



## Home Entertainment Practices in Austin’s *Mansfield Park* And Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*

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### Abstract

The following paper investigates the role that home entertainment practices play in revealing the events that take place in Jane Austin’s *Mansfield Park* and Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*. In *Mansfield Park*, a large section of the novel is devoted to depicting an attempt of organizing and performing a home theatrical. In *Jane Eyre*, there is a brief yet very crucial game of charades performed at Thornfield Hall. In both novels, there are fortune-hunters who use the home entertainment practices to achieve their goals, and, in contrast, there are the heroines of both novels who stand out and refuse to take part in those practices. The following study offers an interpretation of the theatricals in *Mansfield Park* and their implications as well as the game of charades and its significance in *Jane Eyre*.

**Key words:** Home entertainment practices; Theatrical; Charades; Performances; Acting; Foreshadowing

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### INTRODUCTION

Embedded within the narrative strategies of both *Mansfield Park* and *Jane Eyre* is some kind of a home entertainment practice that basically foreshadows and/or reveals much of what the novel has to say. In *Mansfield*

*Park*, a large section of the novel is devoted to depicting an attempt of organizing and performing a home theatrical. In *Jane Eyre*, there is a brief yet very crucial game of charades performed at Thornfield Hall. Furthermore, in both cases, we meet two young women who try to hide their real motives of securing a good marriage through taking part in these performances. Both Miss Maria Bertram and Miss Ingram are fortune hunters who put on a performance, which, instead of hiding their real motives, serves as an uncovering or unmasking of what they aspire for. In the case of *Jane Eyre*, Mr. Rochester is also putting on an act that hides his real motives. In contrast to these two devious and shrewd young women stand the governesses of *Mansfield Park* and Thornfield Hall, Fanny Price and Jane Eyre, who never accept to take part in any role of acting, and thus remain true throughout the work. The following study takes a close look at both the theatricals in *Mansfield Park* and their implications as well as the game of charades and its significance in *Jane Eyre*. The characters of Maria Bertram and Miss Ingram will be brought together in an attempt to show how the two characters are to an extent very similar in their behavior and in their quests. Finally, the characters of Fanny Price and Jane Eyre will be discussed in light of their weaknesses and low social status, but who, nevertheless end up as highly admired and respected, and finally triumph in the end simply because they adamantly refuse to put on acts and take part in those home entertainment practices.

### 1. HOME ENTERTAINMENT PRACTICES IN MANSFIELD PARK

The understanding of the theatrical manifestations is crucial to the understanding of the characters in *Mansfield Park*. Much criticism has been written about the acting out that takes place in the novel. Lodge (1962) believes that “the theatricals are given great prominence in *Mansfield*

*Park* because they produce a situation, involving all the most important characters in the novel that lends itself particularly full and subtle treatment of the delicate and complex interrelationship of social and moral conduct” (p. 279). Litvak (1986) believes that “theatricality as topic turns out to pervade the novel (p. 332). Moreover, Hummel (1973) suggests that “in the production of Kotzebue’s *Lovers’ Vows*, ... Austen treats events as emblematic charades which dramatize larger moral and didactic implications of her novel” (p. 256). When it is suggested that a theatrical be performed, the true nature of both Fanny Price and Miss Bertram surfaces and we watch both of them move in opposite directions, Fanny as a true and honest young girl, and Miss Bertram as a cunning and pretentious person who not only aspires to get married to a rich man but also paves her way into an illegitimate relationship after her marriage.

From the beginning of *Mansfield Park*, a distinction is made between Fanny Price and her cousins with whom it has been decided she is to be raised. Sir Thomas Bertram hopes “to preserve in the minds of [his] daughters the consciousness of what they are, without making them think too lowly of their cousin; and without depressing her spirits too far, to make her remember that she is not a Miss Bertram. . . .But still they cannot be equals. Their rank, fortune, rights, and expectations will always be different” (p. 47). As the girls grow up together, with this distinction in mind, Fanny plays the role of the observer.

Miss Bertram, at the age of twenty-one, playful, beautiful, and clever gets engaged to Mr. Rushworth, who, in spite of being somehow stupid, has a great fortune. Although Miss Bertram is well off herself, she greeds for more. On her first visit to Sotherton, the place where Mr. Rushworth lives, Maria is uneasy on their way there, but as they arrive and she sees what the future has in store for her, “Miss Bertram could now speak with decided information of what she had known nothing about, when Mr. Rushworth had asked her opinion, and her spirits were in a happy a flutter as vanity and pride could furnish, when they drove up the spacious stone steps before the principal entrance” (p. 112). This is the starting point in which we watch Maria publicly masking herself, acting out the fact that she is in love with her fiancée, whereas what she really is in love with is his estate.

By the time the characters in *Mansfield Park* decide to act out *Lover’s Vow*, Maria is already in question. She has learned to act even before they decide to really act out *Lover’s Vow*. She is betrothed to a person for whom she has no feelings and has to act in order to achieve what it is she aspires for. The rehearsals for acting are in fact rehearsals for Miss Bertram to skill herself even more. The whole scene up until now has been all about acting. With the inclusion of the theatricals, Austen is telling the readers who can and who can’t act. Maria is one of those actors who continue to act throughout the novel. Tave (1978) asserts that in the choice of the play “Maria is

aware to the degree of knowing the impropriety, but not to the degree of resisting it” (p. 42).

The choice of the play brings out more of the character’s true nature than it does to hide it. Everything about the theatricals is revealing and disruptive. The house is rearranged and altered to make it look like a real theatre. The play itself turns on unnatural and dangerous relationships especially when Maria plays the role of the abandoned mother and Henry Crawford plays the role of her bastard son. The choosing of the role foreshadows the illegitimate relationship between the two as later on in the novel they elope. In this way, rather than concealing the true nature of one’s self, acting becomes the window into oneself, and the theatre, which is normally a place where one can explore and experiment with other selves, becomes a place where one can explore and experiment with one’s self. This is the situation with Miss Bertram. The theatricals at *Mansfield Park* help us understand her more, and from there we can see her act out for the rest of the novel.

Upon her father’s return after a long absence from home, he notices that his daughter does not care for her fiancée and talks to her about it, urging her to break off the engagement if that is what she really desires. She puts on another act and convinces her father that it is what her heart desires and she will be perfectly happy with this marriage. After the conversation with her father ends, “the conference closed as satisfactorily as to him. She was in a state of mind to be glad that she had secured her fate beyond recall—that she had pledged herself anew to Sotherton. . . and retired in proud resolve, determined only to behave more cautiously to Mr. Rushworth in the future, that her father might not be again suspecting her” (p. 216).

Her final scene of acting takes place when she elopes with Mr. Crawford, who is as skilled in acting as Maria herself. Miss Bertram’s selfishness and cruelty are clearly seen in her last ‘act’, which disgraces not only herself, but all her family as well. The end of her acting runs parallel with her own destruction. When all her talents of acting vanish, her true self and nature are brought to the fore. Her end is exactly what she deserves:

She was not prevailed on to leave Mr. Crawford. She hoped to marry him, and they continued together till she was obliged to be convinced that such hope was vain, and till the disappointment and wretchedness arising from the conviction, rendered her temper so bad, and her feelings for him so like hatred, as to make them for a while each other’s punishment, and then induce a voluntary separation. (p.448)

In practicing for the theatricals in *Mansfield Park*, an actress is born. In the positioning of theatrical conventions in the home, Austen is giving Miss Bertram a chance to apply her acting in everyday life. The usefulness of the dramatic literacies provided at home have a larger scope than just entertainment. It results in a strong announcement of a woman’s capabilities in acting out in real life. Miss Bertram puts on her mask both on stage

and off stage because of her practice. In this way, Austen is suggesting that these home entertainment practices have serious complications that produce characters such as Maria. They are dangerous and have unlimited consequences.

On the other hand, we watch and observe Fanny Price. Whereas Wiltshire (1997) believes that “Fanny Price is an interesting psychological study in the manners and attitudes of a radically traumatized personality,” (p. 60) I believe it is otherwise. Fanny’s personality is neither insecure nor traumatized as she is the heroine of *Mansfield Park* because of her strength, will, and most importantly, her honesty. It is true that we see Fanny in the beginning as insecure, but it is only so because she is young, lacks experience of the world, and has been transplanted in a higher social class than which she really belongs to. However, as the novel progresses, we watch Fanny grow in every positive way.

Fanny is a young girl who has a strong sense of duty and a strong set of principles on which she acts. In the novel, her attachment to her aunt, and likewise, her aunt’s attachment to her is indicative of her sense of responsibility and gratitude towards the Bertrams. When Fanny leaves *Mansfield Park* in order to visit her own family, the two places become contrasted in Fanny’s mind. Paradoxically, her own home “was the abode of noise, disorder, and impropriety” (p.381).

Not only is Fanny aware of the responsibility she has towards the Bertrams, but she is also aware of the responsibility she has towards herself and her principles. This is very evident when the theatricals are being arranged for in *Mansfield Park*. Fanny, though not in a position to argue or speak for herself, totally refuses the idea of acting. “No, indeed, I cannot act” is the basis of Fanny’s values and principles (p. 168). Litvak (1986) believes that “for Fanny . . . the theater is not just an object of anxiety but the very site of anxiety, a site that crosses its own boundaries to figure the anxiety of the novel as a whole” (p. 334).

Being so determined not to act is carried out further with Fanny when she adamantly refuses to be the wife of Henry Crawford. Despite the fact that he goes to extreme lengths to gain her approval, Fanny knows that he is as talented in acting as Maria Bertram.

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## 2. HOME ENTERTAINMENT PRACTICES IN *JANE EYRE*

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In *Jane Eyre*, and specifically in Chapter sixteen, Mr. Rochester and his guests decide to entertain themselves on a rainy day by playing a game of charades, which, according to Jane “in [her] ignorance [she] did not understand the term” (p. 206). The game of charades is divided in to three parts, and each part has its layers of meanings. It seems like it is the intention of Bronte to

implant this game in order to warn both the reader and *Jane Eyre* of upcoming events and the true intentions of both Miss Ingram and Mr. Rochester.

When “the curtain drew up” in the first game of charades:

Within the arch, the bulky figure of Sir George Lynn, whom Mr. Rochester had likewise chosen, was seen enveloped in a white sheet: before him on a table, lay open a large book. . . . Then appeared the magnificent figure of Miss Ingram, clad in white, a long veil on her head, and a wreath of roses round her brow: by her side walked Mr. Rochester, and together they drew near the table. . . . A ceremony followed, in dumb show, in which it was easy to recognize the pantomime of a wedding. (p. 207)

The first game of charades may be interpreted in three ways. First, this is the aim of Miss Ingram as she, and her family, are hoping of securing her with a good marriage by marrying her off to Mr. Rochester. By placing herself in the place of a bride, she is announcing her intentions. In this way, like the case of Miss Maria Bertram, acting becomes a means of expressing hidden desires, motives, and aspirations.

Another interpretation of the first game of charades is seen twofold: First, it serves as a warning to the reader that Mr. Rochester is already married and has a wife. Second, it also reveals what Mr. Rochester has in mind concerning Jane. Looking at this part from Mr. Rochester’s perspective, acting out in the charade not only helps him reveal his intentions, but also helps him conceal his darker and hidden secrets. Rea (1992) believes that in the charades “in which Rochester is a participant lies an important thematic and onomastic key to the novel as a whole” (p.75).

When the first charade is solved, the second performance takes us deeper and deeper into the motives of both Rochester and Miss Ingram:

Seated on the carpet by the side of this basin, was seen Mr. Rochester, costumed in shawls, with a turban on his head. His dark eyes and swarthy skin and paynim features suited the costume exactly: he looked the very model of an eastern emir; an agent or a victim of the bowstring. Presently advanced into view Miss Ingram. She, too, was attired in oriental fashion: a crimson scarf tied sash-like round the waist: an embroidered handkerchief knotted about her temples. . . . Both her cast of form and feature, her complexion and her general air, suggested the idea of some Israelitish princess of the patriarchal days. . . . From the bosom of his robe, he then produced a casket, opened it and showed magnificent bracelets and earrings: she acted astonishment and admiration.” (p.207-8)

The charade is exactly what Mr. Rochester has in mind if his first plan of marrying Jane, exemplified by the first charade, fails. This is his alternative plan as he later suggests to Jane that they both run away and live together unmarried. The oriental features of the charades suggest the fact that he intends to take Jane to faraway lands and indulge her in luxuries as far as she is his mistress and

lover. He will be the "emir" and she the "princess".

As far as Miss Ingram is concerned, the second charade complements the first one after she becomes his bride. By marrying Mr. Rochester, she hopes to become a "princess" indulged in "magnified bracelets and earrings" having "the treasure at her feet" (p. 208).

The third charade is the most significant because it foretells and provides warnings for what is hidden as well as what is about to take place:

On its third rising only a portion of the drawing-room was disclosed; the rest being concealed by a screen, hung with some sort of dark and coarse drapery. . . . Amidst this sordid scene, sat a man with his clenched hands resting on his knees. I knew Mr. Rochester; though the begrimed face, the disordered dress. . . the desperate and scowling countenance, the rough bristling hair might well have disguised him. As he moved, a chain clanked; to his wrists were attached fetters. (p. 208)

To Rea (1992), "the thematic referents of the tableau are significant. . . the tableau foreshadows the mockery of a marriage that Rochester is prevented from carrying out with Jane as the innocent bride" (p. 76). The chain and fetters are symbols of the legal fetters that bind him to Bertha Mason as he later admits to Jane that he is "bound to a mad, bad embruted partner" (p. 369), a wife he considers to be "a filthy burden bound to me" (p.393). The chains may also be reflective of his attachment to Jane and indicative of his eternal love for her. "The dark and coarse drapery" are reflective of the darkness and ambiguity of the whole situation. The dimness of the scene reflects the dimness of Bertha's "cell". It is windowless, and its light is derived from "a lamp suspended from the ceiling by a chain" (p. 370). Thus, the last charade provides important visual clues to the existence of Mr. Rochester's previous marriage and to his mad incarcerated wife.

Moreover, the charade predicts the future of Mr. Rochester after Jane leaves him. In it, he is sitting with "clenched hands, resting on his knees, and his eyes bent on the ground." Later on in the story, Mr. Rochester is crippled and blind. This may be the punishment chosen for him as he attempts to act and cheat Jane, as he has acted in the previous charades.

The charades of Mr. Rochester as bridegroom, emir, and prisoner being over, Rochester continues to act as later he is another form of disguise—that of the gypsy and fortuneteller. As he/she reads Jane Eyre's palm, he is also giving her a warning of looking deeper than appearances, and insists that she reads everything as a riddle. But the scene is telling us more here about Rochester than Jane, as Williams (1998) suggests, "the scene hints at a dissolving and splitting apart of Rochester's personality: his rational self is no longer in control, his feelings are beginning to master him, and a deeper and more impersonal part of him almost gives his consciously and manipulating self away" (p. 36).

Until Jane realizes the truth about Mr. Rochester's first marriage, she is within a curtained enclosure. Jane's

whole experience takes the form of a charade, and she must acquire the ability to interpret the cryptic signs she sees. Thornfield is a theatre, its inhabitants are actors acting out in front of Jane. Jane is the ignorant, innocent spectator being acted upon. She is led through these home entertainment practices which not only hide the truth, but also reveal it. However, with the true nature of Jane, she cannot see the truth through what is acted in front of her. She learns it almost too late.

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## CONCLUSION

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Both *Mansfield Park* and *Jane Eyre* employ the use of home entertainment practices as cautioning, foreshadowing, and providing a means for devious characters to carry out their schemes. Like Miss Maria Bertram, Miss Ingram hopes for securing herself with a good marriage. By acting, both women are revealing what they aspire for. Mr. Rochester also has something to hide and something to reveal simultaneously by acting in the charades. On the other side of the "stages" stand Fanny Price and Jane Eyre. For Fanny Price, her insistence on not taking part reiterates her insistence of being and remaining honest throughout. For Jane Eyre, who according to one of the guests at Thornfield Hall "looks too stupid for any game of the sort" (p. 206), one might retort by saying that she is "too honest" for any game like that. Little does she know, however, that the whole episode is on her, about her, and for her. Williams (1998) comments that "Jane is the center of the whole episode" of charades though it is "unknown to herself" (p. 35). Not being able to understand this game, Jane Eyre goes through the process of realizing the truths bitterly and broken-heartedly; nevertheless, she does not adhere to any of the plans Mr. Rochester has enacted through playing charades.

From these home entertainment practices arise devious, manipulating, and subversive characters. Against such characters stand women with principles, self-control, and above all, honesty. Both Fanny Price and Jane Eyre are the heroines of both novels and we watch them grow into maturity choosing the right path of not putting on performances. Their power is derived from the fact that they have chosen to lead a life of truth. The fact that they are genuine is why they both triumph and end up with the men they both love.

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