

CHAPTER ONE

Jane Austen's experience of theatre

Despite being the home of a respectable country clergyman, Steventon parsonage was by no means divorced from things theatrical. Plays, both contemporary and classic, were evidently available for reading and for the production of home theatricals. Jane Austen's elder brothers perhaps brought the 'itch for acting' (*MP*, p. 121) home from Oxford, resulting in a series of domestic productions in 1782–90; but the reading of plays seems to have been part of the normal spectrum of home entertainment in a family where reading aloud was a regular after-dinner pastime. Cassandra and Jane's brief sojourn at the Abbey School, Reading (1785–6) was under the direction of the theatre enthusiast Mrs La Tournelle, and 'plays may have been a feature of Jane's and Cassandra's education', argues Claire Tomalin.¹ Whether or not this was the case, there is plenty of evidence that from childhood, Austen was reading plays, dissecting their characteristics, and delightedly reproducing them in her early experiments in writing.

THE JUVENILIA

Austen's juvenilia, carefully collected by her into three 'volumes', include three spoof playlets, 'The Visit', 'The Mystery', and 'The first Act of a Comedy'. 'The Visit' (*MW*, pp. 49–54), like the other two, is set out in perfect compliance with the conventions of the printed drama, with stage directions including asides and instructions for actors' movements. The text of the playlet is a hilariously deadpan parody of society drama, in which polite clichés are exchanged and nothing of moment is said except by the resident Fitzgeralds, who blame all the shortcomings of the visit on the eccentricities of 'my Grandmother'.² This includes a surreal sequence in which Miss Fitzgerald says to the visitors, 'Bless me! there ought to be 8 Chairs and there are but 6. However, if your Ladyship will but take Sir Arthur in your Lap, & Sophy my Brother in hers, I beleive we shall do

pretty well.' Which they proceed to do without turning a hair. The dinner, discussed with similar imperturbable politeness, includes 'fried Cowheel & Onion', red herrings, tripe, 'Liver & Crow', and suet pudding. All ends happily with arbitrary proposals of marriage insouciantly accepted.

'The Mystery' ('An Unfinished Comedy', *MW*, pp. 55–7), even shorter in its two pages, consists of an inspired riff on the trope of stage secrecy: the eight characters in the three scenes drop hints, nods and winks, and tantalising unfinished sentences – but nothing material is actually revealed to anyone, on or off stage:

DAPHNE. My dear Mrs Humbug how d'ye do? Oh! Fanny t'is all over.
 FANNY. Is it indeed!
 MRS. HUM. I'm very sorry to hear it.
 FANNY. Then t'was to no purpose that I . . .
 DAPHNE. None upon Earth.
 MRS. HUM. And what is to become of? . . .
 DAPHNE. Oh! thats all settled. (*whispers* MRS. HUMBUG)

(*MW*, p. 56)

In 'The first Act of a Comedy' (*MW*, pp. 172–4) Austen expertly parodies the burletta or comic opera of the day:

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.

SONG.

I go to Town
 And when I come down
 I shall be married to Strephon
 And that to me will be fun.
 CHORUS. Be fun, be fun, be fun,
 And that to me will be fun.

The parodies that these three playlets constitute are knowing, extremely accurate satire. Obviously well before she was an adult Jane Austen knew a great deal about contemporary theatre. There is even a theatrical in-joke in the final paragraphs of *Love and Friendship*: 'Philander & Gustavus, after having raised their reputation by their Performances in the theatrical Line at Edinburgh, removed to Covent Garden, where they still exhibit under the assumed names of *Lewis & Quick*'³ (*MW*, p. 109). Elsewhere in the juvenilia Austen cites specific playwrights by name. In the 'History of England . . . By a partial, prejudiced, & ignorant Historian' she unabashedly draws much of her 'history' from Shakespeare's plays, which she expects her audience to

recognise. 'Henry the 4th', for example, 'falling ill, his son the Prince of Wales came and took away the crown; whereupon the King made a long speech, for which I must refer the Reader to Shakespear's Plays, & the Prince made a still longer' (*MW*, p. 139). She had also by this stage (circa 1790) read and obviously appreciated Sheridan's hilarious satire of contemporary theatrical fashions, *The Critic* (1779): 'as [Sir Walter Raleigh] was an enemy of the noble Essex, I have nothing to say in praise of him, & must refer all those who may wish to be acquainted with the particulars of his Life, to Mr. Sheridan's play of the Critic, where they will find many interesting Anecdotes as well of him as of his freind Sir Christopher Hatton' (*MW*, p. 147). Brian Southam notes two other probable borrowings from *The Critic* in the juvenilia: the 'hints and mysteries' of scene ii of 'The Mystery' and the famous 'We fainted alternately on a Sofa' of *Love and Friendship* (Notes, *MW*, p. 458).

Southam has also argued persuasively for the presence of Jane Austen's authorial hand in 'Sir Charles Grandison', dating the final version of the manuscript around 1800 (after a start in about 1793). He assumes a later bout of family theatricals for which it was written, probably involving Austen's young niece Anna Lefroy. This very short five-act reduction of Richardson's massive novel is written in the style of the popular playwright Hannah Cowley, with a strong emphasis on the lives of women and most scenes taking place in drawing-rooms. 'The essence of the joke in Jane Austen's "Sir Charles Grandison"', Southam argues, 'is the reduction of a mammoth novel to a miniature play . . . a comedy of abridgement.'⁴ An amusing enough piece for home entertainment, it is however lame by comparison with the work of playwrights such as Cowley or Inchbald, depending as it does on the audience's knowledge of the original text (a favourite novel of Jane Austen's family); the pleasure arises from the contrast with Richardson's leisurely and circumstantial plotting. As Southam remarks, 'it was a play for the family to perform':⁵ whether they did so in the year or so immediately preceding their removal to Bath is not known. More significant family entertainment at that time would have been provided by the reading aloud of early versions of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Pride and Prejudice*: Austen's original and mature drama was to be found in her novels.

HOME THEATRICALS

'A love of the theatre is so general, an itch for acting so strong among young people', Austen wrote in *Mansfield Park* (p. 121) – an observation surely based on autobiographical experience. During the years 1782–9,

when Jane Austen was aged seven to fourteen, her older siblings regularly organised home theatricals.⁶ Even at this early stage in her literary career, Austen's taste clearly never ran to tragedy and high-flown sentiment: 'One of Edward's Mistresses was Jane Shore, who has had a play written about her [by Nicholas Rowe, 1714], but it is a tragedy & therefore not worth reading' (*MW*, p. 140). The young men of the Austen family, however, clearly thought that they were capable of bringing off the bombastic style and sentiments of contemporary tragedy in their first piece for the Steventon home theatricals, Thomas Francklin's *Matilda*, which they produced in 1782. This is an inflated, unconsciously comic historical-sensational drama, premiered by Garrick in 1775; it offers plenty of opportunities for ranting by the proto-Mr Yateses of the family – but surely little real entertainment for their audience.

As anyone who has been involved in amateur theatricals knows, comedy is a more reliable route to general satisfaction. The Austens soon moved on to comedy, and stayed with it. The plays performed in the Steventon home theatricals during Austen's childhood present a conspectus of late eighteenth-century fashionable comic theatre. Arguably these performances, and – perhaps more importantly – the bustle and excitement that inevitably accompanies 'putting on a show' (particularly in amateur companies) had a profound influence on the young writer, alerting her both to the seductive power of theatre and to the ambivalence of acting.

Sheridan's *The Rivals*, performed at Steventon in 1784, has kept its place in the English dramatic repertory, and its significance will be examined in chapter 2. Susannah Centlivre's *The Wonder! A Woman Keeps a Secret* (1714) was the play in which the Austens' cousin Eliza de Feuillide was the flirtatious leading lady in 1787 – it was also the production of which we are told that Mr Austen's 'barn is fitting up quite like a theatre, & all the young folks are to take part'.⁷ Given the large cast of *The Wonder*, this probably included 'young folks' outside the family, a possibility which is discussed with some anxiety in *Mansfield Park*. William Hazlitt thought this play 'one of our good old English Comedies, which holds a happy medium between grossness and refinement . . . the dialogue [is rich] in *double entendre*, which however is so light and careless, as only to occasion a succession of agreeable alarms to the ears of delicacy'.⁸ It does include some 'warm parts' (to use Mary Crawford's phrase), such as this exchange:

DON FELIX. [Henry Austen's role?] . . . Give me your hand at parting however Violante, won't you? [*Here he lays his hand upon her knee several times.*] Won't you? – won't you? – won't you?

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VIOLANTE. [*Half regarding him.*] Won't I do what?

DON FELIX. You know what I would have Violante. Oh! my heart!

VIOLANTE. [*Smiling.*] I thought my chains were easily broken. [*Lays her hand in to his.*]

DON FELIX. [*Draws his chair close to her and kisses her hand in a rapture.*] Too well thou knowest thy strength. Oh, my charming angel my heart is all thy own! forget my hasty passion, 'tis the transport of a love sincere!

(Act v)

As well as contributing to the amorous raptures of Austen's *Love and Friendship*, the opportunities for physical contact here would not have been lost on 'Jane, a sharp-eyed girl of twelve'.⁹

Hannah Cowley's *Which is the Man?* and Garrick's *Bon Ton* had been under consideration for performance in 1787, at Eliza's instigation. The former, one of the most popular of the highly successful dramatist's works, will be discussed in chapter 5. Garrick's *Bon Ton, or High Life above Stairs* (1775) is a lively two-act comedy satirising the pretensions of well-off urbanites. Like many comedies of the period, it has a strong anti-Gallic tone¹⁰ ('those monsters, foreign vices, and *Bon Ton*, as they call it') – a francophobia which Austen also exploits in her comic masterpiece *Emma*, as I shall argue in chapter 6.

The Chances, performed the following year, is Garrick's revision (1773) of Buckingham's rewriting of Beaumont and Fletcher's play. The revisions supposedly removed indecency, but it remains quite a risqué piece, especially in the character of Don John (played by Garrick in his version), a charming libertine who is finally converted by the love of a free-spirited witty young woman. The play also contains a proto-Mrs Malaprop – crossed perhaps with Lady Wishfort of *The Way of the World*: an affectedly genteel lady with a taste for liquor. Another play with a large cast, it too probably called for resources greater than the Austen family. Perhaps Henry, taken with the success of the previous year's opportunities for flirtation, was the prime mover in suggesting a play with a libertine for hero; in any case, Henry Crawford's character has a long ancestry. Fielding's *Tom Thumb*,¹¹ also performed in 1788, is a rollicking farce with a cast of giants and midgets; it parodies the excesses of Shakespearean tragedy in a way that must have appealed to the young Jane, herself writing parodies of contemporary fiction and drama. And like *The Chances*, it has its share of indecorum, not to say indecency: female drunkenness, gluttony, large breasts, and beds are staples of the rhyming dialogue.

The heroine Roxalana of Isaac Bickerstaff's *The Sultan* (1775; performed at Steventon in 1789) was a favourite role of the two great comic

actresses of the day, Dorothy Jordan and Frances Abington. In chapter 4 I discuss the possible echoes in *Pride and Prejudice* of this comedy, which also provided the original plot for Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*.¹² Another farce presented in the same year was James Townley's *High Life Below Stairs*, a moralising comedy in which servants ape the nobility, throwing a party while their master is away. He returns to share the revelry in disguise, and then dispense summary and harsh justice on their extravagance and 'impudence'. The charm of this popular farce must have lain in its classic carnival theme: the delights of a topsy-turvy world were exhibited on stage (including satire of the fopperies of the upper class), but the play concludes with everyone back in their place and the rebellious elements expelled.

Clearly the Austen family preferred comedy to the opportunities for ranting and risibility offered by contemporary tragedy; and like Edmund Bertram and Henry Crawford they probably thought of Shakespeare as more suitable for reading aloud than getting up as a performance. But 1789 saw the last of the Steventon theatricals: Tucker speculates that the elopement of a family connection, Thomas James Twisleton, with a young lady in September 1788, 'as a result of a liaison begun while they were acting in an amateur production of Jephson's tragedy *Julia* at the Freemason's Hall in London', may have induced some parental anxiety. Perhaps, he suggests, Mr and Mrs Austen felt that 'it was injudicious to encourage further amateur theatricals at the rectory for fear that something similar . . . might be duplicated in their own family'.¹³ The erotic excitement generated by theatre finally had its effect, however: Henry Austen became Eliza de Feuillide's second husband in 1797.

VISITS TO LONDON AND BATH

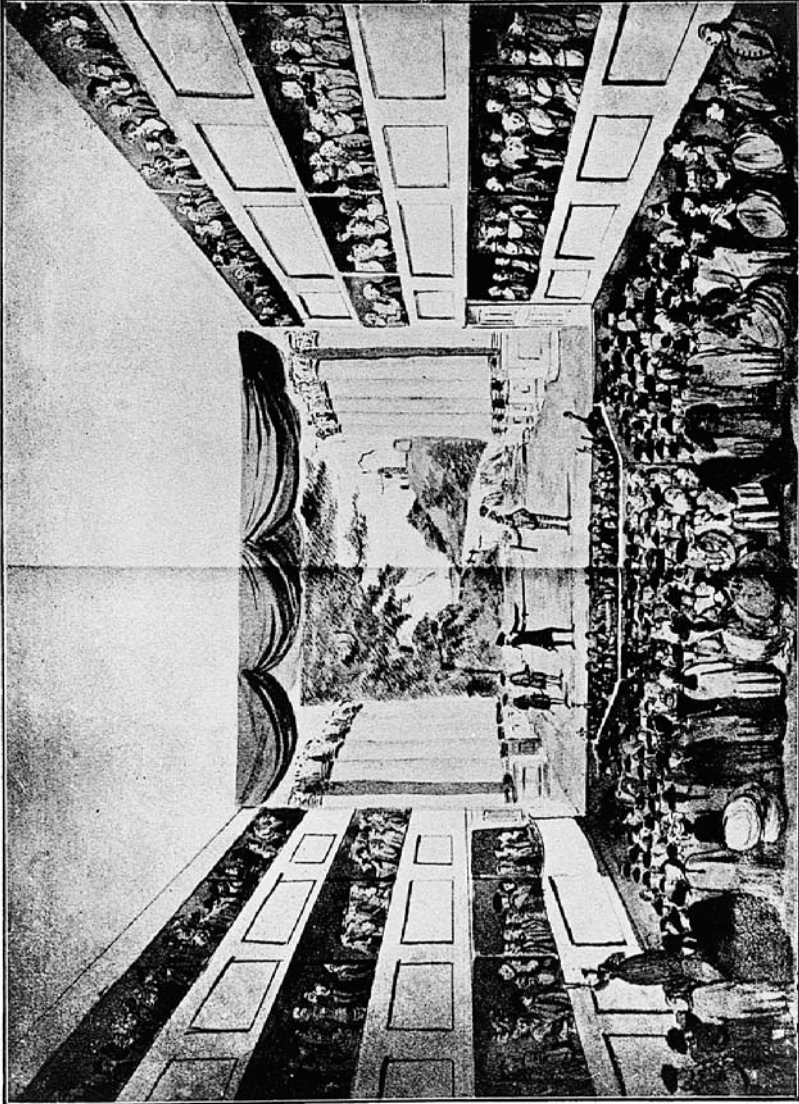
The young Jane Austen, during intermittent visits to England's first and second fashionable cities in 1796, 1797, and 1799, undoubtedly went to the theatre, and may well have seen the great Sarah Siddons and her brother John Philip Kemble, reigning stars of the London stage. Of the plays mentioned in *Mansfield Park*, Siddons appeared in *Douglas*, *The Gamester*, and *The Rivals* (these plays are discussed in chapter 2 below), as well as the standard Shakespearean repertoire. The only plays Austen is actually known to have seen in this period were in 1799 at Bath: Kotzebue's *The Birth-Day* (adapted by Thomas Dibdin) and Colman's *Blue Beard, or, Female Curiosity!* – a 'pleasing spectacle', which had had

a successful new production in London in January 1798.¹⁴ *Blue Beard* was lightweight stuff based on the fairy tale (I discuss it further in chapter 3); but *The Birth-Day* represented a new kind of theatre, the sentimental 'German drama' that was to be so complained of by moralists in the next twenty years. Margaret Kirkham has drawn attention to the similarities of plot and theme between this domestic comedy and *Emma*,¹⁵ but despite the play's possible role in providing Austen with ideas for her novel, it never comes near the ironic complexities of that text. (The parallels between the two are further discussed in chapter 6 below.)

THE BATH YEARS, 1801–1806

On the Revd George Austen's retirement, he and his wife and their two daughters settled in Bath – not, according to most biographies, with any great enthusiasm on Jane's part. The pleasures of the theatre, however, may have provided some consolation for the loss of a quiet country life. What might Jane Austen have seen at the lively and prestigious Bath theatre in those five years? Mrs Siddons, Kemble, G.F. Cooke, R.W. Elliston all made appearances there during these years; it is inconceivable that Austen would have missed a chance to see 'good hardened real acting' (*MP*, p. 124) from these stars.

The theatre in Orchard Street (built 1749) was licensed as a 'Theatre Royal' in 1767 – the first such licence in the provinces; it indicated a recognition that by mid-century Bath had grown to be the second most fashionable city in the kingdom. This royal patent 'free[d] the theatre from the stigma, however notional by this time, of illegality'.¹⁶ That is to say, the theatre was entitled to present, without fear of prosecution, 'legitimate' or spoken-word drama (which in London was confined by law to Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and the summer-season Haymarket).¹⁷ The Bath audience – largely consisting of visiting fashionable Londoners and country gentry – 'had long maintained the character of being the most elegant and judicious in the kingdom; and the "School" [for young actors], which gradually formed under their influence and the exertions of Mr. Palmer [the entrepreneurial manager] obtained the pre-eminence in the eyes of the Dramatic Tyro and the London critic'.¹⁸ It was, in fact, the most important and successful playhouse outside London; between 1779 and 1817 it expanded its business profitably to the theatre in King Street, Bristol, transporting the company several times a week over the twelve miles that separated the two cities.



1 Interior of the Orchard Street Theatre, Bath

The capacity of the Orchard Street Theatre would have been about 900–1,000 people, in pit, boxes, first gallery, and upper gallery. The seating divisions mirrored class divisions in the audience: ‘the wealthy and privileged occupying the boxes; the “bucks”, “critics” and other men about town in the pit; citizens and their wives from the middle classes in the middle gallery . . . ; the lower classes, often noisy and uninhibited, in the upper gallery’.¹⁹ As the only extant illustration of its interior shows (Figure 1), a full house was a crowded house: the auditorium was only 40 feet wide and about 45 feet deep. By 1805 it was clearly too small and awkwardly sited: its location was at the now less fashionable end of the town, opposite South Parade, and so close to the river as to be in constant danger of floods. The new Theatre Royal, nearly twice the size of the old one, was opened in October 1805 on the more central Beaufort Square.

Only nine letters have survived from Jane Austen’s years in Bath (and several of them are solely to do with Mr Austen’s death): not enough for us to make any inferences about how often Austen attended the Bath theatre. Mr Austen died in January 1805, which event would undoubtedly have limited the Austen ladies’ theatre-going for the remainder of their stay in Bath. But that Austen was indeed familiar with the inside of the Orchard Street Theatre can be inferred from the detailed description in *Northanger Abbey*, chapter 12:

it was a play she wanted very much to see. . . . 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. Henry Tilney and his father joining a party in the opposite box recalled her to anxiety and distress. 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. No longer could he be suspected of indifference for a play; his notice was never withdrawn from the stage during two whole scenes. At length, however, he did look towards her, and he bowed, but such a bow! No smile, no continued observance attended it: his eyes were immediately returned to their former direction. Catherine was restlessly miserable; she could almost have run round to the box in which he sat, and forced him to hear her explanation. (*NA*, p. 92)

In a theatre only 40 feet wide, Catherine and Henry are opposite each other at a distance of perhaps 32 feet. No wonder she feels snubbed.

We can make educated guesses about what Jane Austen is likely to have seen in her five years in Bath. Margaret Kirkham lists the Bath performances of the plays mentioned in *Mansfield Park*: all but *The Gamester*²⁰ were performed several times during 1801–6; notably *Lovers' Vows* (fifteen performances) and *The Heir at Law* (ten performances).²¹ It is very likely that Austen saw these plays. Kirkham also cites performances of 'other plays of special interest to students of Austen' which were performed with some frequency in Bath: Cumberland's *The West Indian*, Thomas Dibdin's *Nelson's Glory* and *The Birth-Day*.²² Apart from Shakespeare, the most popular playwrights in Bath were Cobb, Holcroft, Dibdin, and Morton; to whom we can add the German dramatist Kotzebue, whose works were represented in translation (*Lovers' Vows*, *The Stranger*, *Pizarro*, *The Birth-Day*).

What does this tell us about Jane Austen's theatrical experience? Broad farce, good-humoured or sentimental comedy, and the drama of sensation which was to mutate into melodrama make up the spectrum of popular theatre available in the early years of the nineteenth century. Shakespeare is represented largely by those plays which offer strong roles for male actors: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Richard III*, *The Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare's comedies, which, with Restoration drama, to us seem the nearest ancestors of the witty banter of Elizabeth Bennet or Emma Woodhouse, were in the new century less commonly played. Hare's *Bath Calendar* lists only a small number of performances of *As You Like It*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. *Twelfth Night* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* were not performed at all during the Austens' residence in Bath.²³ That Austen read all these plays is virtually certain: references can be found to them in the novels, juvenilia, and letters, and plays as domestic reading material were almost as popular as novels.²⁴ But that she saw theatrical embodiments of Rosalind, Beatrice, or Viola is less likely. Her condoling with Cassandra on her not seeing the most famous Shakespearean comedienne of her day, the forty-year-old Dora Jordan, suggests that she knew what her sister was missing (*Letters*, 8–9 January 1801). (Austen certainly saw Jordan late in her career, in 1814, in *The Devil to Pay* at Covent Garden.) In fact she is more likely to have encountered the witty young woman as stage heroine in the plays of Hannah Cowley, Elizabeth Inchbald, and Isaac Bickerstaff – plays which have largely disappeared from our map of eighteenth-century drama.

During a visit by Jane to her brother and his family at Godmersham, the Austen tradition of family theatricals was revived; and according to Fanny Austen's diary Jane Austen took part in these unrehearsed