated and controlled the dancers it contained. The bodies that occupied the dancing space were openly displayed and highly codified, simultaneously observing and being observed. (430)

Once again, it is possible to observe a major importance of the gaze during balls. Thus, this aspect can be linked to the idea of theatrical performance that was observed in the previous section regarding looks, the actors, and the audience. In addition to the distribution of the gaze within the ballroom, other gender expectations and norms regulated the dancing space. For example, one convention of that era was that during a dance, it was "a man's responsibility . . .

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to maintain the conversation between the sexes" (Engelhardt 38). Austen explores this rule and plays with it in her novels, using the parody as a way to mirror her society like she did in her *Juvenilia* playlets, demonstrating her discontent with men's role as initiators as well as managers of social interactions. The extract in *Northanger Abbey* that was previously mentioned when Henry Tilney mocks the triviality of dance conversations illustrates perfectly Austen's derision. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen even reverses this convention as she swaps the roles during the dance between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, jeopardising the gender expectations:

> They stood for some time without speaking a word; and she began to imagine that their silence was to last through the two dances, and at first was resolved not to break it; till suddenly fancying that it would be the greater punishment to her partner to oblige him to talk, she made some slight observation on the dance. (89-90)

In this passage, Mr. Darcy's quietness is opposed to Elizabeth's easiness to accomplish a task that is not supposed to be hers. She points out this default, attempting to make him speak: "It is *your* turn to say something now, Mr. Darcy" (90). The manner in which she formulates her phrase is telling. She does not ask him a question but recalls him assertively his duty to continue the discussion, opening her sentence with "it is", as if she were reading aloud a rule or a definition from a manual. She even suggests some topics he could use in order to maintain the conversation like "the size of the room, or the number of couples" (90). Therefore, she is well aware of the reversal of gender roles taking place at that moment and of the dominant position she is placed in and, thus, plays with it. However, it is important to underline that, unlike what will be examined later with the example of Mary, Elizabeth's behaviour is not punished, as, in opposition to her sister, she understands the limits and boundaries linked to ballroom and remains in her playing, only teasing Mr Darcy and not shocking the entire audience. All the

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examples explained above demonstrate Austen's use of the ballroom as a place that will generate performance. Indeed, within this environment, all the characters are expected to play a certain role, according to their gender or social status. However, it has been demonstrated that they do not necessarily follow these expectations, either mocking them or totally ignoring them.

Finally, a last element that appears important to highlight is the presence of music and its performance within the ballroom. Indeed, even though it was usual for ladies to play an instrument or to sing in various situations, including mere entertainment for the family or close relationships in private, it is particularly relevant to centre our analysis in the context of public performance in order to investigate the displaying aspect linked to music. The question of accomplishment through music is a notion that appears regularly in Austen's novels and each of her heroines have their respective bond with the exercise. Elizabeth Bennet does not perceive herself as a great player, and her performance during the Meryton ball is soberly described by the narrator as "pleasing, though by no means capital" (25). Emma Woodhouse, though praised by her entourage on many levels remains confronted with the "superior performance" (158) of Jane Fairfax, who Mr. Knightley describes as "the really accomplished young woman, which she wanted to be thought herself" (156). Anne Elliot, never noticed by her family since the death of her mother, nevertheless keeps playing, which "suggests the comfort she derives from her hours at the keyboard" (Hart & Zionkowski 179). Fanny Price did not learn to play an instrument as she did not want to, becoming the target of the mockery of her two cousins. It is striking to notice that in a certain way, Fanny already refuses performance by refusing to learn music. Finally, Catherine Morland tried the spinnet but "could not bear it" after a year (16). Therefore, it is striking to notice that Austen approaches music in various manners with her main characters. Music detains a major role in the context of the ballroom space as there were conventions attached to its performance. Indeed, one can hardly forget the tirade of Miss Bingley concerning accomplishment:

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> A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, signing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expression. (39)

Looking at this quote, it seems like women who wanted to be called "accomplished" had the difficult task to be polyvalent and expert in every topic. However, Hart & Zionkowski explain that the quality of a lady as a musician should not be too obvious in order to not fall into an overly excellent performance:

> [P]racticing too much or performing too well was believed detrimental to women, who foolishly risked making spectacles of themselves—or becoming mere entertainers— by exhibiting their talent too insistently, even in the relatively private sphere of the home. (166)

Therefore, a woman who would expose her talents too widely would cause herself trouble. They add: "it was imperative for women to remain amateurs and to avoid self-display, competition with other women, and the quest for admiration of their playing" (166). In other words, being proficient at a task that was not a stereotypical female artistry like needlework for instance, and, moreover, placing herself in a position that would encourage attention from an audience would be considered bad for a woman in the patriarchal society of that time. Entertaining as a leisure would be judged acceptable, however, self-display was not welcomed. A character that encapsulates this idea of over-performance is Mary Bennet. Described as "being the only plain one in the family" (25), she desperately tries to be noticed in other fields than beauty and thus, "work[s] hard for knowledge and accomplishments . . . always impatient for display" (25). However, it is not well-perceived for a young lady to put herself forward in order to receive the praise of the audience. Thus, Mary acts poorly during the Netherfield ball, and is part of her family's dishonour according to Mr. Darcy and the higher society present in the ballroom, as she decides to play the pianoforte:

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> [S]he [Elizabeth] had the mortification of seeing Mary, after very little entreaty, preparing to oblige the company. By many significant looks and silence entreaties, did she endeavour to prevent such a proof of complaisance, — but in vain; Mary would not understand them; such an opportunity of exhibiting was delightful to her, and she began her song. (98)

Once again, the importance of the gaze is perceptible and demonstrates the performative aspect of music. The fact that Mary ignores what is appropriate in such situation and wants to show herself and her 'talents' at the instrument places her as well as her family in a delicate position. Indeed, her lack of understanding of the decorum that governs the ballroom space has consequences, which shows the importance of knowing how to 'play' in order to fit in the conventions and to maintain one's social status. In that sense, it is possible to observe in the musical example a primacy of performing social conventions just like it was the case regarding the dances and the rules that surrounded their execution. In other words, the ballroom frame contains the substance of acting more than any other environment in Austen's novels. Like on a theatre stage, all the characters play their part, whether dancing, playing an instrument or even just watching.

2.3 The Overlapping of Theatre in Everyday Scenes

Even though investigating how theatricality slips outside the original stage frame in Austen's novels, the two previous sections nevertheless focused on places and environments that remain linked to the idea of theatre and performance in general. Indeed, the 'displacement of acting' examined at the beginning of the chapter maintained the notion of acting inside the limits of the theatre hall, only moving its core towards the audience. In the same manner, the ballroom is a place so codified and in which the display and the gaze are so present that it is easy to find similarities between this space and the theatre. Kuldip Kaur Kuwahara depicts Austen as "[a] self-conscious novelist, [who] delights in playing with reality and illusion" (i). This assertion

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illustrates what was previously said concerning the duality of theatre, an apparent artificial device, but that possesses the power of mirroring reality and of retransmitting it to its audience. She adds that Austen "seems to make the ironic suggestion that life can be most fully experienced through art" (i). In other terms, Kuwahara talks about the bond between art and real life in Austen's writings. Therefore, having a look at scenes from *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* that can be described as theatrical despite the natural environments they take place in, this section's purpose will be to investigate the entanglement of reality and fiction within Austen's works, questioning the permeability of these two opposite poles.

One of the first scenes that, demonstrate an 'overlapping of the theatre' can be found in *Mansfield Park*. It is the visit of Mr. Rushworth's estate Sotherton during which, all the various romantic plots of the novel will be explored. The double love triangle structure respectively composed on one side of Henry Crawford, Maria Bertram and Mr Rushworth, and one the other side, of Fanny Price, Edmund Bertram and Mary Crawford is the central dramatic knot of this sequence. Paula Byrne defines the Sotherton episode as "a prelude to the mainpiece of *Lovers' Vows*" (198), emphasizing the idea of expansion of the theatre beyond the boundaries of the stage. Accordingly, these two sequences "are firmly linked in Fanny's consciousness as the two social events in which illicit misconduct goes unwarranted and unchecked" (197). In other words, these two moments of the novel transmit a rejection of norms and of what was considered as appropriate at that time, providing a freedom of behaviour to the characters. This liberty given to them is particularly associated with the natural world embodied in the pastoral surroundings of Sotherton. Byrne explains the relation between nature and freedom, mentioning the influence of Shakespeare's comedies, and pointing out the differences occurring in Austen's reinterpretation of the genre:

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> The connection between the pastoral tradition and a kind of unlimited freedom of behavior does derive from Shakespearean comedy, but the pastoral location is usually the wood or forest, as in the Italian tradition from which the genre derives. The use of park or garden of a country estate is the Restoration variation of pastoral that was also the model for eighteenth-century comedy. Austen's use of the garden to dramatize freedom of conduct show an allegiance less directly to Shakespeare than to recent and contemporaneous stage comedy. (198)

As this extract demonstrates, Austen's is well aware of the theatrical conventions of her era and uses them in her own novels, mimicking the stage's gimmicks and traditions in another format. The reader is thus confronted to an adaptation of the theatrical device of "love-play outdoor" (200) that comes in opposition with the ceremony and etiquette usually attached to indoor spaces like the ballroom environment that was analysed previously. The natural world becomes the representation of authenticity, providing a 'safe space' for the characters who are able to flirt with more freedom than it would be the case in society, the isolation of this small private group allowing rapprochements between some of the individuals. Nevertheless, these pastoral environments become, under the pen of the author, the receptacle of acting. The different characters of the novel seem to inject performance into the spaces they walk in, modifying their traits. Byrne takes as an example the moment inside the chapel, saying that "Julia draws the group's attention to the 'performance': "Do look at Mr Rushworth and Maria, standing side by side, exactly as if the ceremony were going to be performed" (201). The word "performed" itself recalls the notion of spectacle as well as a certain artificiality, that the reader will witness later as the marriage between them will results in the treason of Mary, eloping with Henry.

However, the part that seems to be the most explicitly theatrical is chapter 10, or more precisely the 'ha-ha scene'. The choice of the word 'scene' to describe this particular segment of the novel is motivated by its inherent theatricality and the fact that in a dramatic meaning, a

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scene can be defined as a representation of actions that occurs within a unity of time and space[10], which is the case here. This moment follows the abandonment of Fanny by Edmund and Mary who leave her alone on a bench as she feels tired but forget about her and never come back. The chapter opens with Fanny, still waiting alone on the bench, when suddenly, she is joined by Maria, Henry Crawford and Mr Rushworth who sat with her, talking about the various improvements of the estate. But after a moment, Maria expresses her desire to go into the park through the iron gate with a ha-ha that can be seen from their spot. Mr Rushworth therefore decides to go fetch the key as he did not bring it with him. His absence leaves the possibility for Henry to flirt with Maria, before they both decide to climb the fence in order to get to the other side, despite Fanny's warnings. She is not left alone for a long time as Julia joins her, but does not keep her company for a long time, as she also exits by the fence following her sister and Henry. After some minutes alone again, Mr Rushworth finally arrives with the key and is really affected when Fanny tells him what happened. She, then, tries to cheer him up and suggests that he goes to look after them, which he finally does, leaving Fanny to her solitude. The narrator even emphasizes her state of forgettable individual, commenting that "[s]he found herself more successful in sending away, than in retaining a companion" (130). The striking element about that part is the fact that, despite her rejection of theatre that she appears to find "morally devious" (Cano 65), Fanny becomes against her will and for the entire scene, the pillar on which the entire performance relies on. Indeed, she will be the only character staying 'on-stage' throughout this part, unable to get out of her position, while others enter and exit the scene frenetically. Paradoxically, her lack of motion and action is what forces her into the theatrical frame. She is not as strong as the other characters who are in control of their environment like Maria, Henry and Julia who are able to climb the fence easily or like Mr

[10] Paraphrased from *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, (4 ed.).

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Rushworth who rushes for the key, and therefore undergo this space that becomes a stage inside which she is trapped. In addition to her lack of movements, Fanny's voice is silenced for most of the scene, too weak in comparison with the wooing conversation between Henry and Mary who do not pay attention to her warnings. The character with which she converses and who listens to her the most is Mr Rushworth, probably because he is upset and therefore, in a position of weakness for a brief moment. However, his vitality comes back quickly after some encouraging words of Fanny and he leaves her, seemingly not concerned about her staying alone on her bench once again.

The spatiality of the scene is another extremely relevant element to investigate as it is built and composed on the opposition between the natural world and outdoor space that represent an idea of reality and truthfulness on the one hand, and on the other hand, the artificial theatrical space, usually attached to indoor or urban environment in *Mansfield Park*. Here, Austen gathers these two apparently contradictory ideas of fiction and reality, and combines them into a scene, questioning their boundaries. As previously mentioned, the scene takes place in the pastoral outdoor spaces surrounding Sotherton. This environment appears to fit Fanny's personality, as she is the character most associated with the natural world in the novel. Rosa Mucignat underlines this aspect of her character, asserting that "she also does her share of naturalistic enthusiasm and . . . is inspired by the lush variety of the parson's shrubbery" (25). She takes here the example of the moment when Fanny and Mary are in the garden, but both women have their own very different relationship with the natural world. Indeed, in comparison with Mary, who is very fond of large society and who does not care about the countryside and nature, Fanny appreciates to walk in the garden and to contemplate the beauty of the nature surrounding her. She even tries to explain her point of view to Mary, declaring:

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> You will think me rhapsodizing; but when I am out of doors, especially when I am sitting out of doors, I am very apt to get into this sort of wondering strain. One cannot fix one's eyes on the commonest natural production without finding food for a rambling fancy. (255-256)

This passage demonstrates what separates the two women. While one enjoys the presence of numerous people and likes performing the harp for an audience and therefore catching the gaze through the exercise, the other one prefers less crowded environments allowing introspection, like the gardens or the East room, which, though an indoor space, can be associated to nature as Fanny usually goes there when she wants to "visit her plants" (187). Unlike the other indoor spaces, the East room is a representation of truthfulness and authenticity:

> The room was most dear to her, and she would not have changed its furniture for the handsomest in the house, though what had been originally plain, had suffered all the ill-usage of children. (189)

Therefore, it is not surprising for Fanny to have a real connection with this kind of space, as it is not covered with ornaments and remains linked to the natural world with the plants that decorate it. The image of "Tintern Abbey" (189) present in the room also displays her close relation to nature, as it evokes William Wordsworth's 1798 eponym poem in which, through the depiction of memories of a place he visited five years ago, he "espouses an early belief that remembering nature's beauty can have an affective power" (Rexroth 153). Thus, Fanny's bond with the natural world is important to take into account as it also suggests the opposite link between other characters and the world of fiction and artificiality. Indeed, taking the example of Henry Crawford in the ha-ha scene, it is easily observable that, unlike Fanny, he is able to use the settings and space at his own advantage. He is talkative and in control of the conversation when he flirts with Maria, trying to persuade her that she is special for him, while he was doing something similar with Julia during their ride to Sotherton in the carriage, "sitting

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side by side full of conversation and merriment" (106). In other words, the ha-ha scene contrasts two kinds of characters and environments. On the one hand, Henry Crawford represents artificiality and the indoor space, while Fanny Price portrays authenticity and outdoor space. In this sense, it is not a coincidence if the sequence occurs at a gate, symbolising a clear separation between two states, a performance associated to fiction on the one hand, and the truthfulness of nature on the other hand.

A similar scene occurs in chapter 10 of *Persuasion*, when Anne witnesses a conversation between Captain Wentworth and Louisa while being hidden from their sight. Like in the *Mansfield Park* sequence that was examined above, the characters evolve inside a natural environment as Henrietta, Louisa, Mary and Anne go for a walk together and cross paths with Charles Musgrove and Captain Wentworth. However, this particular seen does not place Anne as an actor like it was the case with Fanny, but as a spectator. Once again, the natural world is associated with the heroine of the novel, whose interiority is deeply linked to the autumnal landscapes she contemplates:

> Her pleasure in the walk must arise from the exercise and the day, from the view of the last smiles of the year upon the tawny leaves, and withered hedges, and from repeating to herself some few of the thousand poetical descriptions extant to autumn, that season of peculiar and inexhaustible influence on the mind of taste and tenderness. (102)

The description of nature during the walk corresponds to Anne's state of mind, melancholic and dull from the mistakes of her past. This depiction of the environment sets the stage for the passage when Anne surprises Louisa and Captain Wentworth as she is sitting "on a dry sunny bank, under the hedgerow" (106) without being seen. This particular moment can be observed as a real scene taken from a play. Indeed, there are several elements that are relevant to analyse inside the paradigm of theatre. The first obvious one is the notion of gaze that has been largely

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discussed during the previous sections. During this scene, Louisa and Captain Wentworth are not aware that they are the centre of the attention, their conversation being caught by Anne. In addition to that, the fact that Anne is hidden behind a hedgerow but cannot see either is interesting as it allows the possibility to create dramatic irony in a hypothetical adaptation of the novel to a play. It is also important to notice that during this part, Anne only uses her hearing, as her sight is thwarted by the hedgerow. Therefore, it makes sense to speak of dramatic irony through the staging of the scene and the placing of the audience in a situation in which they would have more information than the characters. For instance, the combination of gestures and speech through oppositions could create a comical effect and accentuate the idea of the repartition of knowledge. Unlike in "The Mystery" in which Austen explored dramatic irony to the highest degree, refusing information to her audience, she here demonstrates her expertise of the tool, creating within a natural setting a theatrical composition in which the outdoor environment represented by the hedgerow is at the service of the dramaturgy.

What stands out in these examples from *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* is the use of natural settings as a way to offset the artificiality and theatricality present throughout the novels. In both segments examined, theatre seems to overlap and insinuate itself into outdoor spaces that are usually a representation of reality and truthfulness, also linked to the most genuine characters. The encounter between these two worlds is extremely interesting as it creates a tension between characters who are 'playing a part' like Henry Crawford and Maria, and the ones who remain themselves like Fanny and Anne. Attributing two different roles to her heroines, one becoming an actress against her will, and the other one a spectator by pure chance, Austen explores the various relations between introverted characters and theatre. Moreover, both these scenes demonstrate Austen's manner of bringing fiction and reality closer. As the author Jacqueline Simon Gunn once said, "like any good fiction, without the need to adjust or conceal the truth, it actually might be the greatest expression of truth" (*Circle of Betrayal*). This

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sentence describes really well Austen's novels and the nearly permanent entanglement of truth and performance that questions the nature of acting and its supposed opposition to reality. Therefore, the various spaces examined in this chapter play a major role in the representation of this web inside which the different characters evolve and interact with each other, with more or less authenticity.

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CHAPTER 3: MOTIVATED PERFORMANCES

> [I]f you can play every part equally well, how can you know who you really are? And, if you can simulate all moods and affections, how can you know what you really feel? (Tanner 169)

With this quote, the British literary critic Tony Tanner summarizes the questioning around the notions of acting and selfhood. While it seems evident at first glance to separate these two ideas because of their apparent contradiction, the first one often perceived as the result of an active and voluntary process, and the second one the display of someone's individuality, it is nevertheless observable that the deeper one reflects on the problem, the harder it is to untangle it. Taking as an example the well-known Russian theatrical practitioner Konstantin Stanislavski and his Method regarding acting, it is striking to remark the rapprochement between the actors' own individuality and life, and the characters impersonated. One of the key principles of his theory of acting is what he calls the "magic if" (105), which can be defined as the way the actors will try to imagine themselves experiencing the same events as their character and perform according to what they will have drawn from themselves during the process of introspection. Therefore, this system of perception of performance as the elongation of the actor's interiority is particularly relevant to point out, as it testifies the surprising bond between fiction and reality within acting. This link has already been explored in terms of spatiality in Austen's diegesis in the previous chapter. In other words, after having analysed the environment on which the theatricality of these novels relies, it consequently appears relevant now to focus on what is happening within this same frame, investigating the various performances displayed by the characters, paying a particular attention to the motivations that encourages them to take part in a masquerade. As David Monaghan writes, Jane Austen is a "social novelist" (5). Thus, it is fundamental to examine her writings in terms of networks of characters who interact with each other and evolve through contacts and their different relationships. These intercourses have a

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major role as they determine the social status of the individuals in the society Austen aims to describe to her readers. Therefore, in such situation, it appears complicated not to perform, as refusing a certain part might compromise someone's rank. Starting with the investigation of gender performance in Austen's novels, this chapter will then focus on the omnipresent figure of the 'handsome lying suitor' and will end on the complex relationship between genuine characters and the world of acting.

3.1 Austen's Women: Accomplishing Gender Performances

Throughout her writings, Jane Austen gave birth to a wide range of female characters. From Emma Woodhouse to Anne Elliot, each of her heroines has her own personality and social status. However, Rebecca Postula gathers them by their societal constraints:

> Though blessed with an admirable blend of independence of mind, spirit and moral fortitude, they are women for whom the privilege of space is often either an intangible desire or an oppressive reality. (76)

Postula goes further in her reflection, writing that while a "man's space might define his character . . . a woman's space was defined for her by the men with whom she resided" (77). This consideration of the space as the pedestal of gender interrogations is a good bridge between the previous chapter and the current one. The question of spatiality in Austen's novels examined above already introduced the notion of gender expectations from characters who were confined to certain environments like for instance the ballroom. Focalising on several female characters and also on some male ones at some moments in order to underline the differences in their respective gender expectations, this section will allow a deeper investigation of the issue of gender performance, whether conscious or unconscious, in order to then observe the

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consequences of the display of different versions of "femininity" on the way these characters are perceived and treated by the society they are evolving in.

Before having a close reading of the novels, a look at Judith Butler's illustration of gender performance appears useful to grasp the ins and outs of this concept. In her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", she describes gender as "an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (519). This definition demonstrates the performative aspect of gender, as well as its instability, as one could argue that giving up the repetition of these acts might lead to the collapse of this same identity. In other words, gender can be perceived as a process, something that is built throughout someone's life and therefore not innate. In addition to that, it is primordial to acknowledge the subjectivity of gender as well as its origin within a specific system. Indeed, if gender is a "construction" (522) and does not derive from "nature", its roots come from the environment and, thus, from the society that sets the rules and norms over its population. Monaghan describes the English society of the late eighteenth century as:

> a series of rural communities governed in paternalistic fashion from the great house by a member of the gentry or the aristocracy who owed his authority and prestige to the ownership of land. (1)

Therefore, Austen's novels are inscribed in a particular context defined by a pyramidal administration in which gender dictates everybody's place and behaviour. Furthermore, the notion of gender performance is extremely relevant to consider in the context of this mémoire, as Butler asserts that "the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical context" (521). Thereby, the entanglements of gender and performance corroborate the comparison of society with theatre.

The first element that needs to be emphasised in this section is the importance that several Austinian characters place on the idea of the "accomplished" woman. This concept was

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already mentioned previously in chapter 2 in connection with the topic of music and its performance. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the subject is brought up by Mr Bingley, who is really astonished by women and their expertise in so many fields, before being contradicted by Mr Darcy who declares: "I cannot boast of knowing more than half a dozen, in the whole range of my acquaintance, that are really accomplished" (39). This question of women's accomplishment spreads in a way or another in all of Austen's novels, from Emma's jealousy of Jane Fairfax already examined above, to Catherine Morland's mother who "did not insist on her daughters to be accomplished" (16). It is also explained at the beginning of *Mansfield Park*, as Sir Thomas Bertram thinks about taking Fanny under his wings. It is decided that she should nevertheless not receive the same treatment as her cousins in order not to create a conflict of classes:

> There will be some difficulty in our way, Mrs Norris . . . as to the distinction proper to be made between the girls as they grow up; how to preserve in the minds of my *daughters* the consciousness of what they are, without making them think too lowly of their cousin; and how, without depressing her spirits too far, to make her remember that she is not a Miss *Bertram* (19-20)

This passage demonstrates the need to maintain the impermeability of the system, with the fear of it collapsing by the blurring of boundaries between social classes. In other words, it is possible to observe a moderation of Fanny's education from the aristocratic class represented by the Bertrams. Too many accomplishments of hers could compromise the good running of society, as it would questions the pyramidal system that categorises people according to their family and blood. Thus, the question of accomplishment is particularly relevant in the investigation of gender performance, as education of gender norms is a key that can open many doors for a woman, providing her a deeper understanding of society and how to make her way through it, than a woman without means to benefit from proper instruction who would not be

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able to perform a major role and thus, would not have the possibility to rise in social status in the pyramid.

Nevertheless, the concept of gender performance does not only concern women. Bound to the etiquette, men are also judged according to the manners they display. David Monaghan writes: "Manners are of more importance than laws. Upon them, in a great measure, the laws depend" (3). In other terms, the entire system of the late eighteen-century in England is here described as relying on appearances and manners. He adds later in the same chapter that "Only through the medium of good manners could these people hope to live up to the ideals established by the landed gentleman" (4). Therefore, the notion of performance is of most importance, as it is through acting that the system and its distribution into separated classes can be understood and analysed.

A relevant point regarding the question of gender and performance that seems to have been neglected or forgotten in the scholarly field is the complexity surrounding Mrs Bennet's character. While many have focused on her as being a "caricature" representing "greed, envy and jealousy" (Miles 16), she, nevertheless, deserves to be observed from a different angle, as she embodies the gender-oriented anxiety and fear linked to financial struggle that emerged from the patriarchal society of Austen's era. Remaining a spinster could have major consequences in the lives of women. Jane Austen and her sister Cassandra themselves have both experienced it, as they never married and lived with their mother in "dire straits", with very little income after the death of their father in 1805 (Hume 291). This concern of future and financial stability is at the heart of *Pride and Prejudice,* personified by the five Bennet daughters, and even if three of them find a husband at the end of the novel, it is not without difficulties, Lydia's elopement with Mr Wickham being an event that could have led the family to social disgrace, as the violent words of Mr Collins suggest it: "The death of your daughter would have been a blessing in comparison to this" (281). This brutality demonstrates the

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pressure that a woman had to endure to remain respectable in the eyes of society. However, this episode is quickly forgotten by Mrs Bennet once she knows her daughter will be married, and moreover, only "at sixteen" (289). This reaction, as well as her excessive behaviour throughout the novel can appear ridiculous at first glance. Nevertheless, her attitude must be examined in the context of Austen's time, as well as her husband's one. The recent on-screen adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* like the BBC serie of 1995 or the 2005 movie directed by Joe Wright have chosen to depict the Bennet couple, creating a clear opposition between them, Mr Bennet being depicted as the parent with which Elizabeth is more intimate and incline to share her feelings, while Mrs Bennet is attributed the part of the selfish mother who does not care about the happiness of her daughter, asking her to accept Mr Collins proposal, despite Elizabeth's clear disgust. In this manner, both adaptations appear to place the entire blame on Mrs Bennet, totally forgetting important extracts of the novel which demonstrate that Mr Bennet failed his duty as a father. In chapter 50, it is explained that:

> Mr Bennet had very often wished, before this period of his life, that, instead of spending his whole income, he had laid by an annual sum, for the better provision of his children, and of his wife, if she survived him. (292)

His regrets can be understood, as "[w]hen first Mr. Bennet had married, economy was held to be perfectly useless; for, of course, they were to have a son" (292). Mr Bennet's lack of concern regarding his daughters because of his assurance that he would have an heir to succeed him is not mentioned on the on-screen adaptations, which tends to place him in the comfortable position of the nice father who does not force her daughter to accept the first man. This choice is, therefore, selfish as it does not consider Mr Bennet's duty, leaving the mental load to his wife. As the state of spinster could, as previously said, lead to terrible economic consequences,

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it is not a surprise if "[t]he business of her life was to get her daughters married" (7). Thereby, Mrs Bennet's performative behaviour cannot be purely reduced to selfishness as it is, on the contrary, motivated by the pressure of a patriarchal system in which women's places and income depended on men. Indeed, "since society expected genteel women not to work, for the vast majority of women, only marrying and marrying well ensured financial security after their fathers' death" (Herman 207). Thus, her performance, despite considered as too exaggerated in the eyes of people like Mr Darcy, is, nevertheless, a strategy of survival for her daughters who risk falling into poverty if they do not find a respectable husband, due to the carelessness of their father, who mocks the behaviour of his wife as she tries to find potential matches for her daughters.

But Mr and Mrs Bennet's relationship is not the only one that demonstrates the performative aspect of marriage, as the subject has been explored in various ways in Austen's novels, especially regarding proposals, from their motivations to their consequences. *Persuasion*'s entire plot revolve around Anne's refusal of Frederick Wentworth's proposal due to his lower social status. Eventually, the couple is formed, not without a certain bitterness, as Captain Wentworth is now part of a higher after he got promoted in the navy and, therefore, more suitable for Anne. Refusals are recurrent in Austen's writings. It is possible to draw similarities between Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet who both decline the proposal of a clergyman, in the characters of Mr Elton and Mr Collins. However, the motivations behind these two proposals are very different. In the case of Mr Elton, marriage is purely a way to acquire money, finding a wealthy woman with an important dowry:

> He only wanted to aggrandise and enrich himself; and if Miss Woodhouse of Hartfield, the heiress of thirty thousand pounds, were not quite so easily obtained as he had fancied, he would soon try for Miss Somebody else with twenty, or with ten. (128)

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Once married, Emma's fortune would have become the property of her husband. In other words, the advantage of such a marriage would have been only for Mr Elton. Concerning Mr Collins, his reasons to marry are really different and on the question of money, he states that "to fortune [he is] perfectly indifferent" (104). His claims are verified by the fact that he intends to make a match among his cousins who are not in a particularly wealthy situation, as explained while talking about Mrs Bennet's behaviour. What convinced him to look for a wife appears to be societal conventions and the advice of his patroness Lady Catherine de Bourgh who told him "Mr. Collins, you must marry. A clergyman like you must marry" (103). In other terms, Mr Collins's decision to choose a wife is linked to the question of his duty in his role as a clergyman rather than to a financial one, as he performs the socially-acceptable script for his position. Thus, marriage was also an important decision of men as these two examples illustrates it. Furthermore, the mannerism of both characters displays attempts to act a part in the most convincing manner, even though they fail the exercise.

Another character who uses performance and attempts to play a part in order to access marriage and its advantages is Charlotte Lucas. Damstra describes this character as "a determined schemer who does not trust in the vagaries of fate" (166). He adds that "Charlotte's manipulative skills rely on her perceptive insight and cunning deception" (166). Therefore, she can be perceived not only as a mere player, but also as someone who is attentive of her environment and whose gaze analyses the possibilities for her future. Certain descriptions also reveal a theatrical potential in the treatment of her character, especially in terms of scenography. For instance, as Mrs Bennet decides to have a discussion with Mr Collins after his failed proposal, the narrator informs the reader about Charlotte's reaction: "Charlotte . . . by a little curiosity, satisfied herself with walking to the window and pretending not to hear" (111). The visual adaptation of this short passage would be extremely relevant and would help to foreshadow her marital plan. Two chapters later, her design is once more evoked, with this

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time, an even stronger suggestion of her acting skills: "Miss Lucas perceived him from an upper window as he walked towards the house, and instantly set out to meet him accidentally in the lane" (119). Like in the previous passage, she is paying a close attention to what is happening in her environment, becoming here the vector of the gaze, observing her prey in a position of strength. Indeed, she is placed higher in the composition of the scene, which suggests an imbalance at her advantage in the power dynamic between her and Mr Collins. Moreover, the combination of the words "set out" and "accidently" within the same sentence is really clever and displays Charlotte's performance and control of the situation. Seeking a financial stability compromised by the patriarchal society of that period, her acting is a strategy of survival. She is well aware that her chances to find a husband at her age are poor at that time, and thus, her best option to obtain a comfortable life is to marry Mr Collins. Thus, Austen's use of theatricality in the depiction of Charlotte Lucas's scheme is particularly relevant to expose the gender stakes of her era. Far from the romantic pattern common to all Austen's main heroines, Charlotte Lucas's marriage with Mr Collins is an interesting example of fulfilment of gender expectations whose purpose is to thwart the "punitive consequences" (Butler 522) of bad gender performances.

Finally, Austen's female characters all display in their own manner the struggles that women had to endure in early-nineteenth century Britain. Passing hands to hands from the protection of their father to the one of a husband, independence was for most of them an unreachable dream. Thereby, the various performances that were explored, from the exposure of one's accomplishments to the overly apparent careful search for a good match, can be perceived as their only weapons with which they can attempt to obtain some space in a society that tends to crush them into preconceived boxes, similar to the bars of a prison cell.

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3.2 The Game of Masks: Jane Austen and the Handsome Lying Suitor

The previous section introduced the gender and social aspects attached to acting, replacing it within a system of value inside which not only women but also men were trapped. The following one will focus on several male characters, gathering all of them under the same trope, that could be named as "the handsome lying suitor". From George Wickham to Frank Churchill, William Elliot, Henry Crawford or even John Thorpe in a certain extent, Austen is a fervent user of charming hypocritical characters that disguise and hide themselves under a mask of virtue which balance other masculine characters who are their strict opposite in terms of behaviour, as well as values. This idea of stereotypical figures playing a precise part while 'masking' their intentions is reminiscent of the Italian genre of the *commedia dell'arte*. This similarity between Austen's writings and a certain kind of theatre is particularly relevant to address, as such connections reveal one more time her knowledge of the acting world and her skills to play with its devices and conventions to employ them in her own designs. Through the examination of these hypocritical characters and their contrast with more respectable male figures, the purpose of this section will be to investigate Austen's relation with the specific theatrical genre of the *commedia dell'arte*, in order to observe the manner in which she uses and transforms theatrical tools to depicts her society.

The first aspect to examine before approaching the role played by Austen's hypocritical suitors characters is the genre of the *commedia dell'arte* itself. The term designates a theatrical form that developed between "the last decades of the sixteenth and first decades of the seventeenth century" (Taviani 17) in Italy. The performers of this kind of theatre were organized in "professional companies" and played "mainly improvised drama" (Henke, *Performance in the Commedia* 6). In addition, the features of this genre include "the use of

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distinctive masked and unmasked stock characters[11]" (Katritzky 20). Therefore, it is a theatrical form easily recognizable due to its physical visual tropes. It is also important to point out the fact that The *commedia* "left its mark on English theatre from Halmet to Garrick to Grimaldi" (Henke, *Commedia in Context* 115). Even if similarities between Austen's novels and the *commedia dell'arte* are not evident at first glance, it is, nevertheless, possible to compare these different works in several aspects. The most striking element is pointed out by Henke as he talks about the characters of the *commedia*, and more precisely about the dramatis personae, describing them:

> The dramatis personae of the commedia dell'arte present one of the best examples in theatre history of a character system in which the figures are largely defined dialogically, in relationship to other characters. (*Performance in the Commedia* 15)

The key word of this quotation that can help understand the substance of these characters is "relationship". The *commedia* is a theatrical form whose central component is the interaction between the different characters onstage. These masked characters would seem uncomplete without someone to receive their behaviours and react to them in their own specific manner. According to Henke, despite the fact that plays contained about twelve actors in total, "the optimal number for improvisation" (*Performance in the Commedia* 25) would be two characters. He also stresses the notion of combinations for these interactions, splitting them into two main groups according to the social status of the two characters present onstage. For instance, the dialogues between two *innamorati*[12] of the same social class will not be the same

[11] *Stock characters*: Conventional types rather than individuals, closely associated with established representational codes. In *Oxford: A Dictionary of Media & Communication*. Edited by Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday.
[12] *Innamorati:* Roles attributed to certain characters of the *commedia dell'arte*. The *innamorati* are usually two young lovers of a higher social class than the servants characters.

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as one between *Pantalone*[13] and a *zanni*[14]. The comic effect will usually come from the social difference between two characters. Henke adds: "Encounters between characters of unequal status dramatize contrasting lexicons, formulas, and world views" (*Performance in the Commedia* 27). In other words, the tension generated by the contrast in the language and the manners of these characters is a major element in the elaboration of comedic situations. In that perspective, the *commedia* can be defined as a genre that focuses mainly on the relationships between the different characters that compose its diegesis, in order to, then, use these interactions and bonds to create comedy. As it has been demonstrated in the previous chapters, Austen's novels centre their plots around characters who, despite their attempt, are inevitably attached to their conditions because of the society they are evolving in and the people that compose it. Therefore, the analogy between Austen's writings and the *commedia dell'arte* arise not from their characters in general, as it would mean comparing caricatures to realist depictions of people, but from the importance of their respective interactions and relations in the building of the plot.

Even though it would be quite unfair to reduce Austen's characters to mere caricatures, it is possible to remark throughout her work a recurrent male figure who plots directly or indirectly against the protagonists of her stories. Taking at first glance the traits of a young man with good manners and a respectable appearance, the face of the ideal match quickly leaves space to a character whose intentions are not as innocent and trustworthy as they seemed at first. Moreover, the possibility of a romance between him and the heroine is always at the heart of the interrogations, as he attempts to woo her at some point in the novel. Therefore, this trope

[13] *Pantalone*: A mask of the *commedia dell'arte*, and a type of the old man or *vecchio*, who is also known as 'Il Magnifico', and is a figure of Venetian provenance. In *The Oxford Companion to Italian Literature*. Edited by Peter Hainsworth and David Robey.

[14] *Zanni*: This mask of the commedia dell'arte, the name possibly deriving from the dialect of Bergamo, was the male servant, often conspiring with adventurous youth against cautious middle age, serving but also deceiving master or mistress, generating imbroglios, and generally complicating the stage action. In *The Oxford Companion to Italian Literature*. Edited by Peter Hainsworth and David Robey.

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will be named "the handsome lying suitor". In this case, the comparison with some Machiavellian stock characters of the *commedia dell'arte* relies on the symbol of the mask. While the *commedia* uses the mask in a clear visual manner "to reinforce the appearance of social types" (McGehee 13), choosing the caricature of characters who "become the magical incarnation of all [their] class" (Rudlin 67), Austen's figure of the "handsome lying suitor" only wears a metaphorical mask that covers his true designs. Without the entire equipment and costume of a *commedia* character, the idea of the stock character is nevertheless conveyed through the symbol of the mask, represented by the numerous lies of the suitor.

George Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice* is an excellent example to begin with, as he checks all the boxes that were enumerated above concerning the features of this trope. When he appears for the first time, he commands the centre of the attention directly:

> But the attention of every lady was soon caught by a young man, whom they had never seen before, of most gentlemanlike appearance, walking with an officer on the other side of the way. (71)

The first impression he provides is the one of a gentleman, his attractiveness being also widely described later in the same paragraph: "His appearance was greatly in his favour; he had all the best part of beauty, a fine countenance, a good figure, and very pleasing address" (71). The 'mask' of virtue and beauty with which he is introduced will not leave Elizabeth indifferent, as she confesses to her aunt that she regards him as "the most agreeable man [she] ever saw" (142). Soon after their first encounter during which Elizabeth notices a tension between him and Mr Darcy, Wickham attempts to play the role of the victim and manages to convince her. This demonstrates his persuasive performance as well as his abilities as a liar, which nearly resulted in the elopement of Georgina, whose fortune as well as revenge against Mr Darcy motivated his scheme. Hiding himself behind his good manners and appearances, he is a cunning character who easily tricks the people he meets, blaming Darcy to avoid attention on his plans. Wickham

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represents at the same time the theatrical duality between the actor and the character interpreted, and the hypocrisy of a society based on appearances. Furthermore, his figure is constantly put in opposition to Mr Darcy, who will, eventually, be revealed as being the portrait of virtue and honor. The manner in which both men are introduced demonstrates the difference of treatment they receive. Next to Wickham's first appearance, addressed above, the similarities between his introduction and Darcy's are striking:

> Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mein; and the report which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year. The gentlemen pronounced him to be a finer figure of a man, the ladies declared he was much handsomer than Mr. Bingley. (12)

Just like Wickham, Mr Darcy is a man who catches the attention of the assistance. However, it is primordial to underline that in the case of Mr Darcy, this faculty is unvoluntary, as he is not a man who appreciates to be at the centre of the attention in a room full of strangers, which might suggest that his unwelcoming figure could be a performance from himself. In addition, the element that separates them after the first gaze laid on them is their extremely different behaviour towards other people. While Wickham displays polite and charming manners since his introduction, Darcy quickly falls from people's good graces during the Meryton ball where he meets Elizabeth for the first time. The narrator explains that "[h]e was looked at with great admiration for about half an evening, till his manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity" (12). Because he refuses to wear a mask of amiability, Darcy is judged and categorized by strangers. Another element that separates both men is their relation to spontaneity and improvisation. For the actors of the *commedia dell'arte*, the notion of improvisation was at the heart of their profession, as they "usually worked without scripts" (Henke, *Performance in the Commedia* 12). In that sense, the figure of Wickham emerges as

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an improvisator of the *commedia*. Unlike Darcy who prefers the seriousness and rigidity of a letter that allows a time of reflection to express the story to Elizabeth, Wickham transmits his tale orally, demonstrating his ability to invent on request. Therefore, Austen uses the contrast between these two opposite, but nevertheless, linked characters, to make the world of artifices and theatricality encounter the one of realism and sincerity.

However, the handsome lying suitor is not a fixed figure that cannot evolve and explore new horizons. On that topic, other parallels can be drawn with the *commedia* and the "fluidity" (*Performance in the Commedia* 15) of its characters. Indeed, despite the fact that they played caricatural characters, the actors were not strictly confined in their performance and "had the opportunity to construct a detailed and nuanced repertoire of verbal and gestural routines" (15). In other words, each actor could give his own interpretation of the stock character he played, analysing the versions of actors in different professional companies who would play the same role in their own manner. Thus, it allowed the declination of a same stock character in a large range of variations. Regarding the handsome lying suitor, Austen is also flexible in the interpretation of the trope. William Elliot's character is probably the most similar version to George Wickham in terms of intentions. Wishing to remain Sir Walter Elliot's heir, he attempts to woo Anne, and later Mrs Clay to avoid Sir Walter Elliot's potential marriage that could lead to the birth of a son. Like Wickham, his conduct is directed by his greed that he hides behind polite manners.

However, the motivations of the handsome lying suitor are not necessarily materialistic. For instance, Henry Crawford's conduct is not guided by money, but by his pure lust and selfishness. His attractions for Fanny Price or Maria Bertram are fantasies of the moment. He is a character who does not think about the future and consequences of his behaviour and thus, appreciates to play the role that will serve him to achieve his goals. Another representation of this acting figure is Frank Churchill, who flirts with Emma and play the charmer role in order

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to hide his engagement with Jane Fairfax, who, in that case represent an unsuitable match for his social background. When Mrs Weston tells Emma about the news of his engagement, she explains that, regarding his aunt who recently passed away "there could not have been a hope, a chance, a possibility" (374) for her to give her blessing for such a union, and that she would have disinherited him for that. Therefore, Frank's behaviour can be perceived as an attempt to protect his fiancé and is excusable in this perspective. However, money once again plays a part, as he hid their relationship until the death of his aunt, worried about being disinherited. Furthermore, Emma is angry at him, as she thinks that he was playing with and using her. She tells Mrs Weston:

> "What right had he to endeavour to please, as her certainly did – to distinguish any one young woman with persevering attention, as he certainly did – while he really belonged to another? . . . How could he tell that he might not be making me in love with him? – very wrong, very wrong indeed. (372)

Thus, even though his intentions were not as selfish and morally wrong as Wickham's or Elliot's, he is a character who does not take into account the pain that he could potentially cause to a woman falling in love with him due to his flirting manners.

Finally, the variation of this trope in which its different features are revisited in the remotest way relies in the character of John Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey*. Unlike the other lying suitors that were analysed previously, he stands out as a more complex figure that does not perfectly fit in the trope. The key element that separates him from the rest of these character is the fact that Catherine is not interested by John Thorpe at any moment of the novel, while he only wants to marry her because he thinks she is the Allen's heiress. When Catherine meets him, she already only has eyes for Henry Tilney. Nevertheless, it does not mean that no other similarities remain between him and the trope. Indeed, his one-way attraction towards Catherine makes him develop a clear jealously of Tilney, which will lead to a series of lies whose purpose

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is to sabotage her relationship with Henry Tilney, as well as with his sister Eleonor. Thus, the plotting and wooing elements are still present in the conception of his character, which would reduce the name of the trope as "the lying suitor". However, it is more plausible to argue that in *Northanger Abbey*, the trope of the handsome lying suitor operates with two characters instead of just one. The figure appears to be split between the two Thorpe siblings John and Isabella. This assertion is motivated by the fact that Isabella is a close friend to Catherine and therefore has an influence on her, as she is younger and is not in her element for her first time in Bath. She also represents greed and her scheme to get married to Catherine's brother James because she thinks her family is fortunate can recall Wickham's wish to make a wealthy match. Furthermore, Isabella is an extremely performing character who pretends throughout the novel to be genuine. For example, when she learns that she needs to wait "two years and half" (129) for the marriage, she declares:

> "I hate money; and if our union could take place now upon only fifty pounds a year, I should not have a wish unsatisfied. Ah! my Catherine, you have found me out. There's the sting. The long, long, endless two years and half that are to pass before your brother can hold the living." (129).

This passage demonstrates her manipulative nature and her love for performance. Overdramatic aspect of the scene is emphasised by Isabella's mother who claims "Yes, yes, my darling Isabella . . . we perfectly see into your heart. You have no disguise" (130). Playing with irony, Austen displays the overperformance that makes Isabella's character ridiculous. The contrast between her actions and her words are too important and her attempt to pass for a virtuous person can only fail in the eyes of the reader. Here, Austen lampoons the Gothic genre, playing with the usual features of Gothic characters. Isabella is depicted as "the reverse of the good-hearted and virtuous confident" (Steiner *Northanger Abbey / Persuasion* 56) and is mainly characterized by her selfishness and her wish to marry a wealthy man, which clearly mirrors

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designs of characters like Wickham. Therefore, Isabella encapsulates the features of greed as well as performativity, while John represents the ones of courtship and scheming. In other terms, these two characters are not only bond by their status of siblings, but also by their complementary roles in the embodiment of Austen's handsome lying suitor.

Through all these various representations of a caricatural figure borrowed to the principles of the Italian theatrical genre of the *commedia dell'arte*, Austen deliberately incorporates acting elements in the universe of her novels, confronting them with characters who do not have the same relationship with the world of performance, like for instance Mr Darcy, who, nevertheless, still has to play the script of the good estate owner, creating through their interactions a contrast that questions the boundaries of theatre and its relevance to depict the late eighteen-century English society. In this sense, these figures are the representation of a society based on artificiality and false pretence that hides its grey zones.

3.3 Genuineness in a World of Performance: A Complex Relationship

Until now, the different sections focused on characters and their active as well as conscious participation to performance in various situations. However, the universe of Austen's novels is not only composed of hypocritical figures or professional schemers that will do all their possible to obtain what they desire. On the contrary, her writings are also composed of genuine characters who do not attempt to play a role or sometimes do not even understand the notion of acting. The most evident example is Jane Bennet who represents with her good opinion of everybody the strict opposite of what was discussed previously about the trope of the handsome lying suitor. Her character is a total stranger to the idea of performance and theatricality in everyday life and does not conceive that someone's behaviour could not be excused by circumstances. However, the distinction of genuine characters from theatricality is not always as clear and direct as in her case. Indeed, several instances display a complex relationship

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between the notions of authenticity and sincerity, and performances. This complexity is addressed by Sinanan and Milnes who explore the entanglement of the two first notions, arguing that "it is in Romantic literature and thought that 'sincerity' and 'authenticity' are fused—and thereby transformed—for the first time" (5). It is possible to understand the fusion of these two terms as the result of their respective relation with the notion of genuineness:

> A person can be genuine in the sense of being real or authentic; at the same time, he or she can be genuine in the sense of being honest or sincere" (Sinanan and Milnes 8).

Nevertheless, it will be important to maintain these two ideas apart in this section, as, despite being both closely linked to genuineness, each of them deals with a separated dimension of the word, authenticity being opposed to "imitation" or "impersonation" (7) while sincerity deals with "truthfulness" (8). Through the overperformative presence of Miss Bates, the fiction-creative mind of Catherine Morland and their comparison with Anne Sharp's figure from *Godmersham Park* by Gill Hornby, whose novels have been strongly influenced by Jane Austen's work and life, it will be argued that Austen's novels play with the complexity of the boundaries of theatricality and truthfulness within a society characterized by artificiality and decorum, questioning the possibility for people to remain contradictorily genuine despite taking part in some sort of performative acts in an unconscious manner.

A good example to start the analysis of genuine figures in Austen's novels is Miss Bates. She is a truly interesting character to focus on in terms of performance as her behaviour constantly blurs the boundaries of acting and authenticity. On the one hand, her extreme loquaciousness can be interpretated as a signal of truthfulness in the sense that she appears as an 'open book character' who says what she thinks, but on the other hand, her sudden soarings close to monologues provide her character with a certain theatricality. This contradiction in Miss Bates's character is not the only one. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator depicts

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her as a person "enjoy[ing] a most uncommon degree of popularity for a woman neither young, handsome, rich nor married" (22). Thus, it is clearly stated that Miss Bates's status is peculiar for her condition, marriage being considered as an important accomplishment for women. Therefore, her genuineness appears to outdo her performance, relying mostly on her 'way of speaking' rather than the content of her speech. In other words, it seems she has the favours of Highbury because, despite the form of her expression, it remains truthful and sincere. However, Diane Reynolds perceives Miss Bates as a more complex character than one might assume at first glance. For her, she is a primordial figure in the structure of Highbury and its inhabitants, a "queen bee" (235) who receives information before anybody else. She goes further in her observation, argue that "Miss Bates is far different from the person we perceive through Emma's eyes, more secure in her power as a central conduit of information than Emma realizes" (235). In other words, Reynolds appears to question Miss Bates's total genuineness that she attributes to Emma's gaze that leads the reader's perception. Reynolds' view of Miss Bates is particularly relevant, as it displays the duality of the latter's character and her complex relation with theatricality.

It is not a coincidence if Rosina Filippi chose Miss Bates as the central figure of one of her seven parlor plays adaptations of Austen's novels. In 1895, Filippi is among the first to perceive in Austen's work a theatrical potential. Adapting various moments within four of the six novels, she focuses nearly half of her work on scenes from *Emma*. She rewrites each passage editing the dialogues and providing at the beginning of each scene information about the costumes that should be used, as well as a little summary that contextualizes the scene. She also adds stage directions like asides or information about how the actors should perform certain lines. Therefore, the novel format literally turns into a theatre script. The subtitle of Filippi's book *Parlour Plays for Drawing-room Performance* demonstrates the potential of Austen's novels for theatre adaptations. The character of Miss Bates appears in the playlet named "The

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Reading of Jane Fairfax's Letter". This adaptation of the first occurrence of Jane Fairfax's character through a letter received by Miss Bates presents a dialogue between her and Emma who arrives at her home to visit her has well as her mother who is present onstage, though described by the stage indications as "almost completely hidden from the audience during the whole of the scene" (37). Moreover, the unequal length of Emma and Miss Bates's speeches in the benefit of the latter demonstrates the potential of Miss Bates to become an 'actress' and to convey a real theatrical presence despite her sincerity. Her speeches that sometimes could appear as monologues compose the majority of the playlet, with only a few comments and asides from Emma to break their continuity. This adaptation displays remarkably the talkative personality of Miss Bates.

However, she is not only defined by that. Despite Reynolds's argument about the fact that she might be more intelligent and aware of her status than Emma allows us to think, she is still perceived by a lot of scholars as a grateful person who sees the positive side of life, even though she and her mother suffer from the consequences of her being a spinster. These are evoked by Mr Knightley who mentions after Emma's rude behaviour that "[Miss Bates] has sunk from the comforts she was born to" (351). For Jacqueline Latham:

> Her love of her niece and mother, her satisfaction with her hard life, her gratitude for small kindnesses, and the warmth and generosity of her judgements of others are shown almost every time she speaks. (140)

Throughout the entire novel, her words and actions remain in harmony, showing amiability and kindness even in the most painful moments. For instance, when Emma ridicules Miss Bates during the picnic on Box Hill, pointing out her overly talkative attitude and lightness of mind, the first thing that Miss Bates does is to inquire to Mr. Knightley, trying to understand if she did or said something wrong to Emma:

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> Ah! – Well – to be sure. Yes, I see what she means, (turning to Mr. Knightley,) and I will try to hold my tongue. I must make myself very disagreeable, or she would not have said such a thing to an old friend. (347)

In addition to that, when Emma comes to apologize for her rude conduct, Miss Bates is not capable of reproaching her anything, declaring to Emma: "So very kind . . . But you are always kind" (356). This line is particularly interesting to investigate, as it is possible to perceive in it a duality in Miss Bates's character who performs in a certain sense, but nevertheless remains sincere in her intentions. She surely still has in mind the words of Emma towards her but refuses to alter her perception of the Miss Woodhouse she admires so much. One could argue that she attempts to play a part, pretending that she is not hurt in order to not place Emma in a bad position. The fact that she claims that Jane is ill more than she really is and "laid down upon the bed" (354) to avoid an awkward conversation between them demonstrates the key different between authenticity and sincerity. As she plays a role and, thus, falls into "impersonation" (Sinanan and Milnes 7), her speech cannot be 'authentic'. However, as her aims is to avoid conflict, she remains sincere in her intention. In other words, she puts her acting skills only at the service of other, demonstrating once again her selflessness. With her character, it is possible to observe the erasure of the simplistic dichotomy between performance and genuineness. Even when she 'performs' in a way by lying to Emma, she remains in harmony with her feelings towards Emma. This demonstrates the complexity of performance that should not be reduced to artificiality, not leaving space for the conveyance of truthfulness.

Another character who remarkably displays an apparently contradictory identity is Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, as she embodies at the same time a genuineness of behaviour and a passion for fiction. She is a young seventeen-year-old woman whose passion for reading Gothic novels leads her to imagine fanciful stories and events in her head. From the

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very beginning of the novel, the narrator describes her from childhood to her coming-of-age emphasizing several times the fact that she is "plain" (17). It is also mentioned that "[s]he never could learn or understand any thing before she was taught; and sometimes not even then, for she was sometimes inattentive, and occasionally stupid" (16). Therefore, the first element given to the reader is Catherine's lightness of mind. She represents genuineness and does not always understand the overtone of the characters with whom she interacts. Because of that, it appears unlikely for her to be a good performer. This is even suggested in the first chapter of the novel, when the narrator comments that:

> [T]hough there seemed no chance of her throwing a whole party into raptures by a prelude on the pianoforte, of her own composition, she could listen to other people's performance with very little fatigue. (18)

This quotation underlines once again her lack of knowledge regarding acting. She is not a 'good player' and prefers to stay in the background while paying attention to other better performers. However, as it was already mentioned above, Catherine has a hobby that makes her active in another manner. Her love for reading, and in particular, reading Gothic novels allows her to become a playwright or even a stage director figure who chooses the plot that fascinates her the most, even when it does not represent reality. Jonathan Lamb describes "Catherine Morland as a kind of Don Quixote" (62), in the sense that, through an obsessional behaviour towards literature, she builds around herself an imaginary world, which comes out of her mind. Therefore, just like it was the case with Miss Bates who, despite her sincerity could become an actress, Catherine Morland transcends the dichotomy of real and fictional, becoming a stage director despite her ingenuity and her plainness. A quote that summarizes Catherine's character perfectly is "I cannot speak well enough to be unintelligible" (126). More than pointing out the social script that gathers unintelligibility and accomplishment, this sentence displays the

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contradictions in her identity. Here, she claims in a really elegant and well thought way her lack of knowledge and education concerning words and a certain kind of performance. This opposition between her speech and its precious form demonstrates a duality in her character. However, it is important to point out that, unlike Isabella Thorpe, her speeches are never artificial. It is even more amusing to witness Isabella's reproach to Catherine for being dishonest, while her entire character can be observed as the personification of lie:

> Nay, my sweetest Catherine, this is being quite absurd! Modesty, and all that, is very well in its way, but really a little common honesty is sometimes quite as becoming (136)

But coming back to Catherine's creative figure, it is important to remark that the events she imagines take their origins in real life. However, the problem of Catherine is that her "tendency to misread novels is concomitant with her misreading of people" (Steiner 58-59). For instance, her suspicion about Henry's father being the murderer of his wife comes from the lack of information as well as the extrapolation of certain details concerning the death of Mrs. Tilney. The fact that her imagination is paradoxically deeply rooted in reality demonstrates the ambiguity of fiction. This permeability that has already been addressed in chapter 2 demonstrates the reality hidden behind theatre. Indeed, we previously saw that even non-theatrical figures like Anne Elliot or Fanny Price could become, unconsciously or even against their will, theatrical elements, Anne being a spectatorial figure, while Fanny is an unfortunate actress imprisoned onstage. Therefore, Catherine Morland's identity as a stage director seems to validate an Austenian trope that tends to attribute theatrical roles and behaviour to genuine characters. This habit could be interpretated as a mean of rejecting the preconceptions regarding theatre as a purely artificial art that does not convey sincerity. It was previously mentioned that Austen is a writer who observe society "from the stage" (Penny Gay 23). Thus, what she displays 'onstage' cannot be pure fiction as her aim is to hold a mirror to this same society,

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showing its real face. Theatre is made for a certain audience at a certain moment and requires a sense of truth as the stage director's purpose is to transmit real through fiction.

The idea of the genuineness of the stage director in Austen's work is an aspect that Gill Hornby has particularly explored in her last novel *Godmersham Park* which incorporates Austen as one of the main characters and, therefore, appears relevant to address in the context of this mémoire. The novel tells the story of Anne Sharp, a woman who worked for two years as a governess for Edward Austen's daughter Fanny and who, after several exchanges of letters, will become friend with Fanny's beloved aunt Jane Austen. Despite some invented elements, the novel is based on information found in Fanny's "diaries" (Gill Hornby 414-415) and "give[s] agency and interest to a minor figure in Austen's life who has otherwise been ignored by biographers and scholars" (Larman, paragraph 1). Structured in four 'acts', the novel already displays its bond with theatre through its shape. But Hornby explores the theme even deeper in the plot and the allusions to Austen's writings are numerous. The topic of gender performance and expectations already examined in section 3.1 is here developed with the character of little Charles who is mocked by his siblings because of his "sweet, delicate nature" and for enjoying playing with a "doll" (310). In the same direction, the problem of spinsterhood is also addressed with the characters of Anne Sharp, Jane, and her sister Cassandra. In addition to that, the multiple conversations between Jane and Anne concerning theatre testify the importance of this topic as well as its relevance in Hornby's interpretation of Austen's work. Certain narrative plots of the novel echoes Austen's theatrical moments, providing a new interpretation of them. Unlike in *Mansfield Park*, the two children theatricals organised under the supervision of Miss Sharp are a triumph and her talent as a playwright and stage director are praised by all. During the process of writing *Virtue Rewarded*, the play performed by the children of the household, Anne Sharp still wants to incorporate reality in her fairy theatrical and therefore "set[s] herself the task of including a morality lesson" (259). This importance of reality inside fiction is another

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wink at Austen's oeuvre, and the fact that the role of the stage director is attributed to a genuine character like Miss Sharp also echoes what has been argued above about the dualistic identity of genuine characters in Austen's novels. Therefore, placing this particular character in the position of stage director who is in control of what is being displayed to the audience is deeply connected to Austen's particular use of theatre.

Miss Bates, Catherine Morland, Fanny Price or even Anne Elliot are all examples of characters who have a complicated relationship with performance and theatre in general, displaying overperformance, a fascination for fiction or even a rejection of performance. Despite the clear refusal of some of them to participate in an activity that they consider as not appropriated, their identity remains nevertheless incomplete without theatre. Through their actions, they all play a part in an unconscious manner and nourish the act of performance. What makes them different from other Austenian characters is the fact that their use of theatricality is not related to an attempt to shine in society or to obtain money or a higher social status. Thereby, the entanglement of genuine figures with specific theatrical roles such as the ones of playwrights, stage directors, actors, or even spectators is Austen's tool to combine the artificiality of the performing art with her purpose to exhibit reality as well as the wrongs of her society in everyday life.

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CHAPTER 4: THEATRE IN CONTEXT

To quote Rosina Filippi, "[Austen] is essentially dramatic, and her characters assume shape, form, and colour; her plots are human, her people are alive" (xi). From a thorough analysis of Austen's writings and the questioning of her relationship with the theatrical world through various elements such as the settings, the frame encompassing the dramatic action, or the characters evolving inside this same frame, emerges a figure more complex and polyvalent than simply the one of a novelist. She is also a playwright, a stage director, a dialogist, and in an amusing way an 'onstage spectator', whose gaze is turned towards the audience itself, scrutinizing every gesture and examining every speech. Through this inversion of roles between actors and spectators, Austen's novels transcend the dichotomy between the stage and the audience, turning the society who comes to theatre in order to get entertained into the real actors of the play, placing them under the spotlight. In this sense, the theatricality of the novel becomes a mirror that reflects its era. Therefore, it appears relevant to widen this investigation, exploring theatre, its specific features and uses in different contexts. Thereby, this chapter's purpose will be to better understand the importance of theatre as a political tool that can serve in the denunciation of the wrongs of society, as well as its status of a living form of art that evolves and changes its shape according to the context of its interpretation and the socio-economic and political interrogations attached to it. While the first section summarizes the different points of view of several scholars on the topic of theatre and politics, but also address the particular legal context of eighteenth century theatre, and therefore step aside from Austen's work, the second section will address two stage performances that are linked to Austen and the universe of her novels to observe the way in which these pieces of writing are still relevant regarding current issues and how their subtexts can be emphasised and redeveloped within another format.

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4.1 Theatre: A Political Art

The theatre critic Michael Billington once said "theatre – so often treated as marginal in our modern, hi-tech world – responds more quickly to events than other media and is not burdened by expectations of spurious objectivity" (Prado-Pérez 14). In this quotation, Billington argues the timeless power of theatre as an art that involves a notion of relation as well as exchange as it "responds" to some "events". Therefore, it is a media whose purpose and roots rely on the principle of reaction. In opposition to the art of cinema whose tools includes the possibility to edit the raw material, making cuts or directing the gaze of the spectator through various camera movements or close-up shots, theatre creates a discourse through a live performance that remains unmodified, though paradoxically evolving, as each performance is different. Thus, its reaction to events can be perceived in a certain manner as a message that the spectator needs to examinate and deconstruct without the help of the cinematographic tools depicted above. Hannah Arendt is even stronger than Billington in her argumentation as she places theatre above all other arts for its capacity to convey a political meaning, asserting:

> [T]he theater is the political art by excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art. By the same token, it is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others. (188)

This quotation taken from *The Human Condition* clearly exposes the political feature of theatre and defines the art itself through the connections and relations between human beings who are the central elements that compose it. Therefore, the stage can be considered as a place of thoughts and debate, which reinforces the idea of response and reaction raised by Billington. In addition to its political aspect, Arendt mentions the imitative dimension of theatre:

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> [T]he imitation or *mimesis*, which according to Aristotle prevails in all arts but is actually appropriate only to the *drama*, whose very name (from the Greek verb *dran*, "to act") indicates that playacting actually is an imitation of acting. (187)

Here, she makes a clear distinction between acting and what she calls "playacting". She describes the latter as the imitation of the first and therefore builds a relation of causality between these two terms, playacting's existence being entirely dependent on the reality of acting. Reproducing an action that, in opposition to its imitation, is part of the real world, the theatre can therefore be regarded as a secondary phase in a process whose substance and corporality are attached to the environment in which the humans, vectors of these actions, evolve. Returning to the notion of action itself, Arendt groups it with the other notion of speech and explains that they only exist because of the diversity and singularity generated by every human being:

> Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction. . . If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood. (175)

Arendt posits the relation between singularity and diversity as one of interdependence. Without diversity between all humans that have existed, and do, or will exist, speech and action are meaningless. In other words, the distinction between people is at the heart of theatre, because it is through these same distinctions that relations and interactions are created. Thus, if the interactions are at the centre of the dramatic art, it appears evident that, as Arendt explains it later in her text, "to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act" (188). With these elements in mind, the political dimension of the theatre can be understood more easily. For a definition of politics and the political, I rely on the *Oxford Dictionary of Public Health*

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describes the word as: "A set of activities associated with governance, organization, and running of public affairs at local, regional, national, and international levels"[15]. To paraphrase it, politics deals with the notion of system, and therefore, with the interconnections and relations within this same system. Just like theatre, the idea of relationships between human beings is at the heart of politics. Thus, it is not a surprise if theatre and politics are deeply linked and that the term 'political theatre' is pervasive in the writings of scholars interested in the art of performance.

This pervasiveness has at times led to debates in theatrical studies. For instance, Michael Kirby has quite a different point of view regarding theatre than Hannah Arendt. Kirby does not consider theatre as an art that is necessarily political. For him, there is a misunderstanding in the definition of the word "political" that leads to a biased perception of theatre. He even states that "[m]ost plays make no political statement" (129). The reason for his position can be drawn to his own personal definition of political theatre. For Kirby, it must be "concerned with government" or "must take sides in politics" (129). While the first element raises interesting questions concerning the ways to talk about government from an artistic point of view and in various degrees, the second one, however, appears extremely binary and does not leave space for nuances. Arguing that theatre is political only when choosing a clear side seems simplistic and misrecognizes the complexity of this art. One key element that should be taken into account is the fact that theatre is a plural art and encompasses several individuals with different roles, such as the playwright, stage director, actor, costumer or other technicians. Therefore, taking a clear position seems a hard task as it involves a lot of people with their own perception and viewpoints about the piece they are working on. In addition to that, it raises the question of knowing to whom does a play and its ideas belong. Even though the playwright could appear

[15] In *Oxford Dictionary of Public Health*. Edited by Miquel Porta and John M. Last, 2018.

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like the evident answer in a first place, because the text and, sometimes, stage directions are created by this person, it is important to point out that, despite being a product of a certain time for a group of people in particular, theatre is a living art that constantly evolves and changes, which means that plays are not fixed but are able to be reinterpreted and rethought in order to adapt to the society of the moment. Moving from theatre to opera which are two genres linked by the fact that they are both 'onstage arts', a good example that illustrates the idea of the stage as a place of evolution in which current issues can be addressed is the 2018 adaptation of *Carmen* by Leo Muscato in Florence which created a strong debate. For his own interpretation of the opera, the stage director decided to change the ending through the scenography. In order to talk about the violence made to women, "instead of being stabbed to death, the heroine snatches the gun from her tormentor Don José and kills him" (Verdú paragraph 1), a strong political message that, however, did not have any musicological impact on the opera. The modification was only visual. This choice demonstrated the power of scenography and the possibilities opened to explore pieces of art of nearly one hundred and fifty years old like Carmen and to use them with a different approach in order to tackle current issues such as violence against women.

Deploying theatre as a showcase to exhibit one's political opinions is not something new and, before coming back to Jane Austen and her novels, there is a particular event of the eighteen century that needs to be address in order to understand the environment in which she wrote them. In 1737, the British Parliament put in place the Licensing Act 1737. This law created a real upheaval in the dramatic sphere, as it depicted the theatre as problematic for the wellbeing of the state and as a threat for the government. The Act said that "[n]o performance on a public stage could legally take place without the prior full consent of the Lord Chamberlain's Office" (Zacchi 323). In other words, its aim was to control what was performed on stage because of its status of "an overly referential space, dangerous for its connections to

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current events and political scandal" (Hodgson 36). Therefore, a play that could potentially address undesirable topics could be easily censored by this law. It resulted in a drastic change in the theatrical landscape of London that "would be stifled for centuries" (Hodgson 35) as the act was only modified in 1843, nearly a hundred years later. The consequences of this law restricting the freedom of speech of playwrights are described by Anderson Hodgson as he evokes Eliza Haywood, who abandoned the writing of plays to focus to novels:

> The Licensing Act did more than prompt authors such as Haywood and Fielding to turn to novels instead of plays. It prompted these authors to turn to novels *and* to frame those novels as fictional. The lull in theatrical activity that postdates the Licensing Act coincides with a spurt of novel writing. (36)

Therefore, this 'migration' of the stage artists towards the novel was a strategy to avoid censorship from the government and will remarkably draws an historical connection between theatre and this really different literary genre. With this perspective in mind, Austen's sway between both novels and drama can be regarded as the direct legacy of the Licensing Act 1737. With the law still operating in the early nineteenth century, it is probable that writers were still more inclined to explore the novel genre to convey their political ideas rather than theatre that was closely supervised by the British government. This could explain Austen's close bond to theatre while remaining mainly a novel writer with the exception of her youth playlets that were mentioned above in the first chapter. The investigation of this major event in the history of British drama once again demonstrates the importance of politics in theatre that appears like a real "forum for political commentary" (Hodgson 36). Indeed, if theatre was not political or only tackle the subject in a few examples, a government would not devote a law to the censorship of plays that are considered not acceptable for performance. Theatre is a reaction art that attempts to register the issues of a time and to question it through, speech, dialogues, props, costumes

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and sometimes even music. Relying on the interactions and relations between individuals, theatre becomes alive through diversity of actions and the imitation of these same actions.

4.2 Austen's Novels Onstage: Remaining Current Through Adaptation

With time, Austen's different pieces of writing have been adapted into many different forms. The most well-known adaptations of her work are undoubtedly the cinematographic ones, with various movies for each novel, including some which have been real success at the box-office, like for instance the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* film. However, the theatre adaptations of Austen, though more obscure, have also flourished this last decade and continue to do so, as *Pride and Prejudice* (*sort of*), the musical adaptation of the novel, is still performed in 2022 after having won the Laurence Olivier award for Best Comedy the same year. Therefore, it is remarkable to notice the success of such adaptation as it demonstrates the potential of theatre to display to the public of the twenty-first century these novels in a form that could help spectators not familiar with the author to enter in the world of Jane Austen in another manner than by reading the novels. In that sense, theatre can be used as a pedagogical tool that widens the horizon of Austen's legacy. Additionally, as previously mentioned, drama can also serve as a way to talk about current issues. Sexism, racism, war, climate change, social classes, the stage is a place inside which various topics and problems can be addressed. Sometimes these issues are already present in the original piece and are directly raised by their writer like for instance, the issue of sexual violence against women at the end of the second world war in *A Woman in Berlin*[16], and sometimes, though not part of the original questionings, they are integrated by the stage director of a specific adaptation. The example of the opera *Carmen* that was mentioned in the first section of this chapter is a good example to illustrate it. These two theatrical examples are

[16] Memoir of the German journalist Marta Hillers that was originally published anonymously in 1954 in which she depicts the occupation of Berlin by the Red Army in 1945 and her rape by Soviet soldiers.

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interesting as they both deal with the topic of violence against women but, while in the first one, the subject is rooted in the intention of the writer herself, the second one reinterprets an old opera in order to tackle the issue with the gaze of the twenty first century. This once again demonstrates the lived and living dimension of theatre as an art that does not stay fixed in time but on the contrary evolves.

Coming back to Jane Austen and her work, various topics addressed in her novels remain relevant in our current society despite the changes that have occurred between the moment when these pieces where published and now. For instance, the subject of gender performance, though addressed and questioned in very different ways in the early nineteenth century and today, remains an issue that links these two periods and therefore can be really interesting to investigate in the context of contemporary theatre. In addition, Austen's theatre adaptations demonstrate what has been investigated throughout this mémoire, the capacity of these novels to comment and depict the society of their time through the use of the metaphor of theatrical performance and to retransmit this analysis to their audience, inversing the usual power relationship between the stage and the spectators around the notion of gaze that, in this case, is directed towards the public whose everyday performance is placed under the spotlight.

The first adaptation worth examining for the relevance of the theatrical form in Austen's world is *Pride and Prejudice* (*sort of*). As an adaptation that is still currently performed and which takes a lot of freedom from the original novel, it appears like an extremely pertinent example to analyse. This adaptation is summarized in an article of *The Guardian* as "a musical version [of *Pride and Prejudice*] in which the entire cast is played by five women posing as jaunty "below stairs" staff" (Akbar paragraph 2). In addition to the stately reduced number of actors onstage to play all the variety of characters that compose the original novel, "[t]he minimalism extends to *Ana Inés Jabares-Pita* 's set (a chandelier here, a Japanese vase there), which seems to be pulled out of a travelling troupe's box of tricks" (paragraph 3). Therefore,

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the key words that appears to describe this theatrical adaptation at first glance is restriction. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to confuse restriction with simplicity. Indeed, with settings reduced to the essential and only five actresses to play all the roles, including the ones of the servants that were added to the plot, reproducing, or rather reimagining *Pride and Prejudice* is certainly not an easy task. However, these constrains might also be perceived as a strength. Indeed, interesting ideas are explored through the reduction of the cast. Firstly, the fact that all the roles are played by women, more than an impertinent wink to the laws of the Elizabethan theatre in which only men were allowed onstage, is a choice that breaks the boundaries of gender and the roles assigned to each of them. Despite the modernity of this choice that would have been impossible in Austen's era, it seems interestingly relevant, as it allows the questioning of gender expectations that is a fundamental theme in Austen's novel. Therefore, the musical keeps the original topic of gender but reexplores it in a contemporary manner, injecting a twenty-first century perspective to a novel of the early-nineteenth century.

Moreover, an important element of the staging is the manner in which this adaptation depicts the fatherly figure of Mr. Bennet:

> In a winning touch, Mr Bennet is portrayed as an empty chair, always facing the wrong way with only his newspaper in view. Mrs Bennet talks at the chair and the joke never gets tiresome, the absurd one-way exchange oddly reminiscent of Winnie and Willie in *Happy Days*. (paragraph 6)

Remarkably, the scenography of this theatrical adaptation develops the concept of Mr Bennet as an absent father who does not fulfil his duty towards his daughters, which was addressed in the previous chapter. The idea to not attribute his role to any of the actresses onstage is a choice that needs to be pointed out as it elaborates on the problems of Mr. Bennet as a father figure that maintains a passive behaviour regarding his daughters. Therefore, the absence of an actor

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to play his part is the reflection of his absence in his duties. Because of that, it seems a little simplistic to summarize this choice of scenography as a nothing more than a "joke" (paragraph 6).

Concerning aspects that were not mentioned in the original novel but which are explored in this adaptation, it is possible to underline the "issue of the below-stairs class" (paragraph 9) as well as the question of sexuality that is raised by the reinterpretation of the character of Charlotte as "a closet lesbian" (paragraph 10). Those two themes, though not mentioned by Austen in her novel, are nevertheless interesting as they are based either on a social dimension that was forgotten or avoided by the author of the original piece, or on a hypothesis that could not have been investigated or mentioned during Austen's era as homosexuality was still criminalized at the time. Thus, the fact that these topics does not appear explicitly in *Pride and Prejudice* that they are irrelevant in a twenty-first century adaptation of the novel. On the contrary, these two examples demonstrate the power of theatre as an art that is always in motion, as well as a place allowing debate on various issues.

For drastically different adaptation concept, I turn to *Austentatious: An Improvised Jane Austen Novel*. As its title suggests, is an "entirely improvised comedy play in the style of Jane Austen"[17] (*Austentatious* website paragraph 1). Evolving around "audience suggestions" (Civale 416), the troupe must improvise and has no time to prepare their performance. This approach of Austen's work is particularly interesting as, unlike an adaptation of a precise novel, this play does not focus on the story or the plot, but on the atmosphere as well as the stereotypical aspects that are linked to the name of Jane Austen for the public of the twenty-first century. Like it was already the case with *Pride and Prejudice* (*sort of)*, this improvisational play is characterized by the drastic reduction of the actors performing.

[17] Quotation taken from the website: https://www.austentatiousimpro.com/

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Originally starting with a "six-person ensemble" (Civale 416) in 2012, the troupe is nowadays composed of eight actors who "regularly perform at London's Leicester Square Theatre" (416). However, this play's structure is the element that separates it from the other more 'realistic' adaptations of Austen's novels. Split into many short scenes of "three or four minutes" (416), the play evolves around the idea that there were many more novels written by Jane Austen than just six. Each scene represents an imaginary lost piece of writing of the author whose title is decided with the different suggestions of the audience. Thus, the play in itself is composed of many different plots in which Austen's literary universe becomes the main subject of comedy.

Lampooning Austen's tropes and parodying her style through its modernisation as well as improvisation, *Austentatious* is a comedy which uses similar tools to Austen's, creating a relevant reinterpretation of her work. The notion of parody is already deeply rooted in her three little playlets that clearly reinvented the different trope of precise theatrical genres such as the burletta for "The first Act of a Comedy". Therefore, witnessing Austen being lampooned in a theatrical performance is particularly relevant to the different bonds between her novels and the theatre that were explored in all the previous chapters. The improvisational aspect of the play also echoes the link that was explored between her novels and the Italian genre of the Commedia dell'arte. Here's it is not the single figure of the handsome lying suitor that improvises in order to fit in the frame the best way possible, but the entirety of the actors present onstage. Thus, *Austentatious* is a play that, under its apparent estrangement from the calmer rhythm of Austen's novel, encompasses in a very amusing manner different themes and aspects of her writings.

Finally, what these two onstage adaptations express, each in their own manner, is the capacity of Austen's literary universe to remain relevant for an audience of the twenty-first century through theatrical adaptation. Reusing topics that already had a strong importance in the novels such as women condition and incorporating new ones such as homosexuality or

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downstairs classes with the addition of new characters, *Pride and Prejudice* (*sort of*) and *Austentatious* demonstrate the skilful interplay of the old and new. They both create a mix between the original work and a contemporary perspective that underlines other aspects of the novels, which asserts Austen's power to remain actual through theatre, an art allowing the change of point of view through gaze.

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CONCLUSION

The permeability of theatre as an art which transcends the boundaries of its own spatiality, often reduced to a stage, is a key concept that Jane Austen uses throughout her work, providing readers with her own interpretation of acting. Through the deep exploration of the theatrical art that fascinates her since childhood, she employs devices and themes particularly important to the acting format like for instance dramatic irony or soliloquy that she sometimes parodies, submitting to ridicule certain characters in order to display their wrongs. Austen appropriates particular theatrical forms and revisits them, as she remarkably creates her own stock character that borrows several elements and aspects from the *commedia dell'arte*. She also plays with the complex relationship between performance and truthfulness, as even her characters considered as the depiction of genuineness are able to display a certain form of theatricality. In other words, despite being mostly remembered as a novelist depicting the life of a certain part of the society of the early nineteenth century, it would be missing an entire dimension of Austen's work not to acknowledge her qualities and expertise as a playwright who uses performance beyond the constraints of the stage. It is not a coincidence if scholars like Penny Gay and Paula Byrne have written books relying entirely on the relationship between Austen and the theatre, or if writers of the twenty-first century like Gill Hornby still write novels in which the triumph of an onstage performance attended by the character of Jane Austen herself plays a key role.

But more than merely using different theatrical elements and themes in her works, Austen widens the possibilities of the theatrical art's expression itself, as she incorporates in her reflection the audience, usually left aside as a remote element that does not belong to acting strictly speaking. This is due to the perception of the audience as a space clearly opposed to the stage which remains the starting point of the acting process in the collective thinking. Furthermore, the manner in which Austen includes the public in the sphere of performance is

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striking, as it does not correspond to the dichotomized and binary vision of on the one hand the stage as the active space in which drama is created and performed, and on the other hand the public as the space that receives the information passively. On the contrary, the audience is often depicted as a space that conveys a form of performance and theatricality, sometimes even more than the stage space. This displacement of acting from its usual environment offers an inversion of the usual roles within the theatre, the spectators becoming the performers and catching the attention, while the characters (and Austen herself) stare at them, their eyes focused on the real entertainment: society. Therefore, the theatre turns into a hall of mirrors where people gaze at their reflection, entertained by their own performance.

Displaying to their face their wrongs and lampooning their artificial behaviours, the theatrical art is, therefore, not a mere place of entertainment, but, on the contrary, reveals its substantial political dimension asserted by scholars like Hannah Arendt. Asking questions about various societal problems and thus, reacting to events of everyday life that are not fictional, the theatre can be described as a reply, an idea that takes its origins from society. Moreover, the fact that Austen wrote her novels during an era of great troubles for the British dramatic sphere due to the Licensing Act 1737 implicates the political aspect of theatre. In addition, unlike cinema, a media that allows editing in its creation process, the theatre displays uncut performances, which are, consequently, extremely difficult to control. This could explain the fear of governments towards theatre that could convey ideas considered dangerous for the good running of society, and therefore, the establishment of restrictive laws against it. Being aware of the context in which Austen wrote her novels allows an easier understanding of her literary pieces of work, taking important elements of the theatre and mixing them with the less politically restrained format of the novel.

This mémoire has endeavoured to display in a new light the theatrical dimension of Jane Austen’s novels. Exploring at the same time the frames of these novels and the various

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performances encapsulated within them, the purpose was to investigate the manner in which her work can be read and understood as the transposition of theatrical elements into the format of the novel and, at the same time, to observe the living and evolving status of theatrical art. Paying a particular attention to the political aspect of theatre and onstage performance, two contemporary plays were examined, analysing their respective treatment of societal problems addressed by Austen like the place of women in society for example, but also their interest in raising new societal interrogations through the adaptation of texts written two hundred years ago.

This mémoire being limited and allowing only a restricted analysis of Austen's literary universe, it appears evident that the relationship between Austen and the theatrical art could still be developed in future papers with a different approach. For instance, another relevant topic that could be addressed in future research on the field could be the comparison of cinematographic and theatrical adaptations of Austen's work. Being two forms of art in which the visual dimension is primordial and thus, complementary to the format of the novel in which the readers can only imagine the world presented to them, it might be interesting to consider the question of visual adaptation as a way to expend Austen's work, already extremely dense without a figurative visual dimension. Maybe it is the main strength of Austen's novels and the reason why they are still the topic of numerous studies: their capacity of evolution and adaptation through time.

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