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Reading Relationships in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice*

By

Joanna Claire Bell Marzec

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2014

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Reading Relationships in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice*

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ABSTRACT

This multi-disciplinary study of reading in Austen's *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice* investigates the relationships of people, books, and ways of reading as represented in these books, placing them in the context of reading practices in Austen's time. The first chapter examines reading materials and reading spaces in Austen's period, showing how Austen's representation of books and libraries reveals character and social expectations. Chapter Two focuses on the reading practices of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, arguing that the way characters read sheds light on their social interactions. The performative aspect of reading, particularly reading aloud, is analyzed in Chapter Three, which compares the period's elocutionary, theatrical, and religious modes of performance. The final chapter expands the implications of reading and gender, linking the period's ideas of women's reading to Austen's representations of female readers. Reading enables Austen's heroines to interpret their worlds with greater accuracy and assurance.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the caring and supportive individuals who inspired me to write, and who gave me the motivation to finish. First to my wonderful thesis advisors and readers, for their patience and wisdom: Dr. Matheson, Dr. Quinsey, and Dr. Howsam. Next to my loved ones, for their undying support: my parents, Laura and Phil Marzec, and my fiancée, Jevon Kimmerly-Smith. Finally, I dedicate this thesis to God, who enabled me to complete it.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MP.....*Mansfield Park*

P&P.....*Pride and Prejudice*

NA..... *Northanger Abbey*

RP.....“Reading Practices” by Alan Richardson

PREFACE

In Jane Austen's novels, what effect does *reading* have on education, morality, religion, and gender? How is women's reading characterized in Austen's works? And how does reading in private prepare one for the complexities of public life? In Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), reading is seen as essential for the "accomplished woman" (*P&P*, 29), and private libraries are a sign of wealth, lineage, or leisure. Reading is also a key topic in Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), where characters read poetry to each other for amusement or learning, rent books from circulating libraries, and even embody the texts through reading aloud. But how does Austen *use* all of these references to reading, books, libraries, and practices? Through historical and feminist approaches, and through close reading of Austen's texts, I will examine the portrayal and effects of reading in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*.

In *The Cambridge Introduction to Jane Austen*, Janet Todd points out an "intertextual allusion" (75) to *Pride and Prejudice* in the opening pages of *Mansfield Park*: "there certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world, as there are pretty women to deserve them" (Austen, *MP*, 3). Although the "contrast of the two novels [may exceed] the resemblance," (Todd, 75), it is worth noting that *Mansfield Park* was written after, and perhaps in response to, the success of the former. In a September 1813 letter, Austen writes that, "on the credit of P. & P. [*Mansfield Park*] will sell well, tho' [it is] not half so entertaining" (Todd, 75). If *Pride and Prejudice* is meant to delight the reader, *Mansfield Park* is meant to instruct them, revealing Austen's interest in the aesthetic, moral, and educative potential of reading.

Jacqueline Pearson argues that “[r]eading is important in Austen’s fiction as allusion, as symbol, as verisimilar detail, and as means of characterization” (146), but I advance this argument further. Reading is thematically important to *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*, because of its relation to social interaction: where, how, and what characters read indicates their value as friends, relations, or romantic attachments for Austen’s heroines.

The first chapter examines the locations of reading and the materiality of books in Austen’s period, arguing that *where* people read reflects their social status, gender, and their degree of autonomy. For Fanny and Elizabeth, the heroines of *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice*, reading spaces are essential to personal growth and moral independence from their male guardians. I also look at the way reading can be valued not only for its intellectual rewards, but also as an indication of socioeconomic status. The period’s rage for building private libraries filled with beautifully bound books and rich furniture suggests the external value placed on reading: books are for the idle rich, the aristocratic and the privileged, as well as those who aspire to these conditions. Austen uses these competing valuations of books to reveal her characters’ social standing, but also their moral substance.

The next two chapters examine reading practices, or *how* people read, to shed light on the social uses of reading in Austen’s novels. Some characters use reading as an excuse to cut themselves off from social duties, such as Mr. Price who neglects his daughter to read his newspaper (*MP*, 300). Others use reading to facilitate social interaction, such as Fanny Price who uses books to open a line of communication with her sister Susan in Portsmouth (*MP*, 313; 328). Since reading was a major form of

entertainment and an aid to conversation in Austen's period, characters' knowledge and use of books reflect their interpersonal skills (or lack thereof). In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen makes fun of socially awkward Mr. Collins, who fails to entertain the Bennet family through both his dull conversation and his equally dull reading of Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1766) (*P&P*, 51-2). That Mr. Collins is "better fitted for a walker than a reader" (*P&P*, 54) means that he is not an adequate partner for Elizabeth, who must find "the man who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her" (*P&P*, 237) through careful reading (Wolfson, 113). Reading people becomes just as important as reading books in Austen's fiction.

Austen's plots, which hinge on the heroines' developing relationships with their prospective suitors, are also forwarded through reading, which becomes a form of courtship in the novels. Through a discussion of oral reading, I sort out the issues of performance, gender, and interpretation attendant on courtship: the power of the oral reader over his (or her) audience becomes a key issue. *Mansfield Park* is particularly interested in the overlap between reading, acting, and social interaction, questioning the ethics surrounding reading and relationship. As with other reading practices, Austen depicts the positive and negative uses of reading aloud, showing how shared reading can connect people, but also expose them to unwanted or unsuitable intimacies. Gender relationships are especially important here, since oral reading involves power between reader and listener.

The final chapter focuses on the relationship of reading and gender. I examine what the women of the upper and middle classes in Austen's period *actually* read, and what they were *supposed* to read, looking to conservative conduct literature and the

historical record to illuminate my analysis of Austen's female readers. Do her female characters read appropriate texts? How do they read these texts? Does the outcome of their reading accord with the period's assumptions, or undermine them? The most important aspect of reading, for Austen, is to enable women to accurately interpret their world. Fanny and Elizabeth must learn to rely on their own judgment, which has been informed through their reading, in order to make decisions: whom to trust, whom to obey, whom to marry. Austen challenges our assumptions about women's reading, and invites us, as readers, to become like her heroines. Like Fanny and Elizabeth, reading transforms us.

CHAPTER ONE

Books and Reading Spaces in Mansfield Park and Pride and Prejudice

Books, libraries, and other “reading spaces” in Austen’s period serve as a fitting introduction to a discussion of reading in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*. The field of book history in recent scholarship helps to ground the study of reading in Austen. If we understand the way books were produced, disseminated, sold, and stored, we can gain insight into the ways Austen’s characters read. The materiality of books is an important consideration: for example, since they had to be “physically [carried]...to the final buyers” (St Clair, 36-7), the size and weight of books affected their distribution. Books could be transported by water for distribution across countries or continents (St Clair, 36), or, more expensively, by land through chapmen networks (36). Newly published luxury editions, such as the “[large] folio” that Mr. Collins chooses from Mr. Bennet’s library in *Pride and Prejudice* (53), were also very heavy, limiting the times and places one could read them. While “the new books of the romantic period were too big and valuable to be taken outside,” “pocket-sized” old-canon reprints were more convenient for those “who had to snatch their reading moments” in private (St Clair, 205). Books with a “handy format and easy mobility” could also open avenues for unsupervised reading (St Clair, 205), like Catherine Morland’s reading of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* in Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1818). Pocket-editions were useful for everyday reading, while heavy, luxuriously bound books became showpieces of wealth (St Clair, 205); thus, Mr. Collins’s choice of a costly folio as a reading prop in *Pride and Prejudice* not only reflects his pretensions to learning, but his period’s materialistic

valuation of books (Benedict, 186). Mr. Collins, who is “better fitted for a walker than a reader” (*P&P*, 54), is weighed down by the heavy volume, unable to grasp its inner meaning. His choice of the folio reveals his “self-conceit” (*P&P*, 52) and aspirations to social status: for Mr. Collins, books are a way to show off his clerical learning, though he benefitted little from his education (*P&P*, 52).

The materials involved in book production also help to illustrate the social and economic significance of reading in Austen’s fiction. Romantic period books were sold unbound “in paper wrappers stitched with thread or temporarily bound in cardboard covered with... sugar paper” (St Clair, 192). Book paper was made from rags or strips of cloth, an expensive and heavily taxed commodity (St Clair, 178), and the popular, more durable leather or cloth bindings had to be sewn in at the buyer’s expense (192). Some books could be recognized by their bindings. For example, Mr. Collins “starts[s] back” when he sees the book presented to him to be read aloud in Volume I of *Pride and Prejudice*, “for every thing announced it to be from a circulating library” (*P&P*, 51). He probably recognized the “cheap marble-colored bindings” commonly used by lending-library owners of the period (Erickson, 579). Bindings could range from practical to luxurious. Expensive books were “rebound in leather...pressed again, ...pages trimmed smooth and gilded,” with the option of adding a personal crest or bookplate (St Clair, 192). These finely bound books “emitted an air of luxury, to the extent that ‘hot pressed’ became a term of derision” in the Romantic era (St Clair, 193). So, for example, when Austen describes one of Miss Bingley’s letters to Jane in *Pride and Prejudice* as “a sheet of elegant, little, hot pressed paper, well covered with a lady’s fair, flowing hand” (89),

the writing-material speaks to the writer's social pretensions as much as the letter's contents.

Related to the materiality of books is their marketability, an issue that Austen was well acquainted with. The publication of Austen's own novels reflects her awareness that writing and reading are vital aids to women's intellectual independence and financial freedom. After the death of her father in 1805, Austen realized her bleak prospects: "she was penniless, dependent on her brothers, and obliged to accept whatever living arrangements were chosen for her" (Tomilin, 188; 191). But things turned around for Austen when she gained a space to think and write at Chawton in 1809 (Tomilin, 210). By 1813, Austen had made a "modest profit of £140" from *Sense and Sensibility*, and "this first money she had earned...signified... [her] freedom" (Tomilin, 220). During the years at Chawton, Austen continued to publish, supporting herself, her mother and her sister through her writing. Austen sold the copyright of *Pride and Prejudice* to Thomas Egerton in 1813 for £110, and it was published in "economic duodecimo" form, sold for 18 shillings unbound (Wolfson, 113-14). *Mansfield Park* was also published by Egerton in 1814, and sold for the same price (St Clair, 579). Though Austen made only a modest profit on her novels, she was well aware of the book market's potential for promoting female independence.

Though books such as Austen's were sold for "modest" profits, others were sold as objects of luxury. Like clothing, furniture, or other commodities, the rich could display their luxuriously bound, personalized books as signs of their wealth. Since "new books of the [Romantic period] were expensive luxuries which could be bought...only by the richest in society" (St Clair, 196), books could be valued in a strictly economic or social

sense. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Caroline Bingley values “collection[s] of books” for their prestigious value rather than their intrinsic worth (*P&P*, 27); *Mansfield Park*’s Aunt Norris, another mercenary character, is guilty of the same offense. Austen satirizes Aunt Norris’s ungenerous nature and her failure to care for her goddaughter, Betsey:

There had been at one moment a slight murmur ...about sending [Betsey] a Prayer book; but no second sound had been heard of such a purpose. Mrs. Norris ...[had] taken down two old Prayer books of her husband, with *that* idea, but upon examination, ...[o]ne was found to have too small a print for a child’s eyes, and the other to be too cumbersome for her to carry about (*MP*, 304).

Aunt Norris, who should act as a spiritual guide to her goddaughter, begrudges her niece these prayer books because of material considerations. Mrs. Norris argues that the size of the print and the heaviness of the volume will prevent Betsy from appreciating the prayer book’s meaning, but she is really concerned with the inconvenience to herself. Aunt Norris displays the same failure of judgment in the performance of *Lovers’ Vows* in Volume I, when she misses the text’s inappropriateness and focuses her attentions on “preventing waste” in the making of the curtains: “If every play is to be objected to, you will act nothing---and the preparations will be all so much money thrown away---and I am sure *that* would be a discredit to us all” (*MP*, 147). Aunt Norris’s focus on materiality of the theatre and of books reveals her materialism and flawed judgment.

Mr. Bingley’s and Mr. Darcy’s Libraries

Not just books, but libraries play a prominent role in Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*. Aware of the significance of libraries in her period, whether as symbols of wealth, knowledge, status, or power, Austen includes a discussion of these book-rooms in *Pride and Prejudice*. When Elizabeth professes a desire to read at Netherfield, and is teased for being “a great reader” by Miss Bingley, Mr. Bingley offers

“all [the books] that his library afford[s]” for Elizabeth’s amusement (*P&P*, 27). The library at Bingley’s recently purchased estate is furnished with a “small...collection of books” which Bingley admits to rarely looking into (27). This does not prevent him from wanting a larger collection for his “own credit” (*P&P*, 27), probably because he is aware that “books and an apparent interest in them were signs of gentility” in the period (Erickson, 576). Ever seeking an opportunity to flatter Mr. Darcy and gain his approval, Miss Bingley exclaims that she is “astonished...that [her] father should have left so small a collection of books,” in contrast to Mr. Darcy’s “delightful library...at Pemberley” (*P&P*, 27). Darcy adds to his family library, showing his personal interest in reading, but also his concern for heritage. He exclaims, “I cannot comprehend the neglect of a family library in such days as these” (*P&P*, 27), implying that book-collection is essential to the tending of an estate. This discussion also shows the difference between Bingley’s and Darcy’s social standings. Darcy’s library belongs to an estate that has been in the family for “many generations” (*P&P*, 27), while Bingley’s father earned his wealth through trade (*P&P*, 10). Netherfield is a newly purchased estate, so Caroline’s “astonishment” at its small collection of books is another instance of her hypocrisy and social ambitions.

In her discussion of bibliomania in Austen’s period, Deidre Lynch shows how Mr. Darcy’s library at Pemberley exemplifies the ideal British private library. British national ideology depicted private property (including books) “as part of the common stock of the national heritage, and [portrayed] gentlemanly book collecting ...as an act of patriotic munificence” (Lynch, para. 4). By maintaining his family’s library, Mr. Darcy is participating in this preservation of national heritage, “Choosing again what has already been chosen for him, he honors the works that his ancestors honored” (Lynch, para. 17).

He also archives the works of contemporary authors for future generations, showing the non-material value of books. Libraries are not just a representation of material wealth; they are a storehouse of knowledge and history, and “the work of many generations” (*P&P*, 27). However, “[t]he possession of a library—of a dedicated space, as well as of a private collection of books—[still] is a clear indicator of status” in *Pride and Prejudice* (Jackson, para. 3). Consciously or not, Mr. Darcy is “implicitly declaring that the high cost of books does not concern him” (Erickson, 577).

Private libraries of the period thus “presupposed the leisure, education, inheritance, and engagement in high culture of the privileged” (Benedict, 172). But if private libraries were associated with aristocratic culture, book collecting was a way to enter into elite culture. Like many other examples of fashionable goods on the market, books and libraries could act as “advertisements” for one’s social position or social pretensions (Benedict, 162). James Raven notes how “[a]spirant local gentry” could impress their neighbours by “buying yards of literature to redecorate their homes and lend visible weight to claims of rank” (190), turning libraries into a site of conspicuous consumption. This is no doubt what Caroline Bingley has in mind when she suggests that her brother build or buy a library in his new home at Netherfield, just like the library in the aristocratic home of Pemberley (*P&P*, 27; see Benedict, 172). In her discussion of family libraries in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen compares “the nouveau-riche Bingleys” who own some books, but do not read them, with “Darcy, who both owns and reads them,” illustrating the “contemporary anxiety about the...definitions of class as birth or manners” (Benedict, 173).

Austen details the behaviours, speech patterns, and even the material belongings of her characters to define not only their private character but also their public persona, or social standing. Armstrong discusses the “sophisticated grammar” of Austen’s time, where material objects became shorthand for social standing, and “one could ...extrapolate a man’s net worth from just a few household objects” (87). Austen’s characters have to “read” people accurately, but so do we as Austen’s *readers*. Wolfson shows how Austen’s fictional worlds are “a vast sign-system of family and connections, estates, homes, carriages, furnishings, and décor” that “become objects of implied or provoked reading” (113). We can interpret the social significance of reading, libraries and books by examining their “net worth” in Austen’s period.

What do collections of books, and the spaces they occupy, signify in Austen’s era? Ina Ferris notes that “[b]ooks and their collection...were becoming an increasingly prominent feature of both private and public life at most social levels in Romantic-era Britain” (*Intro*, para. 2). Belonging to book clubs or libraries, engaging in fashionable reading, or, as we have seen, owning many books became a social signifier. The fashion for comfortable reading-spaces is certainly evident in the period’s demand for libraries: Raven notes the “unprecedented number of domestic libraries...built in the last two-thirds of the eighteenth century” (176), whether building new or redesigning the old (Raven, 188). It was popular to equip these spaces with “reading paraphernalia” and library furniture (Raven, 190), sometimes displaying “mass-produced” busts, tables, and bookcases in the style of “the library of the peer” (Raven, 191). According to Lynch, the period’s “broad dissemination of pictures and descriptions of [showpiece] libraries ... made literary reception appear an aristocratic prerogative” (Lynch, para. 14), depicting

the conception of reading as a “genteel” behaviour. Like the expensive “chimney piece” at Rosings that Mr. Collins boasts about in *Pride and Prejudice* (57), books and libraries could be another object to display one’s wealth and status.

Private Libraries

Following the symbolism of book-related objects, we also need to ask how Austen represents private libraries in her fiction. Does she merely reflect her period’s practices, or critique them? James Raven examines the practical, social, and symbolic significance of library culture. He draws attention to the importance of the private library as “a focal living and entertaining room for much of the English nobility and upper gentry” in the mid-eighteenth century (188), reinforcing the claim that reading was part of fashionable society in Austen’s time. Raven characterizes the library as a “symbolic and designated environment” for books (201). Library architecture and furniture arrangement could dictate the types of reading practices within that space. For example, the private libraries of the gentry could be arranged as “a parade room, a literary browsing room, [with] corners to read in, hearths to read by, steps leading to books, desks to sit at, [and] spaces in which to pause and discuss” (Raven, 199). Both “solitary study and communal reading” were practiced in these rooms (Newlyn quoting Raven, 17), as well as a range of activities other than reading, such as “teaching, needlework, painting, dramatic and musical performance, gaming and drinking” (Raven, 176). More than just a collection of reading-materials or a place for reflection and study, the private library became a scene of social interaction - although Mr. Bennet resists the intrusion of his private space.

Lynch notes the way “domestic book-spaces . . . were being transformed” in the period (Ferris, *Intro*, para. 9), and how the domestic library was in many ways like a living room. “[I]mages of the gentleman’s library,” such as Humphry Repton’s, “feature[d] snug personal enclaves (e.g., the closet library) instead of formal rooms embodying authority and tradition that dwarfed individual readers” (Ferris, *Intro*, para. 9). So, instead of the great family library at Pemberley that represents literary heritage, private libraries can also represent families’ social interactions in Austen’s fiction. Jon Mee examines two representations of the family living room from Repton’s *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1816) (228), and the way reading is mapped out in the rooms’ furniture arrangements. While Repton’s depiction of the “ancient cedar parlour” contains a group of chairs for shared conversation, the “modern living room” separates people into groups, and discussions of various subjects are “scatter’d” across the room (Mee, 228-30). The ways people interact through reading had shifted in Austen’s period, and *Mansfield Park* deals with this clash of ancient and modern.

Mentioned in *Mansfield Park* as an authority on landscaping (43-4), Repton was a well-known “improver” in Austen’s day: but his “improvements” – whether exterior or interior – are portrayed as dubious in the novel. Mee argues that “Austen’s novels are . . . painfully aware” of the breakdown in social relations represented by Repton’s ideal living room (230). We shall see how Sir Thomas and Mr. Bennet, the patriarchs of *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice*, isolate themselves from their family in their private libraries, unable to communicate effectively with their children. According to Mee, “Austen deals with . . . society’s dispersal into scattered groups by drawing back into a

smaller domestic space where individuals may meet in conversation,” (Mee, 231). But are libraries really a place of open communication and socialization, or are they limited to anti-social readers such as Mr. Bennet seems to be?

Mr. Bennet's Library

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen portrays the complex moral significance of Mr. Bennet's private library. Jackson argues that, because Mr. Bennet lives on an “entailed estate[,] [h]e ought to be putting aside some of [his] income to support his family after his death, but he has never done so” (para. 3). Yet Mr. Bennet buys books, an expensive commodity in the period (Jackson, para. 3). But is Austen condemning Mr. Bennet's love for books as a waste of money, critiquing his solitary reading as irresponsible? Private reading (especially for women) could connote idleness or neglect of one's duties, but Austen shows that men are just as prone to this failing. Jackson argues that Mr. Bennet uses his library “to hide from his family,” and that his library becomes a “retreat” from the domestic order that houses it (*Ferris*, Intro, para. 4). Like Fanny's retreat from the Price family's “noise, disorder, and impropriety” in *Mansfield Park* (*MP*, 305), Mr. Bennet's reading becomes a sanctuary from the household bustle – and Mrs. Bennet's “nerves” (*P&P*, 2). Although reading spaces can be positive elsewhere in Austen's fiction, they can be negative if they cut off the reader from his or her community.

Though Mr. Bennet's love for books is not in itself negative, his neglect of his family and his selfish indulgence of solitary reading is problematic. Unhappily married, Mr. Bennet finds in “the country” and “books...his principal enjoyments” in life (*P&P*, 180). Mr. Bennet sees the library as a place of “leisure and tranquillity,” and an escape from the annoyances of his daily life (*P&P*, 54). Chapter Two suggested that Mr. Bennet could be annotating the books he reads (Jackson, para. 9), enjoying the autonomy of

reading and the freedom to “talk back” to books. But this freedom is dependent on solitude. When Mr. Collins follows him into the library, merely to talk “with little cessation,” Mr. Bennet is “exceedingly” “discomposed:” “though prepared, as he told Elizabeth, to meet with folly and conceit in every other room in the house, he was used to be free from them there” (*P&P*, 53-4). Private libraries were male-dominated spaces in the period, and though Mr. Bennet would rather give his eldest daughters than Mr. Collins free command of the library, he cannot prevent the latter from invading it. All he can do is send Mr. Collins out on a walk with his daughters, not thinking about Elizabeth’s possible discomfort, anxious to “have his library to himself” (*P&P*, 53). The library is both a literal and figurative place for Mr. Bennet to think freely in, and he actively resents any infringement of this freedom.

But Mr. Bennet’s deliberate isolation from the rest of the house comes at a cost, and he is forced to reassess his selfish approach to reading and relationship. When news has finally arrived about Lydia and Wickham’s marriage Mr. Bennet reads the urgent letter while “walking towards the little copse” (*P&P*, 228). Mr. Bennet’s need to read the news outdoors indicates the magnitude of the situation: his reading forces him to reflect back on his own mistakes, and reevaluate his own conduct. Against Elizabeth’s advice, Mr. Bennet had believed that Lydia’s public exposure was inevitable, and that the loss of “peace at Longbourn” would be a greater price to pay than the cost of Lydia’s folly (*P&P*, 176-7). But after she runs away with Wickham, he must pay for this moral laziness in more than just money: “Who should suffer but myself? It has been my own doing, and I ought to feel it” (*P&P*, 227). Notwithstanding his joke, “I will sit in my

library, ... and give as much trouble as I can" (*P&P*, 227), Mr. Bennet can no longer pretend to ignore the consequences of his familial neglect.

Despite his habitual façade of "philosophic composure" (*P&P*, 227), and resentment at having his private space invaded, Mr. Bennet does take an active role in his library at key moments in the narrative. In Volume I, Mrs. Bennet barges into her husband's study to "make Lizzy marry Mr. Collins," (*P&P*, 86). Though he "raise[s] his eyes from his book" and looks at his wife "with a calm unconcern" (*P&P*, 86), Mr. Bennet is not as apathetic as he pretends. He supports his daughter's refusal of Mr. Collins on the grounds that he is not her equal, but he also defends his own reading space: "I have two small favours to request. First, that you will allow me the free use of my understanding on the present occasion; and secondly, of my room. I shall be glad to have the library to myself as soon as may be" (*P&P*, 87). Mr. Bennet values his own freedom, as symbolized by his private reading space, but he also values his daughter's well-being. When Mr. Bennet's library is "breached" again by the marriage proposals of Mr. Bingley (*P&P*, 5, 264-5) and Mr. Darcy (*P&P*, 288) (Jackson, para. 1), he continues to exercise his readerly judgment to assess whether they will be happy with their future partners.

When Darcy asks for Elizabeth's hand in Volume III, Mr. Bennet summons Lizzy to the library (*P&P*, 288). He urges Elizabeth not to marry unwisely: "I know that you could be neither happy nor respectable, unless you truly esteemed your husband; unless you looked up to him as a superior.... My child, let me not have the grief of seeing *you* unable to respect your partner in life" (*P&P*, 288-9). Mr. Bennet cares for his "second daughter exceedingly" (*P&P*, 295), and wants her to avoid the pain he has experienced from an "unequal marriage" (*P&P*, 288). His value for the freedom of reading translates

into a desire for his daughters to have autonomy in their choice of husband. In this same room, Mr. Bennet had scoffed at Mr. Collins's insinuation of Lizzy and Darcy's attachment, oblivious to his daughter's discomfort at his wit (*P&P*, 277); but now Elizabeth "conquer[s] her father's incredulity, and reconcile[s] him to the match" by relating all Darcy has done, and the "gradual change" of her own feelings (*P&P*, 289). Mr. Bennet reassesses his opinion of Darcy, and speaks his love for his daughter: "If this be the case, he deserves you. I could not have parted with you, my Lizzy, to any one less worthy" (*P&P*, 289). Though Mr. Bennet's advice is not always sound, and though he can be emotionally unavailable, his library becomes a site where reason and feeling can become united.

On the other hand, the private library can be associated with socially-irresponsible reading practices. Benedict stresses "the dangerously isolating fascination of the male, private library" (186), highlighting the irresponsibility of characters, such as Mr. Bennet, who "immer[se] themselves in literature rather than life" (178). Moreover, Austen satirizes the gentleman's library through Mr. Collins, who primarily uses his library as an observation point for watching Lady Catherine De Bourgh's carriage. Mr. Collins spends some time reading, but the "chief" of it in "looking out of window in his own book room, which fronted the road" (*P&P*, 129). Mr. Collins is a foil to Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bennet, who actually read their books, showing that even isolated reading in the private study may be better than not reading at all.

Sir Thomas' Study

Just as Mr. Bennet's library signifies a retreat from parental duties but also a potential for positive father-daughter interaction, Austen shows the symbolic significance

of Sir Thomas's study in *Mansfield Park*. In his absence, Sir Thomas's private study is transformed into a green-room for a makeshift theatre. When he returns at the beginning of Volume II, Sir Thomas is "surprised" to see "symptoms of recent habitation" in his private study, and more so by the "general air of confusion in the furniture. The removal of the book-case from before the billiard room door struck him especially" (*MP*, 142). Why does Austen draw attention to the removal of the book-case? Why is this alteration to "his own dear room" (*MP*, 142) so disturbing for Sir Thomas? Though we do not often see Sir Thomas in the act of reading,¹ it is clear that he values his private collection of books, and his private reading space, very highly. Like Mr. Bennet's library in *Pride and Prejudice*, the library at Mansfield is a male-dominated space, embodying a "tradition of masculine literary choice, inherited property, and privilege" (Benedict, 169).

Like Mr. Bennet, who must "have his library to himself" (*P&P*, 53), Sir Thomas resents the intrusion on his personal space and the thoughtlessness of his children in making this space part of a public spectacle. Tom had reasoned that by "merely moving the book-case in [his] father's room" (*MP*, 99), a study could be transformed into a theatre's "green-room," but he does much more than this. The Bertram children invade Sir Thomas's space, showing their disregard for his authority by removing his book collection: the symbol of his patriarchal power (Raven, 201).² Far worse than Mr. Collins's temporary invasion of Mr. Bennet's library, when he pretends to be "engaged with one of the largest folios in the collection, but really talk[s] to Mr. Bennet, with little cessation" (*P&P*, 53), the construction of the theatre in Sir Thomas's reading space is of symbolic significance: his children have usurped his authority. In retaliation for this

¹ Sir Thomas does read silently to himself in a room full of people when he returns from Antigua in Vol. II, emphasizing his anti-social reading habits and general failure to communicate well (*MP*, 222).

² In later chapters, I will examine the patriarchal regulation of women's reading more fully.

invasion, Sir Thomas burns all copies of *Lover's Vows* "that met his eye" (*MP*, 149), again exercising his power of selection and control.

Another interpretation of Sir Thomas' private collection of books could be the Romantic period's "closet library" identified by Deidre Lynch. In this most private type of library, "[p]ublic men... [kept] books of less weight, both morally and materially, than the well-ordered collections of folios and quartos ...[of] gentlemanly literacy" (para. 17). These "literal and conceptual" spaces allowed "the gentleman reader... [to] play truant to his responsibilities to tradition" (Lynch, para. 17), indulging in subjective, private reading habits. There is little evidence that Sir Thomas, the emblem of propriety and decorum, would engage in any sort of subversive reading, but he is jealous of his private collection of books and of the space they occupy in his "his own dear room" (*MP*, 142). Perhaps Sir Thomas is not as interested in the enjoyment of his books as Mr. Bennet is, but he is zealous for their symbolic significance.

Lending Libraries, Reading Societies, and Circulating Libraries

If private libraries connoted patriarchal space, heritage, and authority, what did other book spaces signify in the period? "Public libraries," as we know them today, did not exist in Austen's period (until the Victorian era) (Brantlinger, 19), but there were a range of semi-public collections of books. The high cost of books in the last third of the eighteenth century caused "most people among the newly emerging reading public" to start using "lending libraries and reading societies in order to satisfy their reading requirements," though they could also buy pirated editions (Wittmann, 303). Other types of "scholarly libraries" did exist, in cathedrals or in the collections of "various professional and learned societies" (St Clair, 237). But social controls were in place to

restrict non-members' access to books. Wittmann notes that these establishments "played no part in [the] new desire for reading. On the contrary, ...they even [occasionally] checked its progression" (306).

Similarly, reading societies created by groups of "friends or colleagues" could be exclusive, open only to members from the professional (male) classes (St. Clair, 246, 250). Some reading societies were essentially closed to "large sections of the public," such as "students..., young girls and women, [and other] socially marginal groups" (Wittmann, 307). But just as many women could read books from their husbands' or fathers' private libraries, women could still join "male-dominated book clubs" (Pearson, 161; St Clair, 250). Austen was herself a member of a book club in Hampshire (St Clair, 253) in addition to belonging to a circulating library (St Clair, 260). Women availed themselves of reading societies as men did.³

Reading "had an important role in female sociability" in Austen's period, as is evident in the eighteenth-century "blue-stocking" movement (Lyons, 320; 316). These female writers contributed to a growing body of literature, and they are a good example of the period's "women-only" reading circles as well (Pearson, 161). Like the "pubs and *cabarets*" where men would discuss "public affairs over a newspaper," women could exchange books and practical manuals "through exclusively female networks" in the eighteenth century (Lyons, 320). In her study of Austen's period, Pearson suggests that women availed themselves of "all these semi-private, pseudo-genteel libraries or borrowing networks, [though women formed only] a small proportion of all readers" (160). She also describes subscription libraries as occupying the space between private

³ Consider that literary salons, often hosted by upper-class women, had been in existence for almost two centuries (Brewer & McCalman, "Publishing," n.p.)

and circulating libraries, a “compromise” for female readers in terms of respectability (Pearson, 160). In contrast to circulating libraries, reading clubs “simulated private life” and gave women “vital opportunities for non-transgressive access to books” (Pearson, 161).

Like the coffee houses that rented books in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (St Clair, 239), circulating libraries became “arenas for conversation and business” (Raven, 176), uniting private reading with public life. St Clair notes the growth of this type of library: “[by] 1801, there were believed to be about 1000 circulating libraries in Great Britain...[growing steadily to] about 1500 [libraries] in 1821” (237), so they were well established in Austen’s period. The Minerva circulating library was the best known of its kind, “with tens of thousands of volumes” available for rent (St Clair, 237). The Minerva press was infamous for its publication of gothic and sensational fiction of varying quality, and books from circulating libraries consequently became associated with popular novels “much condemned in conduct literature” (St Clair, 244), and by Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*. Though other types of texts were also available, such as religious and historical texts (12),⁴ circulating libraries became associated with “second-rate literature” in the period (Pearson, 152).⁵ Later, I will discuss the negative associations among circulating libraries, novels, and women’s reading.

Do different types of libraries – public or private, book clubs or subscription libraries – correlate to different types of reading practices? Lending libraries promoted a range of reading practices, such as “selection, browsing and the part-reading of a variety

⁴ *The Use of Circulating Libraries Considered; with Instructions for Opening and Conducting a Library, Either Upon a Large or Finall Plan* (1797)

⁵ We can read Austen’s famous defense of novels in Vol. I Ch. XIV of *Northanger Abbey* as an indirect defense of the circulating library: “the person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid” (NA, 77).

of books” but also “concentrated reading” in silence or out loud (Raven, 176). Benedict also discusses the “kind of reading” that circulating libraries encouraged, and the period’s concerns about this trend in reading:

Since libraries lent a volume at a time and novels generally ran to three volumes, ... several clients could read the same novel simultaneously, a practice that might invite speedy rather than considered perusal. Similarly, the dramatic formula of novels might encourage a private reading that would sustain the plot’s mystery... rather than the evaluation of aesthetic merit and moral content... associated with... reading in eighteenth-century male society (169).

Here Benedict highlights the way reading spaces interact with literary genres, reading practices, and gender issues. Subsequent chapters will explore in more detail these concerns about women reading too quickly, indiscriminately, and privately.

Benedict also highlights the importance of the circulating library to the circulation of Austen’s own fiction. Novelists such as Austen were “dependent” on circulating libraries “to disseminate their work” (Benedict, 169), since by 1800 “most copies of a novel’s edition were sold to [such] libraries” (Erickson, 573). This was true for Austen’s novels in the Regency period: “About half of the [print-runs] were purchased by the titled gentry, and upper-middle classes.... The other half wound up in ...circulating libraries” (Wolfson, 114). Austen was “obliged to operate within a commercial system,” and appeal to the literary market for her novels (St Clair, 161), and the “format” for her novels was determined by the circulating library “market more than by any other” (Benedict, 169). We can see the type of plot “demanded” by the “three-deck[er]” format in both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*, that has a “[climax] at the end of each volume, yet preserv[es] a continuing, mounting excitement to propel the reader through the third tome” (Benedict, 171). While Austen occasionally satirized the circulating library as a

commercially-driven enterprise, she also relied on it for the success of her novels, so she certainly did not condemn the institution.

The commercialization of circulating libraries, however, is still an object of Austen's satire. Since this type of business provided moderately low profits for its owners, lending libraries often sold other products alongside books. One librarian recommends in 1797 that "the bookselling and stationery business should always be annexed" (34).⁶ Some of the products sold included "Haberdashery, Hosiery, Hats, Tea, Tobacco and Snuffs; or Perfumery, and ... Patent Medicines" (34-5), along with "items for the display of accomplishments such as drawing, music, writing, and riding" (Benedict, 162). Benedict further draws the connection between the literary marketplace, consumer culture, and the marriage market in Austen's fiction, the way that "commercial culture was identified with female desire" (Benedict, 164). A trip to the library could be a way to put the self on display, shopping for books and advertising oneself as a "reading woman" in the same moment. In Chapter Four, we will see how eighteenth-century "cultural critics complained about female consumption..., often linking moralistic objections to female appetite with attacks on women's reading, especially of circulating library fiction" (Benedict, 153).

In Austen's period, the circulating library was considered an "ambiguous" space (Pearson, 163) for female readers. Although these libraries became a way for women to gain access to books (Erickson, 577), to shop, or even to mix socially, the lending library's poor reputation made its use somewhat risky for women. Just as Hannah More had condemned "[g]irls who ...devour frivolous books" in the "hot-bed of [the]

⁶ *The Use of Circulating Libraries Considered; with Instructions for Opening and Conducting a Library, Either Upon a Large or Finall Plan* (1797)

circulating library” (176) in her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799), anxieties emerged about female readers’ “increased access [to books] through circulating-libraries” in the period (Newlyn, 7). To many, the circulating library “represented the threat of promiscuous reading and individual autonomy of choice” (Richardson, *RP* 402), because it prevented male guardians from selecting or controlling what their daughters read. Hence, Mr. Collins’s shock that the Bennet girls have access to books from the circulating library (Richardson, *RP* 402) – in his case, however, this is an instance of parodic male authority.

Pearson summarizes some of the contemporary conservative criticisms of circulating libraries: “[p]revailing stereotypes saw them as culturally and morally inferior... [they were] imaged as an ‘ever-green tree of diabolical knowledge’, ‘filthy streams of spiritual and moral pollution’... a ‘great evil’ simultaneously conveying ‘food and poison’ to the young reader” (163-4). Even the books of circulating libraries “become feminized[:] ...popular books are ruined by ‘powder and pomatum between the leaves’, or are returned ‘soil’d and dog-ear’d’ by a sluttish female borrower,” and “pernicious” novels are “constantly identified with the female body and sexuality” (Pearson, 165). That circulating libraries were “culturally understood as feminine” (Benedict, 164) has more to do with the political anxieties of Austen’s day than any actual statistics: Benedict shows that “less than 30 percent of novel readers were [actually] women in the eighteenth century” (164). Nevertheless, anxieties about women’s reading permeate the period’s views of lending libraries.

One example of the conservative mistrust of lending libraries arises from a surprising source: Samuel T. Coleridge. In *The Statesman’s Manual* (1816), Coleridge

shares his haughty contempt for the “Reading Public” (40). Lower and middle-class readership, he bemoans, has “multiplied exceedingly,” being “dieteted at the two public ordinaries of literature[:] the circulating libraries and the periodical press” (41-2). The result of this “consumption” of literature is by no means healthy for the nation in Coleridge’s view: “From a popular philosophy and a philosophic populace, Good Sense deliver us!” (42). Concerns about the “new philosophy” of Paine and Godwin were rampant during and after the 1790s, largely because of its “revolutionary potential” (Pearson, 78). Fearing the aftermath of the French Revolution, Coleridge recognizes that literacy cannot be stopped, since “the spirit of curiosity [is] to be found in every village: books are in every hovel” (43); but he also thinks it should be controlled. Coleridge was not the only conservative to doubt the effects of mass literacy. In the nineteenth century, literacy was seen as “either ambivalent or unambiguously negative,” just like “the *pharmakon* of writing: at its best, it is simultaneously both wholesome and poisonous; at its worst, it is poisonous” (Brantlinger, 11). Novels in particular were suspect. According to Brantlinger, “the general threat posed by novels [was] a moral and social one: the spectre of distracted or deluded masses of readers” (Brantlinger, 2-3). The “Reading Public” (Coleridge, 40) was seen as gorging on useless, immoral, or subversive types of literature found at the circulating library, engaging in unrestricted, non-educational reading that “arous[ed] sentimental responses” (Benedict, 167).

The writer of a 1797 pamphlet, “The Use of Circulating Libraries Considered,” is well aware of the “prejudices” against the institution (3; 57). The writer argues that “reading and instruction should be universal” (43), since literacy promotes religion, political stability, morality, and knowledge (13-16), as well as entertainment (21-2). He

or she even defends novels as “bear[ing] a great resemblance to truth,” and “tend[ing] to improve the morals of the age” (15). This claim does not prohibit a warning to “exclude every book of a profane, immoral, and indelicate nature” (42). Perhaps the author has in mind the circulating library’s female patrons, whose “delicacy of mind” must not be harmed by literary choices unsanctioned by their male guardians. As noted above, the writer of the pamphlet recommends works of divinity and history, but he also includes novels, and “Reviews, Magazines, and...Newspapers” in his ideal library catalogue (12, 29). But pamphlets should be “excluded” from the library (34), since these cheap publications could be used for the dissemination of radical political ideas – Tom Paine’s *The Rights of Man* (1791), for example (Brantlinger, 6-7). Authorities feared “a resurgence of the political philosophies and egalitarian ideals that [had] inspired a revolution in France” (St Clair, 308), and alternate pamphlets such as More’s *Cheap Repository Tracts* were sent out to remedy the evil of a reading populace (St. Clair, 352; Brantlinger, 6). Clearly the writer of the circulating library pamphlet does not want to associate with anything close to political.

Lydia Bennet, Fanny Price, and Circulating Libraries

Austen is less concerned with the radical potential of pamphlets and circulating libraries, but her fiction does deal with the period’s anxieties. In *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*, we see the tension between the possible uses of the circulating library: as a centre of commerce and social interaction, a source of trashy fiction, but also a site of learning and opportunity for self-improvement. The comparison is most aptly made by looking at two female characters’ relation to the institution: *Mansfield Park*’s Fanny, and

Pride and Prejudice's Lydia. While Fanny is associated with the educative potential of the circulating library, Lydia is associated with its commercial aspect.

Though Lydia is bored by Mr. Collins's reading of Fordyce's *Sermons*, rudely interrupting him (*P&P*, 51-2), she does enjoy novels from the circulating library – much to Mr. Collins's dismay. When asked “to read aloud to the ladies[,] Mr. Collins readily assented, and a book was produced; but on beholding it, (for every thing announced it to be from a circulating library,) he started back, and begging pardon, protested that he never read novels” (*P&P*, 51). Though Kitty only “stare[s] at” Mr. Collins after this proclamation, Lydia *exclaim[s]*” (51, emphasis added), as though she cannot understand the impropriety of a young woman reading novels. The irony in this scene prevents us from taking Mr. Collins's warning to Lydia seriously – that she ought to read “books of a serious stamp,” for “there can be nothing so advantageous to [young women] as instruction” (*P&P*, 52), but Mr. Collins is merely repeating the prevalent conservative attitude concerning circulating libraries.

What attracts Lydia to the circulating library is not necessarily its novels, but its potential as a social gathering place. As Erickson notes, circulating libraries in Austen's period were “fashionable daytime lounges where ladies could see others and be seen,” a “social attraction” boasting raffles and “expensive merchandise” for sale (576). They could even, as Lydia is fully aware, become potential scenes for flirtation with handsome army officers (Benedict, 171). Always ready to gossip about the officers in Meryton, Lydia cheerfully announces that “Colonel Forster and Captain Carter do not go so often to Miss Watson's as they did when they first came; [Aunt Philips] sees them now very

often standing in Clarke's library" (*P&P*, 21). Lydia frequents the library because it is fashionable, a place to buy things, to see and be seen.

Because circulating libraries were "associated with leisure," they became popular attractions in "resorts for the wealthy" (Erickson, 574) in Austen's period. Austen's unfinished work, *Sanditon*, is set in just such a resort, where the circulating library is synonymous with fashionable life. In the novel, characters check the "Library Subscription book" (Austen, *Sanditon*, 315) as a "useful guide to who [is] in town" (Erickson, 576), and shop at the library for "all the useless things in the World that could not be done without" (Austen, 316). *Pride and Prejudice*'s Lydia is also enamoured of these social and commercial necessities, and attends the circulating library at the resort town of Brighton in Volume II (*P&P*, 182). Self-advertised as "fashionable and selective" (Raven, 179), circulating libraries maintained an "exclusive" aura (179), yet were open to those at the lower end of the gentility (Benedict, 194). Despite the social controls where members were separated "into 'classes' based on their wealth" (Benedict, 167), with "*De luxe* subscription and special editions" available to the rich (Raven, 178), circulating libraries provided "a space that facilitat[ed] the mingling of the elite with other classes" (Benedict, 194). Lydia does not rise above her social status in her eventual marriage to Wickham, one of the officers she flirts with in Brighton, but she does fit in with the fashionable world at Brighton, as the attendant of Mrs. Forster, "the wife of the Colonel of the regiment" (*P&P*, 175). It is also significant that Lydia's "very short" letters to her mother from Brighton detail her shopping, rather than her reading, at the library: "they were just returned from the library, where such and such officers had attended them, and where she had seen such beautiful ornaments as made her quite wild;

that she had a new gown, or a new parasol" (*P&P*, 182). This passage illustrates Lydia's participation in consumer culture, but also in the marriage market, revealing her understanding of the potential "exchanges" of circulating library culture.

In Volume III of *Mansfield Park*, Fanny uses Portsmouth's circulating library for a much less worldly purpose: she goes there to gain access to books! Unlike Lydia, who uses the library as a way of "getting husbands" (*P&P*, 241), Fanny uses the library as part of her escape from an unwelcome suitor. Sir Thomas has sent Fanny to Portsmouth to cure her "diseased" understanding and induce her to accept Mr. Crawford's proposal (*MP*, 289), but she turns instead to her own and her sister's intellectual health. Fanny wishes to educate her sister Susan, "to give her a share in her own first pleasures, and inspire a taste for the biography and poetry which she delighted in herself" (*MP*, 313). Fanny also desires to console herself for the privations of living at her parent's house, and her own emotional turmoil: "if reading could banish the idea for even half an hour, it was something gained" (*MP*, 313). Chapter Four explores how Austen's heroines use reading for subjective or rebellious purposes, but here it is important to note the way Fanny uses the circulating library to facilitate female education and independence.

Mansfield Park's Fanny is often "described as Austen's most passive heroine," yet she "actively seeks access to books" (Richardson, *RP* 402) through a circulating library. While she stays at her father's house in Portsmouth, she regrets "all her books and boxes, and various comforts" from the schoolroom in Mansfield (*MP*, 313). She seeks to recreate that peaceful environment: "[b]y sitting together up stairs, [Fanny and Susan] avoided a great deal of the disturbance of the house," and they eventually "spend the chief of the morning up stairs" (*MP*, 312-3). Soon, Fanny's upstairs room at

Portsmouth becomes more like a private library: the remembrance of the books she had left behind at Mansfield “grew so potent and stimulative, that Fanny found it impossible not to try for books again. There were none in her father’s house; but wealth is luxurious and daring---and some of her’s [sic] found its way to a circulating library” (*MP*, 313). Austen’s use of the words “luxurious” and “daring” echoes the transgressive and materialistic aspect of circulating libraries, but Fanny’s motives ironically invert these negative associations. Fanny’s use of the circulating library reveals her independence of mind (Erickson, 577), and her determination to create a sense of order within the chaos of her parents’ home.

In Austen’s period, “circulating libraries could ideally be ... a means for the intellectual liberation of women of small means,” and Fanny recognizes and takes advantage of this possibility (Erickson, 577). With the money given to her by Sir Thomas, Fanny becomes “a subscriber – ... a renter, a chuser of books!” (*MP*, 313). She is “amazed at her own doings in every way” – “at being anything *in propria persona*,” and “to be having any one’s improvement in view in her choice!” (313). Benedict highlights Austen’s use of the “Latin legal term,” *in propria persona*, arguing that “Fanny exercises almost masculine power in her own person” through her use of the lending library (188). By undertaking the education of her sister Susan, Fanny becomes an “authority” figure, “guiding and informing” someone in a way she could never have imagined previously (*MP*, 311). Able to choose essays, history, biography, and poetry (313; 328), Fanny becomes a “discriminating cultural consumer, educator of a family, ... and patron of authors” (Benedict, 188). In this instance, reading is “daring” (*MP*, 313), a mild act of defiance that gives Fanny more confidence in her own judgment, apart from

male authority. The connection between women's reading and intellectual independence, discussed more fully in Chapter Four, is best established by considering feminine reading spaces in *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

Women and Libraries

Women occupy an indefinite space when it comes to reading. As several critics have pointed out, the line between public and private, male and female reading spaces was not clearly defined in Austen's period, making the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable places to read very unclear (Raven, 176; Pearson, 163; Benedict, 164). Privately owned libraries were owned by men, but could be open to female members of the household, and even the surrounding neighbourhood; similarly, the "public" circulating library was still somewhat exclusive, since it required a subscription fee or membership (Raven, 176). We have seen how "the private library tended to be seen as a masculine space, even a symbol of male power and rationality, while the commercial library...was perceived...as a female-dominated space" (Pearson, 152), even though most subscribers were not women. So where do the women in Austen's fiction actually read?

Austen's female characters certainly use private libraries, even though these may be gendered as male. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the private library at Longbourn "is not an exclusively male preserve, [since] Elizabeth is welcome there and we are assured that all the girls had ready access to books" (Jackson, para. 2). Mary Bennet asks to use the library at Netherfield after Jane's marriage (*P&P*, 66), and we can imagine Elizabeth taking full advantage of the library at Pemberley, just as Georgiana had done (*P&P*, 28-9). In *Mansfield Park* too, Fanny has access to the family library, and it is suggested that

she has a “free...command” of the books there (*MP*, 22). But we also know that Fanny has her own private collection of books, “of which she had been a collector, from the first hour of her commanding a shilling” (*MP*, 119), and that she takes advantage of the circulating library in Portsmouth. Although it was not unusual for a “young middle-class woman [to] accumulate books of her own” (Pearson, 153), women’s libraries were rarely permanent structures, like Mr. Darcy’s at Pemberley, “the work of many generations” (*P&P*, 27). A woman’s library was “a number of books rather than a private space where they [could] be enjoyed” (Pearson, 153), and her books might be borrowed or rented rather than purchased. So female reading spaces become nomadic, snatched like the moments of privacy and reflection so craved by Austen’s heroines.

The intellectual liberty of reading is akin to other forms of thought: introspection, contemplation, discrimination. But all of these mental activities require a location in the physical world, as Austen constantly reminds us. Just as Mr. Bennet relishes “the free use of [his] understanding” and “of [his] room” (*P&P*, 87) in *Pride and Prejudice*, Fanny learns to enjoy the freedom of thought in her East Room at Mansfield, and in the upstairs haven at Portsmouth. In contrast to the male library, Fanny’s reading spaces are temporary, borrowed by the courtesy of her father and uncle. Though she owns some books at Mansfield, Fanny’s books are rented in Portsmouth, and her library subscription is made by the courtesy of Sir Thomas’ gift of 10£ (*MP*, 311, 313). Though she loves books, Fanny’s opportunities for reading are still limited.

Pride and Prejudice is also full of moments where Elizabeth longs to have some private time for reading or reflection, because she knows that dealing with personal thought and emotion in public is unacceptable. After her conversation with Colonel

Fitzwilliam in Volume II, when she first hears of Darcy's interference in Bingley's attachment to Jane, Elizabeth "shut[s herself] into her own room," where "she [can] think without interruption of all that she had heard" (*P&P*, 143). At the Collins's residence, and at Rosings, Elizabeth must live up to her social responsibilities, despite her inner turmoil over Mr. Darcy's proposal and its attendant revelations. It becomes more difficult for Lizzy to maintain her composure after reading Darcy's letter, and she almost "[forgets] where she [is]" while talking to his aunt, Lady Catherine De Bourgh (*P&P*, 162). For women like Elizabeth, "Reflection must be reserved for solitary hours; whenever she was alone, she gave way to it as the greatest relief; and not a day went by without a solitary walk, in which she might indulge in all the delight of [her own] recollections" (*P&P*, 162). Outdoor space seems to be the only place where Lizzy really is free to think or read: for example, she reads Darcy's letter outdoors in Volume II (*P&P*, 149-50). Though she looks forward to being home at Longbourn, where "there would be leisure enough for observation" (*P&P*, 166), even there she is limited to "her own room" as the only place where "she might think with freedom" (*P&P*, 233). Reading is vital for Austen's heroines, in terms of their growth as individuals, and their ability to accurately discern the world around them.

As we saw with the upstairs room in Portsmouth, the importance of a private reading space is also central to *Mansfield Park*, where Fanny has "recourse...[to an] apartment, more spacious and more meet for walking about in, and thinking, and of which she had now for some time been almost equally mistress:" the East Room (*MP*, 118). Originally the "school-room" where Miss Lee the governess had lived (*MP*, 118), Fanny keeps her "plants" and "books" there because her own room, the white Attic, is so

small (118). But she “gradually” adds her other “possessions” to the room – presents from her cousins, mementos, and other little-valued objects from around the house (120) – until it becomes her own (119): “as her value for the comforts of it increased, she had ...so naturally and so artlessly worked herself into it, that it was now generally admitted to be her’s [sic]” (119). The East Room is symbolically powerful for Fanny, a place of ownership, education, and freedom of thought.

Like Mr. Bennet’s library, the school-room is a place of refuge from the rest of the house. But instead of isolating her from others, the East Room becomes a place that nurtures Fanny’s relationships: “The comfort of it in her hours of leisure was extreme. She could go there after any thing unpleasant below, and find immediate consolation in some pursuit, or some train of thought at hand” (*MP*, 119). The objects in her schoolroom, including her books, become her “friend[s]” (119); she tries to “catch [Edmund’s] counsel” by looking at his “profile,” “or by giving air to her geraniums she [tries to] inhale a breeze of mental strength herself” (120). This reading space does not represent a retreat from social interaction – other characters interrupt Fanny’s solitude at various intervals in the plot, seeking or dictating advice (*MP*, 120-3; 132-4; 204-7; 244-52). Rather, the East Room becomes a solitary community where the conversations are between person and page, human and non-human (Deresiewicz, 57). The same room where Fanny reads Lord Macartney’s *Journal of the Embassy to China* (1807), George Crabbe’s *Tales in Verse* (1812), and Samuel Johnson’s *Idler*, (*MP*, 123) – her lessons in essay-writing, poetry, and travel literature – Fanny learns the lesson of self-regulation: “her works of charity and ingenuity,” her solitary “musing” and recollection of past consolations, and her imaginative communion with the objects of her room all assist in

her “attempt to find her way to her duty” (*MP*, 119-20; Deresiewicz, 57-8). Austen critiques the assumption that reading causes women to neglect their proper sphere (see Chapter Four), since Fanny’s contemplative reading spaces at Mansfield and Portsmouth grant her the freedom to think, while still remaining mindful of her domestic duties.

Conclusion

Whether it is through reading a letter in the open air, collecting a private stock of books or renting them from circulating libraries, the reading spaces of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* enable her heroines to flourish socially, intellectually, and independently. Elizabeth and Fanny make use of private libraries on their guardians’ estates, and seize opportunities to gain knowledge through other means as well. Austen’s treatment of the Romantic library is nuanced and complex, drawing from many possible representations, functions, and ideals in her period, and revealing the ambiguities of reading spaces and gender. Further investigation of the reading practices of Austen’s time will help enlighten her novels still more, and Austen’s depiction of women’s reading will continue to challenge the conservative ideologies of her period.

CHAPTER TWO

Reading Practices in Mansfield Park and Pride and Prejudice

Chapter One examined the physical aspects of book culture in Austen's period: what the books, libraries, and reading paraphernalia would have been like in her characters' elite culture. The locations of reading in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* came under consideration, as did the social, economic, and gender-related significance of libraries and books. But what about the *way* people read in Austen's time? The same factors that come into play with reading spaces inform the period's reading practices: we can see the same tensions between public (male) and private (female), between outer display and inner transformation, and between cultural norms and individual preferences in both aspects of reading. But the ways characters read also influence their social interactions. In Mr. Bennet's library, for example, he attempts to retreat from the affairs of the household through private reading, but he also engages in conversations with his daughter Elizabeth in this reading room. Reading can be an excuse to withdraw from society, or a way to connect to people, both debilitating and facilitating social interactions. Like all forms of human behaviour, reading has shifting codes and conventions. Though some reading habits were considered unconventional or even inappropriate in the period, our own ideas of reading *faux pas* may not apply to the Romantics. For example, it was not entirely uncommon to "read outdoors while walking" (St Clair, 394), and annotating the margins of books was not considered improper (Jackson, para. 12). This chapter draws attention to the effects of different reading practices found in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*.

The types of reading that characters enact may fall into certain categories, but we must be careful not to be too rigid in our definitions. Just as the delineation of public and private libraries was ambiguous in the period, with women gaining access to texts outside the home in a commercialized, semi-public venue, we cannot draw a line between public and private ways of reading. For instance, reading aloud could be practiced by amateurs in the private drawing room, or by professionals in public or semi-public venues. Michaelson cites the example of the eighteenth-century French actor Le Tessier, who invited an educated audience to a reading of plays in his home: a public event with the “air of a private occasion” (114). This breach between public and private performance also becomes a problem in *Mansfield Park*.

Another instance of overlapping reading practices is the distinction between intensive and extensive ways of reading. In cultures where there are “few books” available, texts can be “treated as sacred objects, subject to...intense scrutiny” (Brewer, “Reconstructing the reader” 243). Cavallo describes this mode of reading as intensive: a small number of texts are “read, reread, repeated in the form of citations and maxims, committed to memory and recited” (89). Though intensive reading persisted in the eighteenth century and Romantic period, especially through religious reading, there was a shift to extensive reading in Austen’s time. For the upper and middle classes, increased access to books and a broader range of literature encouraged more extensive reading practices than ever before: “people read more widely, quickly, and superficially than in earlier periods, and...such reading was normally performed silently and alone” (Michaelson, 18). But Michaelson, among others, warns against neglecting other types of reading in the period (18). In the same way, Brewer highlights the “diversity of reading

practices” (244) in the eighteenth century, arguing that print culture did not “replace” earlier reading practices (Brewer, 243), but that actual readers engaged in a range of these practices simultaneously.

Intensive reading thrived in genres which encouraged private reflection and individual growth, such as sacred texts and poetry. Religious texts such as the Bible could be revisited frequently, helping to reinforce the individual’s spiritual identity (Brewer, 239). Though Austen does not delineate Fanny Price’s religious reading in *Mansfield Park*, it is certainly implied, and more evidence of characters’ intensive reading comes through their ability to quote texts from memory. For example, Fanny quotes passages from Cowper and Scott in *Mansfield Park* (MP, 44; 68; 338), and *Pride and Prejudice*’s Mary Bennet is steeped in conduct literature and extracts as evident from her didactic and homiletic forms of conversation, such as her reflections on vanity and pride in Volume I (P&P, 13-14). St Clair informs us that it was not uncommon to memorize “long passages of text” (395) in the period, and that poetry “was [generally] preferred to prose” because it was easier to memorize (397). Chapter Four discusses the ways characters use literary quotation in Austen’s novels, and the purpose of these intertextual allusions.

Memorization was also an effective technique for reading aloud, enabling more freedom to express the text’s ideas as one’s own and creating “the illusion of extempore delivery” (Newlyn, 351-2). Just as the wide availability of printed texts inherent in a rising print culture did not abolish the intensive reading of manuscript culture, the profusion of silent reading in the eighteenth century did not altogether erase the practice of reading aloud. Though solitary reading was important to the development of the novel as a genre (Michaelson, 18), and also to women’s reading, oral reading served important

functions as well: “to reinforce domestic relationships” and social interaction, “and to provide practice in the art of speaking” for both private and public spheres (18). Austen highlights the social aspects of oral and silent reading in her novels, showing the ambiguities of both types of reading.

Although some reading practices in Austen’s period are gendered as feminine and associated with the domestic sphere, they are not exclusively female. Conservative authors such as Hannah More recommend solitary reading as a tool for effective conversation, and reading is sometimes seen as an accomplishment – an asset that helps women “attract suitors” (Michaelson, 123). But the ability to translate one’s reading into informed, intelligent conversation is an asset for men as well in Austen’s novels. Reading becomes connected to courtship in the novels, linking the ability to read and to speak of what one reads to a person’s taste and suitability as a marriage partner. However, Austen complicates the notion that good reading well necessitates a good character, and hints at the unequal power relationship of the accomplished (male) speaker to a receptive (female) audience.

Aside from the blending of intensive and extensive, silent and oral types of reading in Austen’s period, it is essential to acknowledge the freedom of readers’ response to text. Attitudes towards reading in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries implied a degree of autonomy for the reader. Reading could be taken more or less seriously depending on the text and the context. For example, in Brewer’s case study of Anna Larpent, a well-educated and well-read eighteenth-century woman, we see evidence of “purposive” reading for serious subjects, but also “superficial perusal” for entertaining genres (Brewer, 240). The way you read a novel is not the same as the way you read a

religious text or a cook book. Readers were free to use texts for their own purposes, and the period's "general attitude towards books" can be described as "respectful but practical" (Jackson, para. 12). Heather Jackson describes how books "were put to use: read from aloud at all sorts of social gatherings, mined for good lines that could be introduced in conversation, and made the subject of conversation themselves" (para. 12). Although she satirizes Mary Bennet for repeating memorized phrases rather than integrating her reading smoothly into conversation, Austen supports Fanny and Elizabeth, who both enjoy using texts to express their ideas in conversation (*MP*, 18; *P&P*, 132).

Books are not static objects, but containers of ideas that can be accepted, rejected, or altered by the reader. With the period's practical view of books and reading, it was not considered improper to make annotations in the margins. For example, summaries, indexes of topics, sections to extract were "some of the commonest forms of annotation of the period" (Jackson, para. 7), and a more self-assertive character like *Pride and Prejudice*'s Mr. Bennet could have annotated a "desultory commentary, a kind of talking back to the book as the spirit moves you" (para. 9). Another reading practice that asserts the autonomy of eighteenth-century readers is "intermittent reading" (Tadmor, 174). When families or friends read aloud to each other for amusement, they did not necessarily read books "cover to cover," or even stick to one book at a time. Rather, "the reading of many texts stretched over months and was entwined with reading of other texts in various genres" (Tadmor, 168). These domestic readings were often non-linear, "skipping from passage to passage" in a text (Tadmor, 168; Michaelson, 175); they involved "ongoing discussion" amongst the members of the group, and readings were often "interrupted for commentary" (Michaelson, 164). An example of this discontinuous

reading is found in Volume III of *Pride and Prejudice*. Mr. Bennet interrupts his oral reading of Mr. Collins's letter to remark its improbability, and to gauge Elizabeth's reaction (*P&P*, 277). Mr. Collins's assertion that Elizabeth will soon be married to Darcy appears ridiculous to Mr. Bennet, who "talks back" to Mr. Collins's letter much like the solitary reader who makes annotations in the margins. For Mr. Bennet, the written word invites debate rather than undivided attention.

Austen uses autonomous reading as a metaphor in *Pride and Prejudice*, relating the long-windedness of powerful characters to the authority of books. At Rosings, Lady Catherine de Bourgh dominates the atmosphere, driving away her guests: "Within doors there was Lady Catherine, books, and a billiard table, but gentlemen cannot always be indoors" (*P&P*, 138). The idea of reading as an indoor activity, too limiting for gentlemen who "cannot always be indoors" suggests that reading belongs to the private sphere; but Austen's juxtaposition of books and Lady Catherine suggests still more. Austen has already informed us that Lady Catherine speaks "her opinion on every subject in so decisive a manner as proved that she was not used to have her judgment controverted" (*P&P*, 126). Her monologues continue "without any intermission" (*P&P*, 126), much like a book by a single author: one point of view is contained in an uninterrupted whole, ostensibly "authoritative" (*P&P*, 125) and resistant to contradiction. However, readers have autonomy: to choose when to read or stop reading; to disagree with what they read; to think critically about texts; and to interpret texts subjectively (Pearson, 17). If we extend the analogy of books to people, Elizabeth's bold interactions with Lady Catherine display a kind of active reading. She dares to contradict Lady Catherine on several occasions, most notably when she refuses to promise not to marry

Mr. Darcy (*P&P*, 272). By supporting her heroine's "pertness" (Michaelson, 208), Austen could be advocating for autonomous reading, and showing the importance of interactive reading to social interaction.

Bad Reading Habits

Though Austen's characters could display a degree of autonomy in their reading, they could also exhibit inappropriate reading habits. In Austen's period, readers were criticized for "reading in unsuitable places" such as the hair-dressing table, "or for reading badly, quickly, insensitively, or too much," making the assumption that "if you read in inappropriate places, then it was likely that your reading material was worthless" (Raven, 180). Properly sanctioned texts from the family library should be read within their designated area, or else the act of reading is morally suspect. Accusations of improper reading practices were, as Pearson argues, often levied at women, who "read novels in coaches, while putting on makeup, at meals, in hospital, even in church" (169). Austen does not seem to provide examples of reading in inappropriate places so much as reading at inappropriate times or situations, or reading for the wrong motives.

Chapter One considered the connection between slovenly, untidy or messy books and the female body and sexuality (Pearson, 165). Similarly, bad reading habits became associated with female readers, who were figured as inferior in what and how they read. In the Regency period, Hannah More produced "tracts condemning slovenly reading" habits, such as dripping candlewax in the book while reading in bed, or spilling hair powder in a book while getting one's hair dressed (Raven, 180). Fires were also a concern: though "many readers read by firelight" to save on wax candles or rushes (St Clair, 394), female readers were condemned for the negligent practice of reading in bed

by candlelight, “risking dangers from seduction to conflagration” in this “slothful” reading practice (Pearson, 169). Ina Ferris has shown “how women’s reading became associated with ‘sofas and softness’ as opposed to the ‘legitimate, upright reading’ of men...[and how women’s] ‘supine, erotic’ reading [became] a form of sensuality rather than intellectuality” (qtd. in Pearson, 170). Chapter Four studies the period’s attitudes towards women’s reading, comparing the “image of the passive female reader” of literary criticism to historical accounts of reading (Tadmor, 162). Though Austen does not share all of her period’s assumptions, she does satirize women who are passive readers.

One such target of Austen’s satire is *Mansfield Park*’s Lady Bertram. Austen describes her as “a woman who spent her days in sitting nicely dressed on a sofa, doing some long piece of needle work, of little use and no beauty, ...guided in every thing important by Sir Thomas, and in smaller concerns by her sister” (*MP*, 16). Here, the *reader* is active enough (Fanny is the one reading aloud), but the listener is inattentive and lazy in her attitude. In a scene in Volume Two, Fanny has been reading to her aunt, but Lady Bertram seems vague about the text’s meaning, or even its name: “Fanny has been reading to me...[.] She often reads to me out of those books; and she was in the middle of a very fine speech of that man’s---What’s his name, Fanny?--- when we heard your footsteps” (*MP*, 263). Reliant on others for guidance and interpretation of any kind, Lady Bertram is often thoughtless, heedless of what goes on around her. It takes Henry Crawford’s acting skills to impress on Lady Bertram the full meaning of the text at hand, which, we learn, is “a volume of Shakespeare” (*MP*, 263). However, Lady Bertram’s warm response and “admiration” for Crawford’s skill foreshadows Fanny’s possible reaction. Crawford is “excessively pleased” by his audience’s reaction: “If Lady Bertram

with all her incompetency and languor, could feel this, the inference of what her niece, alive and enlightened as she was, must feel, was elevating” (*MP*, 265). Though Lady Bertram is merely a foil for Fanny’s taste and sensibility, she is also a negative example of the passive female reader.

Though there may be bad ways to read, or to listen to others read, there are alternative uses for reading in Austen’s fiction. Reading could ideally be the subject for “clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation” (Austen, *Persuasion*, 122), but it could also be a better occupation for the less-adept conversationalist. Michaelson hints at the strategic use of reading aloud in the domestic setting: “One might instigate a reading in order to free one’s mind or to avoid the worse imposition of bad conversation. In this case, the audience simply ignores the reader” (Michaelson, 170). In *Pride and Prejudice*, the Bennet family invites Mr. Collins to read so they will not have to hear more of his dull conversation (*P&P*, 52). Another tactical use for reading is to create a sense of calm or security through reading aloud. Pearson gives the example of Mary Delany, an eighteenth-century bluestocking who “used reading aloud as a narcotic [in her unhappy marriage] and was relieved when her husband ‘had fallen asleep with [her] reading’” (173). Fanny’s reading seems to have this tranquilizing effect on Lady Bertram in *Mansfield Park*.

Reading and Conversation

Reading aloud can substitute for boring conversation, but reading silently can also inform one’s conversation. In the period, women’s reading was sometimes seen as useful because of its ability to translate into subject matter for polite conversation. Hannah More’s insistence that “a talent for conversation should be the result of education” (176)

in her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) is typical of much conduct book advice in the period, stressing the *use* of private reading for the benefit of the woman's social circle. Conduct books offered advice on the appropriate way to use books as conversation-starters (St Clair, 395); for example, on avoiding controversial subjects. Women such as Anna Larpent read "tracts and papers [that] were intended to stimulate conversation," but steered clear of possibly offensive topics (Brewer, 242), but Austen's heroines sometimes ignore this rule. *Mansfield Park's* Fanny Price introduces the topic of the slave trade in Sir Thomas' presence, presumably from something she had read, but is met with "silence" (*MP*, 155). Though conduct books limited the scope of women's reading to superficial and polite subjects, Austen's heroines are not barred from addressing serious issues.⁷

Related to Austen's critique of superficial reading for conversation is the practice of making extracts from literary texts.⁸ These selections from popular literature were often designed specifically for young women, available in a pre-printed format (St Clair, 224-6; 229). That *Pride and Prejudice's* Mary Bennet makes her own extracts (*P&P*, 4) suggests that she also copies out quotes by hand into an album or commonplace book, much like Harriet Smith in *Emma* (1815) (St Clair, 226). Like Harriet, Mary is "silly and ignorant" (*P&P*, 2), and though she pretends to be learned, she fails to impress anyone by her reading. Her "extracts" are synonymous with her "observations of thread-bare morality" (*P&P*, 45), and she becomes the butt of Mr. Bennet's jokes. In Volume One, Mr. Bennet prompts, "What say you, Mary? for you are a young lady of deep reflection I know, and read great books, and make extracts" (*P&P*, 4). Mary is tongue-tied in

⁷ The silence Fanny is met with is, however, significant: Sir Thomas is implicated in the slave trade in Antigua.

⁸ Mary's reading of literary extracts also connects to feminine accomplishments (see Chapter Four).

response: she “wished to say something very sensible, but knew not how” (*P&P*, 4).

Austen is satirizing the “error of reading for superficial knowledge and memorizing set passages for the purpose of showing off” (Richardson, *RP* 402). Real reading requires intelligent interaction with the meaning of the text, as opposed to parroting the words without understanding.

Austen was not alone in her critique of literary extracts. Hannah More also argued against reading “A few fine passages from the poets...huddled together by some extract-maker, whose brief and disconnected patches of broken and discordant materials, while they inflame young readers with the vanity of reciting, neither fill the mind nor form the taste” (More, 178). Concerned that these literary snippets would skew the original texts’ meanings, Hannah More holds “certain *accomplished* young ladies” in disdain, because they have not “come legitimately by any thing they know” (178-9). Similarly, Barbara Benedict characterizes literary extracts as “sentimental snippets for the culturally illiterate” (180), a sort of “mini-library” that packages knowledge into easily digestible units (160). Though women’s lack of access to libraries and the expense of purchasing complete works (especially new texts) made literary extracts an extremely useful resource, Austen questions the depth of understanding one can achieve from these partial texts: “To ‘read great books, and make extracts’... does not [necessarily] result in genuine mental growth” (Richardson, *RP* 402), but rather “tends to value the quantity of literary consumption over depth of understanding” (Benedict, 158). As evident in such examples as Caroline Bingley’s attempts to arouse Darcy’s interest through books, or Mary Bennet’s moralistic maxims, reading for self-display is a recurring object of satire in Austen’s novels.

Reading and Courtship

Conversation is an essential step on the path to courtship, and reading can inform both social activities. However, Austen mocks the use of reading as a mere conversation-starter in *Pride and Prejudice*. At the Netherfield ball in Volume I, Darcy and Elizabeth try “two or three subjects [of conversation]... without success,” so Darcy introduces another:

‘What think you of books?’ said he, smiling.

‘Books---Oh! no.---I am sure we never read the same, or not with the same feelings.’

‘I am sorry you think so; but if that be the case, there can at least be no want of subject.---We may compare our different opinions.’

‘No---I cannot talk of books in a ball-room; my head is always full of something else’ (*P&P*, 71).

Earlier, Darcy had expressed his interest in the kind of woman who improves “her mind by extensive reading” (*P&P*, 29), so his query, “what think you of books?” (*P&P*, 71), is a kind of test for Elizabeth’s suitability as a partner – not just for the dance, but for Darcy’s future marriage. But Elizabeth’s refusal to discuss reading with Mr. Darcy indicates that she is not interested in reading *him* accurately, and foreshadows her refusal of his hand in marriage in Volume II. She asserts that “we never read the same [books],” without determining what books Darcy actually reads (*P&P*, 71). Unlike Miss Bingley, who notes the size, colour, and title of the book Darcy reads in the drawing-room, equipping herself with “the second volume of his” so they can, perhaps, converse about it (*P&P*, 41), Elizabeth is more interested in the substance of books than their appearance.

Although Elizabeth’s reply seems to be highly dismissive, her claim that Darcy would not read “with the same feelings” as her (*P&P*, 71) does indicate some thought on the subject. For Elizabeth, private reading is a subjective experience that cannot be

shared. Her final dismissal, that her “head is always full of something else” in a ball-room (*P&P*, 71), suggests that the noisy, crowded ball-room is ill-suited for discussing one’s reading. Talking of what one reads builds intimacy, and Elizabeth wants to keep her dancing partner at a distance. In contrast, Colonel Fitzwilliam is able to entertain Elizabeth by “talking of . . . new books and music” in Volume II; the pair converse with “spirit and flow” at Rosings and draw the attention of the room (*P&P*, 132). That Elizabeth, like Darcy, does not “catch [her partner’s] tone of conversation, or appear interested in [his] concerns” in the ball room scene indicates that she has refused to “perform to strangers” (*P&P*, 135), faking concern where she has none. Elizabeth *does* enjoy speaking of books, but refuses “to find [the] man agreeable whom [she] is determined to hate” (*P&P*, 69).

We can highlight the obverse example in Miss Bingley, whose attempts to flirt with Darcy using books fail miserably. Extremely keen to be “on the same page” with Mr. Darcy in a scene at Netherfield in Volume I, Miss Bingley pretends to read a book “which she had only chosen because it was the second volume of his” (*P&P*, 41). Earlier, the group had discussed the attributes of an “accomplished woman” (*P&P*, 28-9); in addition to Caroline’s list of elegant skills, Darcy had included “the improvement of her mind by extensive reading” (29). Miss Bingley recognizes that Darcy wants an intelligent, well-read woman as a future wife, so she is eager to display an interest in books. Though yawning with boredom, she exclaims: “I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading! How much sooner one tires of any thing than of a book!” (*P&P*, 40-41). Caroline hopes to “win [Darcy to] conversation,” but “he merely answer[s] her question, and read[s] on” (*P&P*, 41). What Caroline does not realize is that Darcy’s idea

of reading for “improvement” involves “years of wide reading with an end to attaining habits of mental discipline as well as gaining general knowledge” (Richardson, *RP* 402). Like her view of books and libraries discussed in Chapter One, Caroline is only able to see reading as a marketable trait for women, and misses its intrinsic value.

Pretending to read well is no guarantee for success in either conversation or courtship. Austen allows Miss Bingley to make herself ridiculous by continuing the reading charade, which is entirely “aimed” at getting Darcy’s attention (*P&P*, 41). Soon she starts a literal parade, persuading Elizabeth to “take a turn about the room” (*P&P*, 41). But Darcy’s reading also reveals his unconscious motives. Though Darcy appears “inflexibly studious” while Caroline walks through the room, Darcy “unconsciously close[s] his book” when Elizabeth begins walking (*P&P*, 41). Like Fanny, who watches Mary and Edmund enact a scene of *Lover’s Vows* in Volume I of *Mansfield Park*, “clos[ing] the page” at the moment they need prompting (*MP*, 133-4), Darcy is unable to pay attention to his book when watching Elizabeth. Ironically, Darcy may only be pretending to read just like Caroline, but his rude attempts to ignore one woman fail to conceal his attraction for the other.

Anti-Social Reading

As with Darcy’s inattention to Caroline above, solitary reading can often be figured as anti-social in Austen’s fiction. One example is Sir Thomas’ solitary reading in Volume II of *Mansfield Park*. The day after Fanny’s first ball, Sir Thomas dominates the drawing room with his silence: “as Sir Thomas was reading to himself, no sounds were heard in the room for the next two hours beyond the reckonings of the game” (*MP*, 222). Sir Thomas’ presence has repressed the “hope and smiles, bustle and motion, noise and

brilliancy” of the household, and replaced them with “languor and all but solitude” (*MP*, 222). Here, solitary reading is isolating for the reader and for everyone else in the room. Instead of discussing the ball, or inviting social interaction through oral reading, Sir Thomas imposes silence on his family, much as he does in response to Fanny’s question about the slave trade (*MP*, 155). As evidenced by his burning of all the copies of *Lover’s Vows* in the house (*MP*, 149), Sir Thomas exercises strict control over the types of reading he permits, and is not above patriarchal censorship.

There are other examples in both novels where characters use books to hide from people, to conceal their emotions, or to avoid talking. Most of the instances of anti-social or impolite reading in *Mansfield Park* arise because of the characters’ selfish concerns or moods. For example, in Volume I, Maria Bertram is in an ill humour and “scarcely raise[s] her eyes from her book” (*MP*, 56) because she felt snubbed for not being invited to dine at the parsonage with her siblings. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Bennet reads as an excuse to stay up late to see his wife after the ball, and satisfy his “curiosity as to the event of an evening which had raised such splendid expectations” (*P&P*, 8). In this case, Mr. Bennet is defending his detached persona, concealing his desire to participate in the doings of the family. Though Mr. Bennet uses reading for a semi-social purpose here (to hear about the ball while pretending disinterest), he still uses it to conceal his true motives.

Mr. Darcy also uses reading to conceal his emotions, especially his romantic interests. Initially, Elizabeth’s reading and interest in music attracts Darcy’s attention in Volume I, and allows him to gaze at her for longer than is appropriate: “as she turned over some music books that lay on the instrument,” Elizabeth observes “how frequently

Mr. Darcy's eyes were fixed on her," though she cannot conceive it to be the gaze of "admiration" (*P&P*, 38). After this episode, and many lively conversations with Elizabeth, Darcy "beg[ins] to feel the danger of paying [her] too much attention" (*P&P*, 44). He tries to crush any signs of his admiration, and: "steady to his purpose, he scarcely spoke ten words to her through the whole of Saturday, and though they were at one time left by themselves for half an hour, he adhered most conscientiously to his book, and would not even look at her" (*P&P*, 44-5). Where Darcy had ignored Caroline Bingley with comparative ease (remaining "inflexibly studious," *P&P*, 41), it takes a lot of effort for him to keep up the charade when Elizabeth is near. But reading allows Darcy both to observe and to neglect his guest.

Darcy uses reading for other anti-social purposes as well. For instance, when Darcy is visiting Elizabeth at the Collins's residence in Volume II, he attempts to draw her out by inquiring whether or not "a woman may... be settled too near her family" (*P&P*, 138), and Elizabeth fails to pick up his hint about matrimony. Dismayed by her surprised reaction, Darcy uses a newspaper as a prop to conceal his emotions: "he drew back his chair, took a newspaper from the table, and, glancing over it, [spoke] in a colder voice" (*P&P*, 138). Darcy attempts to hide his confusion by picking up a newspaper, immersing himself in public information to avoid his own private emotions. The motif of newspaper-reading for avoidance of social interaction also occurs in *Mansfield Park*, but with a darker turn.

Men who read newspapers in *Mansfield Park* tend to do so for selfish, thoughtless, or even cunning motives.⁹ For example, Tom picks up "a newspaper from the table" while at a family party, "and looking over it [says] in a languid way, 'If you

⁹ Note Dr. Grant's reading of newspapers (*MP*, 87), discussed in Chapter Three.

want to dance, Fanny, I will stand up with you” (*MP*, 94). Fanny declines his reluctant offer, and Tom replies, “I am glad of it, ’ ... throwing down the newspaper again --- ‘for I am tired to death” (*MP*, 94). Though Fanny had felt “it would be a great honour to be asked by him” (*MP*, 94), she is less interesting to Tom than the newspaper he pretends to read. Tom’s impolite and selfish behaviour is shared by Fanny’s father Mr. Price, the paradigm of “coarse” manners in the novel (*MP*, 305). Though Fanny had been away from home for a decade, Mr. Price takes out a newspaper on her arrival in Portsmouth, “studying it... without seeming to recollect her existence” (*MP*, 300). This kind of silent reading typifies Mr. Price’s neglect of his family (*MP*, 305), and makes him one of the most anti-social characters in the novel.

But the worst example of newspaper reading in the novel comes from Edmund, who strives to be a model of propriety and decorum. After Crawford has proposed in Volume III, Edmund “turn[s] his back” on Fanny and Henry in the drawing room, “[taking] up a newspaper, very sincerely wishing that dear little Fanny might be persuaded into explaining away [her behaviour] to the satisfaction of her ardent lover” (*MP*, 268). Edmund takes this demonstration of pretended reading to fairly extreme lengths, trying not to eavesdrop by murmuring “over ... various advertisements” in the paper (268). By pretending to read these advertisements and abandoning Fanny to Henry’s courtship, Edmund is participating in a different form of consumer culture: the marriage market. Pretending to read alone, Edmund is complicit with his father and Henry Crawford, refusing to read Fanny correctly.

As with reading and conversation, reading aloud becomes “a form of courtship” (Richardson, *RP* 401) in Austen’s novels. Though Austen satirizes the idea of “poetry as

the *food of love*” in *Pride and Prejudice*, having Elizabeth joke that “one good sonnet will starve [a budding romance] entirely away” (*P&P*, 33), she shows the more serious side of reading and courtship in Volume III of *Mansfield Park*. Interestingly, it is Fanny’s skill as a listener that initially attracts Henry Crawford. As she listens to her brother William’s tales of naval life in Volume II, “Fanny’s sensibility..., and its effects on her countenance, increase her ‘attractions’ for Henry ‘two-fold’, and play a large part in inspiring his pursuit of her” (Bray, 168). Henry is a performer, longing for an audience, and he decides that Fanny’s “absorbed attention” to William’s speech makes her the perfect audience: “he was no longer in doubt of the capabilities of her heart. She had feeling, genuine feeling. It would be something to be loved by such a girl, to excite the first ardours of her young, unsophisticated mind” (*MP*, 184; see Bray, 168).

Though Fanny is aware of Mr. Crawford’s flirtation with her cousins and his corrupt principles, his reading of Shakespeare acts on her sensibilities, and nearly overpowers her judgment. The scene opens when Fanny puts the book she has been reading to Lady Bertram down on the table, and by “carefully giving way to the inclination of the leaves,” Henry Crawford finds the place Fanny left off, and he continues the reading (*MP*, 262). The book becomes a metaphor for Fanny, whom Henry attempts to “read” through careful intrusion into her domestic routine. Though Fanny attempts to ignore Crawford, she is powerless to avoid listening: “taste was too strong in her. She could not abstract her mind five minutes; she was forced to listen; his reading was capital, and her pleasure in good reading extreme” (*MP*, 263). Educated by her cousin Edmund and accustomed to “good reading,” Fanny is nevertheless astonished by Henry’s performance:

in Mr. Crawford's reading, there was a variety of excellence beyond what she had ever met with. The King, the Queen, Buckingham, Wolsey, Cromwell, all were given in turn; for with the happiest knack, the happiest power of jumping and guessing, he could always light, at will, on the best scene, or the best speeches of each; and whether it were dignity or pride, or tenderness or remorse, or whatever were to be expressed, he could do it with equal beauty.---It was truly dramatic (264).

To understand how excellent Henry's reading is, Michaelson points out that play-reading involves all the skill of the actor: in reading a novel or a play aloud, "*one* reader personates *all* of the characters, speaking in all their registers" (Michaelson, 190). One elocutionist, Gilbert Austin, had rated "dramatic" reading as one of the most difficult genres to perform (Michaelson, 191), but Henry overcomes this difficulty with apparent ease. Chapter Three looks at the implications of oral reading as a type of performance, but here it is important to note the way reading is used to appeal to Fanny's sensibilities.

Henry's reading of Shakespeare demonstrates the power that a reader can have over his listener, but Austen also incorporates an element of metaphoric reading in this scene. Fanny's cousin Edmund watches "the progress of her attention," noting the gradual slacking of her needle-work, until she sits "motionless over it," and becomes completely absorbed in Crawford's reading (*MP*, 264). Fanny's transformation from observer to observed is seamless, as she becomes the "book" that both her cousin Edmund and her suitor Henry try to read. Edmund is "gratified" that "the eyes which had appeared so studiously to avoid him throughout the day, were turned and fixed on Crawford, ... till the attraction drew Crawford's upon her, and the book was closed, and the charm was broken" (*MP*, 264). Fanny's reaction to Henry's reading gives Edmund "encouragement for his friend" (*MP*, 264), and he is convinced that reading is "the way to Fanny's heart. She was not to be won by all that gallantry and wit, and good nature

together, could do...without the assistance of sentiment and feeling, and seriousness on serious subjects” (*MP*, 266). Not only is Fanny absorbed by Crawford’s performance; she is misread by both performer (Henry) and audience (Edmund).

Austen problematizes reading aloud as a form of courtship. According to Michaelson, the trope of reading and heterosexual romantic relationships goes back to Dante, and “scenes that eroticise reading” were still fairly common in eighteenth-century literature (166). Crawford’s attempts to court Fanny occur within accepted rituals:

Discussing books and authors can announce one’s attainment of a certain educational level, manifest one’s sensitivity to ‘high’ literature and to matters of the heart and help carve out a space within the significant constraints of bourgeois courtship rituals for displays of mutual enthusiasm and emotional responsiveness (Richardson, *RP* 401).

Crawford seems like the perfect suitor, speaking through the “celebrated passages” of Shakespeare (*MP*, 265), demonstrating his taste and education flawlessly. But his attentions are not at all welcome. Fanny sees Crawford’s attempts to draw her out through reading and dialogue as “a grievous imprisonment of body and mind” (*MP*, 270) from which she longs to escape. Austen acknowledges the power of reading well, in an aesthetic sense (Kelly, 42), but she also problematizes the power dynamic of reader and listener.

Crawford recognizes the potential for reading aloud in his courtship of Fanny, but his intentions begin very badly. Initially, he wants to “[make] a small hole in Fanny Price’s heart” (*MP*, 179), but as he learns her value, he reproaches himself for his impure motives, and “determine[s] to marry Fanny Price” (*MP*, 228, 231). Arguably, Henry uses the same acting skills to court Fanny that he had used in his flirtation with the Bertram sisters, but alters his *role*. Instead of the dashing hero of *Lover’s Vows*, or the rake figure

who steals away an engaged woman's heart, Henry becomes serious; "without any touch of that spirit of banter or air of levity which ...[he knows is] offensive to Fanny" (*MP*, 266), he claims to "deserve" her (*MP*, 270) not by "equality of merit," but by his actions (or his *act*) as a faithful lover (*MP*, 269). Benedict highlights the way "rhetorical delivery can advertise the speaker" (182); through his performance of Shakespeare, Crawford advertises himself as an educated and sensitive man. The consummate actor, Henry also performs different social "texts" – the preacher, the landlord, the constant lover – convincing the Bertrams of his eligibility as a suitor, and nearly forcing Fanny into an unwanted marriage (Richardson, *RP* 404).

Henry Crawford "reads to such effect that Fanny's reservations about his character are nearly overcome" (Richardson, *RP* 404); yet, Fanny retains her moral judgment (Bray, 171). She compares Crawford's reading to his acting, reflecting that the pleasure of his reading is heightened, "for it came unexpectedly, and with no such drawback as she had been used to suffer in seeing him on the stage with Maria Bertram" (*MP*, 264). "Good reading" does not overpower Fanny's memory, and though she is "absorbed" in Henry's performance, her "high level of 'attention' ... does not cloud her judgment of [Crawford's] character, or persuade her to believe in his professions of love for her" (Bray, 171). Had it not been for her ability to judge independently, "Fanny's sense of duty not only could, but 'must' ... have let her into marriage with a man whose principles she had good reason to mistrust" (Halsey, 53). Thus, Austen critiques her period's courtship rituals through her depiction of Henry's oral reading, and sets the stage for her own discussion of reading aloud in *Mansfield Park*.

Conclusion

The ways characters read in Austen's fiction reveals a connection between reading practices and social interaction. As we saw with reading and courtship, picking up a book or discussing one's reading in a social setting can serve many ulterior motives. In *Mansfield Park*, Henry's reading aloud becomes a way to draw Fanny's attention, appealing to her taste until she betrays more interest in him than she really feels. Suddenly, the scene shifts from reading Shakespeare to reading Fanny, with both her male suitors attempting to interpret her "secret feelings" (*MP*, 264) by her reactions to Henry's performance. *Pride and Prejudice* contains a comic example of reading to flirt, but Caroline Bingley completely fails to capture Darcy's attention through her reading, though she watches him closely. We also looked at reading and conversation, how the display of one's book-knowledge can be meaningful, a signpost of a character's depth and intellect, or superficial, a way to advertise oneself as an accomplished or learned person. Reading can be dangerous or rewarding, proper or improper: it can connect individuals through shared experiences or discussions, or it can separate people from their society. The next chapter focuses on the issue of reading and performance, distinguishing among theatrical performance, sermon reading, and various types of reading aloud in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*.

CHAPTER THREE

Reading and Performance in Mansfield Park and Pride and Prejudice

Reading aloud is a major issue in the two novels. Scenes where characters read to each other, discuss how texts should be performed, or respond to spoken text often illuminate the characters' interactions, and reveal Austen's commentary on her period's assumptions. This chapter examines the performative aspects of reading aloud, drawing on theatrical, elocutionary, and rhetorical theories. It is important to distinguish between reading aloud in the private sphere, where women could participate, or in the public sphere, where men were expected to enact social change through the vocations of clergy, law, and politics; Austen reveals the overlapping of public and private, male and female spheres through her depiction of reading and performance. In Austen's fiction, the performance of text is often ambiguous, but it also becomes a touchstone of characters' ethical, aesthetic, and intellectual qualities.

In Chapter One, we saw the social significance of books and reading in the function of the circulating library, interpreting locations of reading in Austen's fiction as hotspots for social interaction. Tadmor confirms that the "purchasing, lending and borrowing of books were closely connected with other social networks" (Tadmor, 168), and that people could discuss, read, and interact through these networks in both the private and public spheres. However, the social aspects of reading are best illustrated by the practice of reading aloud. Though we might be tempted to characterize reading as solitary or private, Tadmor maintains that, in the eighteenth century, "it was often a

sociable rather than a solitary experience[, as] manifested in the regular reading habit of reading aloud” (165).

Reading aloud was a social activity in both private and public spheres. Newlyn notes how people read aloud “at public meetings, pubs and clubs,” families read “novels by the fireside,” and “published works” were read at “recitals” in Austen’s period (17). Far from being a “dying practice” in the late eighteenth century, reading from published texts such as books and newspapers was “a vital part of genteel social life” (Brewer, 241).¹⁰ In the Larpent household, for example, house guests would take turns reading to each other while the women worked (Brewer, 241-2). Reading was also a part of “social life” in the eighteenth-century merchant family of John and Peggy Turner: in this middle class household, guests would take “part in reading and listening” for an evening’s entertainment (Tadmor, 168). Even though people were increasingly “reading silently and in comparative isolation, [reading aloud] remained an important social accomplishment of the polite classes well into the nineteenth century” (Brewer, 242). “Communal reading scenes” were a feature of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century “life and literature” (Newlyn, 17), and this is especially true for Austen’s fiction.

In Austen’s period, reading was valued as a social activity. For example, some educated circles such as Sheridan’s family had “reading parties,” where the host read aloud to the guests, or everyone participated in the reading of a play (Michaelson, 114). Play-reading was a favoured occupation in Austen’s own family, where the Austen boys had staged *Matilda* in 1782, and Sheridan’s *The Rivals* a few summers later (Tomalin, 33, 41-2). Austen also read her works aloud to her family, “with very great taste and effect”

¹⁰ While I discuss some letter reading at the conclusion of chapter four, my main focus is on published texts.

(Michaelson quoting Henry Austen, 195). Some have argued that Austen even wrote her novels “anticipating that they would be read aloud” (Michaelson, 195), since she knew that many families enjoyed reading to each other. Austen depicted a scene of reading aloud for amusement in *Pride and Prejudice*, when Mr. Collins reads aloud to the Bennet family in Volume I. However, Collins fails to entertain the Bennets with a novel, and chooses instead the didactic works of Fordyce (*P&P*, 52). Mr. Collins’s ineptitude with oral reading is as bad as his conversation, and he becomes Austen’s negative example of the poorly socialized reader.

Reading Aloud in the Domestic Sphere

When comparing the qualities of oral and silent reading, Michaelson stresses the contingencies of reading aloud. Oral reading is “*discontinuous*: either one stops to discuss the reading...or one must work around miscellaneous interruptions” (Michaelson, 174-5). Solitary reading never happens in a vacuum, but oral reading is even more affected by “its situatedness: the social relations between reader and audience [must] affect the experience of the text” (Michaelson, 174-5). Like any other social activity, reading aloud involves a power dynamic; St Clair argues that, in domestic reading, “the selection of the books, the reading, and the subsequent discussion, were often collectively decided,” and that each member of the group was “subject to pressures from [the different] members” (394). Reading a text together meant that everyone could participate in the experience of reading, but it also meant that “the experience of the text [was] mediated by family relationships” – that is, the reader “shape[s] the text for his audience,” and “the listeners receive a text that is fitted to their situation” (Michaelson, 164).

Emphasizing the social relations involved in oral reading, Michaelson connects “family reading,” to the “development of bourgeois domesticity” in the eighteenth century, and the “struggles over power and intimacy” that inform this ideology (141). Though reading together could promote a “shared intellectual life” in the family, enabling positive social interaction and shared meanings, “the reader was also in a position of power [much like] the elocutionary orator” (Michaelson, 141). As evident in Henry Crawford’s reading of Shakespeare in *Mansfield Park*, the oral reader can transfix the listener, drawing her attention and eliciting her reaction. But Henry selects “the best scenes, or the best speeches of each” character in a play he had not chosen (*MP*, 264), whereas the oral reader would normally have exercised the power of selecting the text itself.¹¹ Since the oral reader could also censor a text or offer commentary and emphasis that would “guide [the text’s] interpretation,” the reader, usually the male patriarch, could exert a high degree of control over both subject matter and audience reception (Michaelson, 142). For a female audience, listening to an oral reading meant that she “experienced the text in a mediated form, interpreted by an authority figure” and was thus protected from the dangers of identifying too much with the text (Michaelson, 156). In both *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen reveals the power dynamic of reading aloud as well as its more positive potential.

Oral reading was an important domestic activity in Austen’s period. Frances Burney describes readings “embedded in bourgeois domesticity: in caring for an invalid, in providing amusement during a long evening at home, in enjoying the shared privacy of [a bedroom]” (Michaelson, 138). Tadmor’s case study of the Richardson family’s reading

¹¹ Note that Edmund uses the power of the patriarchal reader when he “recommend[s] the books which charm [Fanny’s] leisure hours” and “talk[s] to her of what she read” (*MP*, 18), selecting her reading material and directing her response to it (see Chapter Four).

habits confirms that “sociable reading-aloud was combined with work” in the period, especially during evening reading (Tadmor, 171). That is, the ladies “sat with mute attention” while another read, “and employed themselves in some kind of needle-work” (Tadmor, 171). Fanny works with thread and needle while Henry Crawford reads, but, as we have seen, the power of his performance causes her to neglect her work, even though she is “determined” not to pay attention to him (*MP*, 264). In this scene, Fanny struggles to keep working mostly to resist Crawford’s advances, but also because of her sense of duty.

Were women encouraged to read aloud in Austen’s period, or did they merely listen to men read? Though reading aloud was mostly emphasized in boys’ education as preparation for “the senate, the pulpit, or the bar” (Michaelson, 156), it could also be a part of women’s education. For example, Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Female Reader* (1789) acknowledges that “females are not educated to become public speakers or players,” and agrees that self-display may sacrifice young women’s proper “diffidence and reserve,” but she upholds the ability “to read with propriety [as] a very desirable attainment” (quoted in Michaelson, 131).¹² “Desirable” is, of course, a slippery term: is the ability to read aloud a valuable trait in itself, or does it make women more desirable as companions to men? Like the silent reading recommended to generate conversation, oral reading in certain contexts was valued as an accomplishment for women.

Since women could still work while reading to each other, reading aloud was a “compromise” between the “imaginative escape” of private reading and the duties of domesticity (Pearson, 174). Through reading aloud in the private sphere, women were

¹² Michaelson interprets reading “with propriety” as an elocutionary term for “perform[ing] a text correctly” (138).

“allowed partial access to literacy without neglecting their proper business” (Pearson, 174). Yet, this form of reading was still questionable to conservatives such as Hannah More, who simultaneously recommends reading aloud in the domestic sphere, and “hints at its inadequacies” in *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1808) (Pearson, 174). The negotiation between polite listening and productive inattention to the male reader could prove difficult. For example, in More’s *Coelebs*, Lucilla Stanley is “praised because she submissively ‘laid down her work’ to concentrate better when one of the men is reading” (Pearson, 174), paradoxically encouraging the neglect of domestic tasks rather than the neglect of patriarchal culture (174).

In situations where both men and women were present, it would be the man who read while the women listened. Pearson affirms that “if a young woman read aloud, it was usually to her family or female companions” (172). However, as a form of display, reading aloud is still suspect in *Mansfield Park*, and is often “reserved for men” (Michaelson, 131). The mistrust of reading as performance is a recurring issue in Austen’s novels. Michaelson distinguishes Fanny’s reading to her aunt Bertram as “domestic work,” pointing out that Fanny reads “only when no one else is present. When the men come in, she puts her book aside and Henry takes over” (Michaelson, 131). There are other instances where Fanny reads aloud to a female audience, or at least provides oral commentary on the text being studied. In Volume III, Fanny reads to her sister Susan in Portsmouth, adding “explanations and remarks...to every essay, [and] every chapter of history” (*MP*, 328). If we assume that the Price sisters read some of their circulating library books aloud in their upstairs haven in Portsmouth, then reading aloud is not just a pastime for women, but an education (as Chapter Four argues).

Reading aloud involves more than just the elocutionary skills of proper reading; it requires an attentive audience. For women in particular, listening to someone read was emphasized almost more than reading well themselves. In the course of elocutionary education, a girl would be “educated to read aloud, often to her mother in the first instance...and to listen to reading, often by her father” (Pearson, 172). We see Fanny practicing her reading skills in *Mansfield Park*, when she reads aloud to Lady Bertram. But if Fanny’s aunt fulfills the role of a listening mother, her uncle never fulfills the role of a reading father. Fanny never has the opportunity to listen to Sir Thomas read: instead, he reads alone in his study, or silently in the midst of the group (*MP*, 222). Sir Thomas is accustomed to making speeches and being received in silence, embodying the power relations of bourgeois domesticity Michaelson describes.

In both *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen critiques fathers who do not attend to the proper education of their daughters. Sir Thomas encourages his sons to recite, preparing them for their public roles, but does not encourage this in his daughters’ education. Still worse, Sir Thomas fails to read aloud to his own family, missing the unifying power of reading in the domestic sphere. *Pride and Prejudice*’s Mr. Bennet also fails in the father’s duty to guide his daughters’ education, since we never see him reading to his daughters; instead, he hides himself away to read, and lets his daughters educate themselves from his library only if they so choose (*P&P*, 127). Austen’s heroines often self-educate through reading despite inadequate guidance or parental support.

In contrast to the failure of fathers to read to their daughters, *Mansfield Park* offers a positive example of domestic reading through Fanny’s reading to her Aunt Bertram. At the beginning of the novel, oral reading acts like an antidote for Fanny’s

perpetual anxiety at Mansfield. Austen writes, “the tranquillity of such evenings, [Fanny’s] perfect security in such a *tête à tête* from any sound of unkindness, was unspeakably welcome to a mind which had seldom known a pause in its alarms or embarrassments” (*MP*, 28). Fanny “enjoy[s] being ... useful as her aunt’s companion,” taking the role of the former governess: “as Miss Lee had left Mansfield, [Fanny] naturally became every thing to Lady Bertram ... She talked to her, listened to her, read to her” (*MP*, 28). The natural transition of talking, listening, and reading reinforces the seamless interchange of reading and social interaction: Fanny’s oral reading is an essential part of her familial relationships. Lady Bertram certainly enjoys the calming effect of Fanny’s reading, and though she does not seem to pay attention to the subject matter, she sees it as a necessary service. When Fanny is absent, Lady Bertram requires Mrs. Grant, Aunt Norris, or Susan as her “substitute” companions, presumably to entertain her by reading (see *MP*, 61-2; 291; 371).

Reading aloud has almost healing properties in the novel, as when Edmund reads to Tom when he is sick in Volume III (*MP*, 337). Edmund becomes “the attendant, supporter, cheerer of a suffering brother,” and the spoken word soothes Tom’s “nerves” and “depressed” spirits (*MP*, 337). After Tom’s illness, Julia’s elopement, and Maria’s disgrace, Fanny yearns to “read to her aunt” as part of the consoling effort to “make her feel the blessing of what was, and prepare her mind for what might be” (*MP*, 339). Fanny’s reading *is* of real service to her Aunt: it is part of Lady Bertram’s “consolation” to be “listened to and borne with,” and to eventually have her thoughts “direct[ed] to other subjects,” her “interest in the usual occupations” somewhat revived (*MP*, 352-3). Here, oral reading is not only social, but gendered as female: just as Edmund assumes a

caregiving role by reading to Tom, Fanny's reading to Lady Bertram allows her to assume an almost maternal role.

Reading aloud can certainly be positive in the domestic sphere, a way for people to connect through discussion and shared ideas, but it also has negative potential. In both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*, we have seen how Austen problematizes reading as a type of performance. Austen satirizes Mary Bennet and Caroline Bingley for reading to show off their accomplishments, and she also reveals Henry Crawford's ulterior motives for reading Shakespeare aloud to Fanny. We see this most clearly in *Mansfield Park*, where the distinction between reading and acting is somewhat unclear. Fanny's refusal to participate in the theatrical performance of *Lover's Vows* seems to indicate her moral rectitude, but she reads the play silently, and is so familiar with it, she can act as a prompter for the actors (*MP*, 133). Also related to the issue of reading aloud and performance is sermon-making, an essential skill in Edmund Bertram's chosen profession of clergyman. The overlap between acting and reading well, and the elocutionary skills required for both the church and the theatre, is an essential subject in *Mansfield Park*.

Reading Aloud and the Theatre

Austen further illuminates the ethical dimensions of reading aloud through the "private theatricals" (*MP*, 99) in Volume II of *Mansfield Park*, where rehearsals of *Lover's Vows* threaten the family's conservative decorum. In Chapter One, we saw Sir Thomas' dismay in discovering his private study transformed into a green room (*MP*, 142): the "book-case" is removed to make way for theatrical props (*MP*, 99; 142). Michaelson notes the phenomenon of private theatricals in Austen's period: "between

1780 and 1810, many aristocratic households built theaters on their properties and staged elaborate theatricals, performed by upper-class amateurs aided by professional actors (125). Edmund's fears of "publicity" (*MP*, 99; 122) are not entirely unfounded, since such a production could have 150 invited guests at each performance (Michaelson, 125). What might be appropriate for a professional theatre, however, is "unfit" for the decorum required for "private representation" (*MP*, 110). Pearson notes how "even reading plays" aloud may erode "the privacy of the private sphere" (62), but also draws attention to the inappropriateness of the play which the amateur actors choose. German drama was associated with "adultery and social disorder" in the conservative mindset of the period, and *Lover's Vows* becomes shorthand for sexual licence in *Mansfield Park* (Pearson, 72).

When arguing in favour of the Mansfield private theatricals to Edmund in Volume I, Tom cites their education as children as evidence of his father's approval. According to Tom, Sir Thomas promoted "the exercise of talent in young people," and encouraged

any thing of the Acting, Spouting, Reciting kind . . . in us as boys. How many a time have we mourned over the dead body of Julius Cæsar, and *to be'd* and *not to be'd*, in this very room, for his amusement. And I am sure, *my name was Norval*, every evening of my life though one Christmas holidays (*MP*, 100).

Michaelson notes that "theatrical modes of speaking [were] reproduced in textbooks" in the period, but points out that these schoolbooks "generally direct[ed] their attention to boys" (Michaelson, 148; 152). Elocution manuals often used extracts of literature to teach effective reading skills (Michaelson, 145), and Tom's allusions to Shakespeare and John Home's tragedy, *Douglas*, may recall Enfield's elocutionary guide, *The Speaker* (1774) (Newlyn, 353). Tom seeks to legitimize the politically "subversive" *Lover's Vows* by drawing on a distinguished oratorical tradition (Newlyn, 353), but Edmund shifts the argument by making "a distinction based on gender" (Michaelson, 129). He objects that

Sir Thomas may have wished his sons, “as school-boys, to speak well, but he would never wish his grown up daughters to be acting plays” (*MP*, 100). Maria Bertram’s “delicate situation” (*MP*, 99) calls for even more propriety in her father’s absence, since she is recently engaged and unsupported by a male guardian. Tom’s educational argument also fails. Although “reciting and acting serve to improve speech” (Michaelson, 129), preparing boys for careers in public life, women were not expected to gain these skills. The gender issues surrounding reading and performance are complex, and Edmund’s concern for propriety seems to reflect typical conservative views.

Gender issues permeated the period’s conduct literature, which considered acting “injurious to the female performers” even in private theatres (Michaelson quoting Gisbourne, 130). According to Michaelson, acting was considered “hazardous” because it entails “sympathetic identification,” and “losing oneself in a role means abandoning the self-monitoring that protects against improprieties” (105). The danger of losing oneself in the text also applies to women’s reading (Michaelson, 154), but acting involves the body to a greater degree than reading does. It was feared that *displaying* the passions of the text in the body “could... stamp those passions into women’s characters” (130-131). Acting is “at odds with the decorum required for virtuous domestic women” (Michaelson, 105), allowing women to escape their social restraints.

In his *Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1797), Gisborne lists the detrimental effects of women’s acting: “What is...the tendency of such amusements? To encourage vanity; to excite a thirst of applause and admiration...; [and] to destroy diffidence, by the unrestrained familiarity with persons of the other sex, which inevitably

results from being joined with them in the drama” (quoted in Michaelson, 130).¹³ Edmund’s fears of sexual impropriety are not unfounded, because Crawford, a rake figure, is also aware of the possibilities for intimacy that acting permits. Crawford considers a flirtation with Maria to be “safe” (*MP*, 36), since “An engaged woman... feels that she may exert all her powers of pleasing without suspicion” (*MP*, 36). Mr. Crawford and Maria use the text of the play to flirt openly, and to express what is ordinarily forbidden by “social convention” (Kelly, 39). The text of the play is actualized: its scripted “intimacies... help develop illicit intimacies among the actors” (Michaelson, 131). Reading aloud and acting both involve embodying text in performance.

Reading, Speaking, and Acting: Modes of Performance in Mansfield Park

Austen brilliantly captures the overlap of reading and other types of performance in three characters’ reactions to *Lover’s Vows*: Maria Bertram, Mary Crawford, and Fanny Price. After the play has been chosen, Edmund tries to dissuade Maria from taking part in the play, urging her to *read* the play “carefully over” before acting out the text (*MP*, 110). Edmund challenges Maria, “Read only the first Act aloud, to either your Mother or Aunt, and see how you can approve it” (*MP*, 110). Since oral reading “is *slow*,” it can ideally increase reader’s and listeners’ “attentiveness to textual details” (Michaelson, 174), and elocutionists such as Sheridan recommended a close attention to each word and phrase of the text (Michaelson, 109). Edmund hopes that Maria will appreciate the full range of the play’s meaning, and that her own sense of propriety will prevent her from enacting Agatha’s role. But Maria only responds that, “with a very few

¹³ Gisborne also objects that acting may create “a general fondness for plays, of which so many are unfit to be read” or “witnessed,” (Michaelson, 130), but the impropriety of women’s *acting* seems to apply regardless of the text’s literary or moral qualities.

omissions,” the text of the play is acceptable (*MP*, 110). Like her Aunt Norris, Maria is willing to put aside decorum in her assessment of the play.

Fanny’s response to the text contrasts directly to Maria’s. Reading *Lover’s Vows* in “solitude” (108), Fanny is astonished “that it could be chosen in the present instance--- that it could be proposed and accepted in a private Theatre!” (*MP*, 108). Fanny’s language in this passage echoes Gisbourne’s quite clearly, and her reactions follow the values of conservative conduct literature. Fanny reads the female characters as “totally improper for home representation--- the situation of one, and the language of the other, so unfit to be expressed by any woman of modesty, that she could hardly suppose her cousins could be aware of what they were engaging in” (*MP*, 108). While Maria appears hardened because she fails to acknowledge the text’s indecorum even after a close reading, Fanny immediately recognizes the play’s indecency (*MP*, 108). Ironically, Fanny’s aunts are also unable to recognize this impropriety, and Fanny’s ability to read the play critically reflects her superior moral judgment.

Mary Crawford’s reaction to *Lover’s Vows* presents a middle ground to Fanny’s refusal to act, and Maria’s repeated and unnecessary rehearsals. At the end of Volume I in *Mansfield Park*, Mary and Edmund come to Fanny’s East Room to rehearse an uncomfortable scene. The subject to be discussed by Amelia and Anhalt “was love---a marriage of love was to be described by the gentleman, and very little short of a declaration of love be made by the lady” (*MP*, 131). Though Mary had teasingly asked, “What gentleman among you, am I to have the pleasure of making love to?” (*MP*, 113) a few days earlier, she is not so flippant once she has read some of the speeches Amelia must perform to Anhalt. She confides to Fanny,

I do not think I could go through it with *him* , till I have hardened myself a little, for really there *is* a speech or two... Here it is. I did not think much of it at first--- but, upon my word---. There, look at *that* speech, and *that* , and *that* . How am I ever to look him in the face and say such things? (*MP*, 132).

Looking and *saying* the words of the play is not as easy for Mary as it seems to be for Maria, who takes advantage of “the licence which every rehearsal must tend to create” (*MP*, 121); but Mary overcomes her timidity through rehearsal of the text in a safe, feminine, educational environment. Hoping to shield herself from the shock of an unrehearsed love-scene with her potential suitor, Mary has violated Fanny’s refuge from the rest of the household. The location of private reading has been transformed into a stage for a scene that Fanny has been “longing and dreading to see ... perform[ed]” (*MP*, 131).

Mary is more willing than Fanny to harden herself to the play. Although Fanny agrees to rehearse with Mary, she refuses to embody the text in speech, insisting, “I must *read* the part, for I can *say* very little of it” (*MP*, 132). The distinction between *reading* a text aloud and *saying* it with meaning seems somewhat arbitrary, especially in light of the period’s elocutionary theory. James Burgh’s *The Art of Speaking* (1773) blurs the distinction between reading and saying entirely, “For *reading* is nothing but *speaking* what one sees in a book, as if he were expressing his own sentiments” (qtd. in Newlyn, 544). Effective oral reading requires “personation,” and the skill of the actor: “As the reader pronounced a text, he enacted it, incorporating its passions into his character” (Michaelson, 187). But Fanny refuses this overlap between reading aloud and saying the words as though they were her own, as seen in her refusal to embody the text of *Lover’s Vows* through acting.

The contrast between reading and saying is stressed at the climax of Volume I, with Henry Crawford and Maria urging Fanny to take Mrs. Grant's part: "You have only to *read* the part,' said Henry ... 'And I do believe she can say every word of it,' added Maria, 'for she could put Mrs. Grant right the other day in twenty places'" (*MP*, 135). So what stops Fanny from performing in the play? We know that Fanny has "read, and read... again" this scene from *Lovers Vows* (*MP*, 131), and that she has learned some of the play "by heart" (115), memorizing all of Mr. Rushworth's lines in an attempt to assist him (130). In doing so, Fanny has followed the advice of Sheridan, who recommends memorizing the text so that "the mind may be at liberty to attend only to the delivery" (qtd. in Newlyn, 341) for effective reading aloud. But Fanny's chief objection is being "look[ed] at" (*MP*, 115). Fanny refuses to become an object of display, whether through reading, conversing, or acting (Michaelson, 132). She is well aware of the distinction between reading and saying, and refuses to lose herself in the text.

Reading Aloud and the Church

Aside from the theatric implications of reading aloud, the connection between reading and performance also has religious implications in Austen's fiction. Michaelson explores "the performance of text and... the ways in which acting, reading, and speech were linked in the period" (101), applying these links to characters' discussion of the clergy in *Mansfield Park*. For example, Michaelson draws attention to Henry and Edmund's discussion of reading aloud in Volume III, which assumes the reader's familiarity with elocutionary methods (149). Just after Henry has read so affectively to Fanny and her Aunt Bertram, Edmund and Henry discuss reading aloud in education, lamenting

the total inattention to [the art of reading], in the ordinary school-system for boys, [and] the consequently natural---yet in some instances almost unnatural degree of ignorance and uncouthness of men, of sensible and well-informed men, when suddenly called to the necessity of reading aloud (*MP*, 266).

Edmund bemoans “how little the art of reading has been studied” in his profession as a clergyman, and Crawford agrees for the necessity of skilled reading in the Anglican service (*MP*, 266). He observes: “Our liturgy...has beauties, which not even a careless, slovenly style of reading can destroy; but it has also redundancies and repetitions, which require good reading not to be felt” (*MP*, 267). Edmund does refer to a “spirit of improvement” among elocutionary theorists (*MP*, 266), who emphasized the power of reading well in the pulpit. For instance, Thomas Sheridan’s *Lectures on the Art of Reading* (1775) includes a “line-by-line analysis of the church service, explaining how it is usually misread and how it should be properly performed” (Michelson, 109). However, Sheridan conceives of the church service “as an acting text, waiting to be performed” (Michaelson, 109). Similarly, Fordyce’s *The Eloquence of the Pulpit* (1755) blended elements of secular and sacred types of performance, suggesting that “theatrical skills are not incompatible with an evangelical purpose” (Newlyn, 348). But Austen shows that the *motivations* of the speaker are equally important to his skill in preaching.

Throughout this elocutionary discussion in Volume III, Austen continues the theme of reading aloud and courtship, and the ethical dimensions of reading aloud. Just as Henry’s reading aloud of Shakespeare had displayed his “sentiment and feeling,” his discussion of elocution now displays his “seriousness on serious subjects” (*MP*, 266). Henry asks Edmund about “the properest manner in which particular passages in the service should be delivered, shewing it to be a subject on which he had thought before, and thought with judgment” (*MP*, 266). Fanny follows his discussion of reading aloud

with “great entertainment” (*MP*, 266), and he even draws Fanny into conversation (*MP*, 269). Though both Edmund and Henry are well-educated and well-bred men of sensibility and taste, and though they both recognize that reading is “the way to Fanny’s heart” (*MP*, 266), Fanny learns to read each man’s conduct as the test of his words. Edmund’s shared reading with Fanny had made her “love him more than any body in the world except William” (*MP*, 18), but she also trusts in his essential goodness (*MP*, 21, 205). In Henry’s case, the seductive power of reading cannot conceal his lack of “constancy” (*MP*, 267), and Fanny is able to maintain her independent judgment.

Henry and Edmund seem to express the same interest in elocution; they both give “instances of blunders” involving “the want of management of the voice, of proper modulation and emphasis, of foresight and judgment” in those who lack proper training (*MP*, 266). However, as the dialogue continues, it becomes evident that they represent opposing views of reading and performance. Where Edmund values good reading because the “distinctness and energy” of a well-delivered sermon can recommend “the most solid truths” (*MP*, 266), Henry admires the “eloquence of the pulpit” solely for its effect on the audience (*MP*, 267). Austen mistrusts Crawford’s definition of a “good sermon” as one that is “thoroughly well delivered” (*MP*, 267), and, through Fanny, Austen shows that good intentions are not the same as good deeds. As Mary Crawford points out in Volume I, Dr. Grant is an example of a clergyman who may have “good intentions,” but who does nothing but behave in a “slovenly and selfish” manner and “read the newspaper” (*MP*, 87). Edmund believes that the corrupt preacher is not “common” enough to warrant Mary’s objections against the profession as a whole (*MP*, 87), but both agree that a speaker’s conduct is just as important as his speech’s content.

In contrast, Mary's brother Henry seems to pay less attention to the private life of the clergyman than to the success of his preaching. Crawford admires "the eloquence of the pulpit" for the same reasons he admires the accomplished actor:

The preacher who can touch and effect such an heterogeneous mass of hearers, on subjects limited...; who can say any thing new or striking, any thing that rouses the attention, without offending the taste, or wearing out the feelings of his hearers, is a man whom one could not (in his public capacity) honour enough. I should like to be such a man (*MP*, 267).

Edmund laughs when Henry claims he "should like to be... a distinguished preacher" with a "London audience" (*MP*, 267). In a moment of self-revelation, Henry imagines himself in a clergyman's role: "I could not preach, but to the educated; to those who were capable of estimating my composition. And, I do not know that I should be fond of preaching often; now and then, perhaps, ... but not for a constancy" (*MP*, 267). We know that Henry is a good actor. Crawford admires the *role* of the "distinguished preacher" but has no taste for sermon-making as a "constancy" (*MP*, 267-68); in other words, a sermon is "good" only so far as it is a good performance.

Is Austen supporting an evangelical purpose for reading aloud, critiquing alternate modes of performative reading? While her novels do not often address religious issues head on, Felicia Bonaparte emphasizes the religious elements within *Mansfield Park*. She cites Austen's letter to Cassandra in (January 1813) about the 'theme' of ordination: "Now I will try and write something else, and it shall be a complete change of subject---ordination" (qtd. in Bonaparte, 48). According to Bonaparte, Austen uses the character of Edmund as a "positive portrait" of the clergyman, "a man who makes a serious effort to do the great work to which he is called and who helps Austen...define what that effort must be in her time" (54). Austen treats the importance of reading aloud with some levity

in *Pride and Prejudice*: Mr. Collins's "monotonous" (*P&P*, 52) performance of Fordyce's sermons bores his audience, and Lydia interrupts him before he reads "three pages" (52). But Austen's satire of Collins's ineffective preaching does not mean she takes religion lightly; rather, they show her stake in the issue. As Bonaparte argues, "[s]atiric portraits like Mr. Collins, the buffoon of *Pride and Prejudice*, express not her contempt for clerics but...her dismay at seeing so many fail in their work because they are vain and worldly men" (Bonaparte, 54). Generally speaking, where Austen wishes to satirize a character, she lets them speak for themselves, and, we can add, she lets them *read*.

Austen's Readers

Interestingly, Austen employs a metafictional strategy in her description of Edmund and Mary's rehearsal in the East Room in Volume I of *Mansfield Park*, drawing attention to the metaphoric dimensions of reading. Austen sets the scene dramatically, marking characters' entrances, exits, and pacing with theatric precision: when Fanny and Mary "had got through half the scene, ... a tap at the door brought a pause, and the entrance of Edmund the next moment, suspended it all" (*MP*, 133). Fanny is forced to watch, "to prompt and observe," as the man she loves declares his "love" for another woman (*MP*, 133). In this highly dramatic scene, Austen engages in free indirect discourse to capture Fanny's inner turmoil:

She was invested, indeed, with the office of judge and critic, and earnestly desired to exercise it and tell them all their faults; but from doing so every feeling within her shrank, she could not, would not, dared not attempt it... To prompt them must be enough for her; and it was sometimes *more* than enough; for she could not always pay attention to the book. In watching them she forgot herself; and agitated by the increasing spirit of Edmund's manner, had once closed the page and turned away exactly as he wanted help (*MP*, 133-4).

In contrast to the scene where Fanny witnesses Henry Crawford's reading, forgetting her feelings towards him in the awe of his performance, this scene captures Fanny's struggle to judge others impartially. Fanny is "invested...with the office of judge and critic," but has too fine a sensibility and is too emotionally involved in the other characters' lives to venture an opinion (*MP*, 133).

Reading the words on the page and watching them acted out, Fanny is at once a reader, an audience, and a passive participant, mirroring the various ways *we* read Austen's text. Like Fanny who anxiously awaits Edmund and Mary's performance of *Lover's Vows*, we also become emotionally invested with the characters in this scene, "look[ing] forward to [Austen's] representation of it as a circumstance almost too interesting" (*MP*, 131). Fanny is a subjective reader, since her love for Edmund and jealousy of Mary makes her incapable of judging their performance, or even being able to follow along in the book, suggesting the reader's autonomy (as argued in Chapter Two). Austen's use of free indirect discourse in this scene links us with her heroine's consciousness, and it dramatizes the act of reading on various levels. Austen wants her readers to look inside Fanny's mind as she "reads" the scene before her, but she also wants us to read Edmund and Mary carefully, looking for signs of genuine feeling as they read the scene aloud. These layers of reading also encourage us to assess our own reactions as readers, identifying with Fanny and retaining our critical judgment of the unfolding events.

Conclusion

Reading aloud, whether for amusement in the domestic sphere, for romantic relationships, or for successful preaching, is a powerful symbol in both *Mansfield Park*

and *Pride and Prejudice*. That reading aloud was central at home, in the theatre, and at church points to its prevalence in Austen's society, and this type of reading often reveals character. In *Mansfield Park*, Henry Crawford's skill as an actor and his charm as a suitor are uncomfortably yoked to his oral reading ability: Fanny's excellent taste and appreciation of "good reading" puts her at risk for the attentions of a rake. A contrasting example in *Pride and Prejudice* is Mr. Collins's "bad reading," in the comic episode where he fails in his attempt to entertain the Bennet family through sermon-reading; but even this "importune" reading has moral consequences (*P&P*, 53), since Austen valued the evangelical purpose of the pulpit. In addition to these religious concerns, we saw how the power dynamic of reader and listener is often inflected by gender, the focus of the final chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Women's Reading in Mansfield Park and Pride and Prejudice

This chapter continues with a historical investigation of reading in the Romantic period with a focus on women's reading in *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice*. What types of books did middle- and upper-class women read in Austen's period? What were these women encouraged to read? How did the conservative conduct literature of the era characterize women's reading, and how does Austen depict it? The Regency period was ambivalent concerning female reading habits. Though "books of a serious stamp" (*P&P*, 52) could enable informed conversation, piety and self-reflection, improper reading could "distract [women] from domestic duties or transgress the limits of [the] private sphere" (Pearson, 2). The period's views of women's education relied on conceptions of appropriate reading: should women be encouraged to read widely, discriminately, or not at all? As with reading aloud and other reading practices, the issues of performance and propriety are again at play.

This chapter begins by contrasting historical records of female readers to the stereotypes of the reading woman in Austen's period, emphasizing the gap between ideal and actual female readers. The chapter then compares conservative conduct literature's views of women's reading to examples of female readers in Austen's novels, and argues that Austen both supports and challenges her period's assumptions. Reading allows Austen's heroines to develop and rely on their own judgment, to exercise their powers of interpretation in a safe environment so they can navigate the complexities of their social worlds. Though superficial reading can indicate characters' shallowness, critical reading

can also inform characters' moral and intellectual independence. In *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice*, reading empowers Fanny and Elizabeth to understand, relate to and connect with others, and to rely on their own judgment.

The Period's Views of Women's Reading

According to Kate Flint, "Women's reading became a 'site on which one may see a variety of cultural and sexual anxieties displayed,'" especially as political tensions rose during and after the French Revolution (qtd. in Pearson, 1). Throughout Austen's period, books were published "solely devoted to advice on reading" (St Clair, 280), urging moderation, parental advice, and strict guidelines for book selection (281). For those who wished to gain a self-directed education through reading, such guidebooks could be invaluable; but prescriptions of what one *should* and should *not* read are fraught with the period's ideologies. There was great anxiety surrounding reading, and social controls were put in place to circumvent the possibility of unguided reading: "No book, the conduct books advised, should be read in private which could not, with propriety, be read aloud among the whole family" (St Clair, 282). In the discussion of circulating libraries in Chapter One, we saw the fears surrounding mass literacy and increased access to literature by such conservative writers as Coleridge (Brantlinger, 2-3). This chapter will focus specifically on the period's anxieties about reading in relation to gender.

Like Katie Halsey, who argues for the influence of mid- to late-eighteenth-century conservative conduct literature on Austen's fiction (Halsey, 15), I will show how Austen reflects her period's views of women's reading, but also exposes the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in such conduct literature. Conduct books such as James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1766) and Thomas Gisbourne's *Enquiry into the Duties of the*

Female Sex (1797) show the period's paradoxical attitudes towards women's reading. Gisbourne, for example, supports the idea of women reading "improving books," but opposes the reading of novels (Uphaus, 334), because proper reading encourages female virtue, while novel-reading may lead to the "corruption" of the mind and emotions (Uphaus, 335). Austen read Gisbourne's *Enquiry* while writing *Mansfield Park*, appreciating its more nuanced approach compared to that of other conduct literature: Austen had had "little patience" with the "standard prohibitions and directives" for women's reading (Galperin, 167). We can see some of Austen's disdain for didactic texts in her treatment of Fordyce in *Pride and Prejudice*.

In Austen's period, women were singled out as "at risk" for becoming "literature abusers, with disastrous consequences for themselves, their families, and society at large" (St Clair, 281). But these anxieties about women's reading resulted in conflicting attitudes and contradictions, where female reading was at once educative and potentially seductive, encouraged and strictly controlled. Jacqueline Pearson examines the "polyvalence of the image of the reading woman" in the period, and the way reading could be seen as a "potentially seditious" but also "rational employment" for women (1). The assumption that women were "neglecting their duties" if they read (Michaelson, 152) was widespread, and some conservative writers maintained that reading served no useful purpose. Some authors felt that "a woman's education amounted to little more than instilling good reading habits and cultivating conversational skills" (Armstrong, 91), but mining books for topics of conversation may only result in very superficial thinking. Other conduct book writers saw the potential of reading to help women exercise their rational abilities, but only under strict guidelines.

Reading was seen as a leisure activity, one of the “idle amusements” that was “aimed at putting the body on display” (Armstrong, 75, 77); women read to be *seen*, and to show off their privileged wealth or social position (Armstrong, 77). This criticism certainly works for *Pride and Prejudice*’s Caroline Bingley, who declares “there is no enjoyment like reading!” (*P&P*, 41) though she values books and libraries merely as displays of wealth and education (as discussed in Chapter One). Though Darcy fails to look at Caroline, or enter into conversation with her, he ironically becomes the object of Caroline’s gaze: “Miss Bingley’s attention was quite as much engaged in watching Mr. Darcy’s progress through *his* book, as in reading her own; and she was perpetually either making some inquiry, or looking at his page” (*P&P*, 40-41). By reversing the gender roles in this scene, Austen satirizes the mercenary aims of Caroline’s pretended reading.

As we observed with complaints of hair powder in the leaves of circulating library books (Michaelson, 153), women were associated with “messy” reading practices, whether intellectually (misunderstanding texts) or materially (misusing texts). Speaking of the eighteenth-century attitude to women readers, Ina Ferris states: “The striking thing about the characterization of female reading is that it makes reading an act of the body rather than the mind” (qtd. in Michaelson, 152). The gender separation which conceptualized “men’s reading [as] facilita[ting] intellectual development” also located women’s reading in the body, and represented it as “a physical not an intellectual act” (Pearson, 4). Perhaps the best illustration of this in Austen is the way Caroline Bingley poses with a book in the same manner that she traipses about the room in *Pride and Prejudice* (41).

In the eighteenth century, “sympathetic identification and critical judgment” were both seen as necessary for reading literature, but the danger of losing yourself in the text was also seen as threatening (Michaelson, 154). If women exercised “poor judgment” in their reading habits, they were prone to be more easily duped, or even “seduced,” in their social interactions (Michaelson, 153). Though some conservative writers feared that “young women might prove liable to confuse the fictions they so greedily absorbed with the actualities of the social world they must eventually negotiate” (Richardson, *RP* 399), Austen shows that reading well could potentially equip women to navigate their society.

The issue of judging people, situations, and ideas is central to both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*, and it is best seen through each heroine’s reading. Although Austen’s earlier heroines such as Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* and Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* fall more clearly into the category of female readers who “identify excessively” with the text (Michaelson, 154), both Fanny Price and Elizabeth Bennet are capable of maintaining critical distance. Austen undermines the assumption that women “read badly” by reading novels, skimming texts, misinterpreting them, and failing to keep “critical distance from the text” (Michaelson 152-3). The contrast of *Pride and Prejudice*’s and *Mansfield Park*’s heroines illustrates two accounts of reading and judgment. For Elizabeth, reading becomes a training ground to refine her powers of discrimination, learning to reread people correctly. But while Fanny’s moral judgment is consistently accurate, she must learn to rely on her own judgment despite contradiction from authority. Her reading allows her to gain this moral independence.

Actual Readers and Representations of Readers

In order to evaluate Austen's representations of women's reading, we must be careful to distinguish among the various historical, social, and ideological constructions of reading. Is the female reader in the eighteenth century a mere "consumer," increasingly buying and renting books in a life of "boredom and idleness" (Tadmor, 163-4)? In the conservative conduct literature of the period, and even in subsequent literary criticism, women's reading is often constructed as an activity of "leisure" (Tadmor, 163) and passivity, entailing neglect of domestic duties (Michaelson, 152). However, feminist criticism has sought to re-evaluate the image of the female reader, and to challenge the way we read women reading.

Tadmor and Pearson compare historical and literary depictions of female reading, examining the period's reading practices, literary representations, and pedagogical debates. Tadmor warns that we must not take the "rebukes of eighteenth-century moralists" as "historical fact" (Tadmor, 165). She draws attention to the "discrepancy between the ways in which ... women [actually] read, and images of the female novel reader" in the literature of the period (Tadmor, 174). Comparing the reading record to the stereotype of the passive female reader, Tadmor concludes that "the practice of reading in ... [eighteenth-century] households was connected not to idleness, listlessness or frivolity but to a routine of work and of religious discipline" (165). Literary images of the female novel reader arose from assumptions about the "impressionable nature of ... young women" (Tadmor, 164), and often served didactic purposes for their authors. The ideal female reader of conduct literature is as much a work of imagination as that of the novel, but this literary construction attempted to prescribe how women should actually read.

Given that “less than 30 percent of novel readers were [actually] women in the eighteenth century” (Benedict, 164), the gap between actual readers and representations of readers is wide indeed.

An example of the moralistic approach to depicting women’s reading is More’s *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1808), where the ambivalence over women’s reading “becomes... urgent and explicit” (Pearson, 88). The heroine of *Coelebs* is “highly literate and her reading is [an] aid to her domesticity,” showing the positive potential of reading, but the novel also warns against the dangers of female literacy (Pearson, 88-9). Although “*Coelebs* legitimises reading for women, figures it as domestic harmony, and even permits pleasure as part of the reading experience,” proper female reading must be “confined to good books,... [it] must be concealed, compliant, and devoted to an ideology of service” (Pearson, 91-2). A woman could only be a good reader if she stayed within “firmly delineated boundaries” (Pearson, 92). Some have argued that Austen challenges More’s conservative mythology through *Mansfield Park* (Pearson, 150), urging the “complexity of real relationships” and undermining “the ideology of female silence” that More represents (150). Austen’s depictions of female reading may be just as ambiguous as More’s, but Austen is less convinced of the possibility of the perfect female reader than her more conservative forerunner: Fanny Price is the outward embodiment of the perfect female reader, but her moral judgment forces her to defy the patriarchal authority she longs to obey (Halsey, 49). Austen fleshes out “conduct literature’s internal contradictions” (Halsey, 47) and urges a more realistic view of women’s reading.

John Brewer provides more evidence of women's actual reading habits in Austen's period. Drawing on her diary of 1773-1828 (Brewer, 228), Brewer's reconstruction of Anna Larpent's reading applies to the kind of readers Austen depicts in her novels (and to Austen's readers as well!). Like Hannah More, Anna lauded "the pursuit of virtue" in fiction, and "condemned" texts which challenged established morality (Brewer, 235). As the wife of a man who censored plays "in the Office of the Lord Chamberlain," (Brewer, 227), Anna recognized the importance her society placed on conforming to mainstream ideology. She practiced "self-censorship" when she discussed her reading of "public matters" such as history and politics (Brewer, 236-7), anxious not to transgress her proper sphere even though she was writing in a private diary. But Anna was still able to aid her husband in his critical role, albeit behind the scenes. She "read novels and plays as realms of feeling and passion but also as sites of instruction and edification," and always maintained her "critical and moral faculties" when reading (Brewer, 235). Anna's balance of subjective and critical engagement with the text is something that Austen's heroines must also achieve.

Prescriptions of Women's Reading

If literacy was perceived as a drug, "either ambivalent or unambiguously negative" (Brantlinger, 11), then someone must prescribe the remedy to the reading public and especially to reading women. Conduct book writers recognized, as Austen did, that the love of reading, "properly directed, must be an education in itself" (*MP*, 18), and they wrote many guidelines in order to direct reading properly. So what did the period's educational theorists prescribe? Drawing upon Jacqueline Pearson, this chapter will

examine Austen's representations of women's reading, comparing the way Austen's characters read to the educational norms of her time.

Informative reading such as "history, geography, travel-writing, manuals on household skills, literary criticism and some kinds of science" was encouraged, though women had to take care not to appear "too well informed" (Pearson, 49). As Austen had teased in *Northanger Abbey*, "A woman especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can" (NA, 81). Similarly, scientific reading was "featured in many education programmes for women, especially [those of] the Edgeworths" (Pearson, 64). Like botany, which was traditionally associated with women's virtues and religious values, astronomy was a useful subject for women's reading because it taught "the power of God" (Pearson, 67). The famous star-gazing scene in Volume I of *Mansfield Park* (89-90) reveals Fanny's education in astronomy: Edmund had "taught [Fanny] to think and feel on the subject," and the cousins' shared reading prepares them to appreciate the reality, and share in each other's company in this scene (MP, 90). Instead of just religious sublimity, Fanny uses her astronomical reading to aid in her relationship with Edmund (Pearson, 66-7). Fanny's education is well-balanced: her reading flawlessly integrates natural history and science with romantic sensibility.

Edmund and Fanny's relationship began through reading, a situation not unprecedented in the period's guides to female reading. Edmund had "recommended the books which charmed her leisure hours, he encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment; he made reading useful by talking to her of what she read, and heightened its attraction by judicious praise" (MP, 18). Initially fulfilling the role of the "superior 'brother or friend'" Barbauld had recommended for women's studies (Richardson, 196),

Edmund also becomes Fanny's love: "In return for such services [Fanny] loved him better than any body" except her brother (*MP*, 18). The literary trope of the male teacher who educates his future wife dates back to Rousseau's *Emile*, where the man can "eventually...reap the advantages... of educating his future wife himself" (Richardson, 196).

Austen reinforces the positive ideal of reading and relationship, where shared reading can invite true intimacy. In Volume III, Fanny shares her love of reading with her sister Susan, building her sibling relationship through educational texts. The sisters' shared reading helps them form their own community (Pearson, 96): separated from the rest of the house in their upstairs reading space, the sisters begin to separate themselves from the Price family and prepare for life at Mansfield. Michaelson notes the way "reading when only women were present [can have] a certain kind of intimacy," especially in shared tastes and experiences of literature (170-1), but Susan and Fanny's reading also foreshadows the shared reading that will occur in the quiet evenings at Mansfield at the end of the novel. Susan becomes Fanny's "substitute" at the end of Volume III as companion to Lady Bertram (*MP*, 371). Austen reaffirms Fanny's role as "the stationary niece" (*MP*, 371) through this continued legacy of female reading.

In Portsmouth, Fanny and Susan read history, another form of informative reading. History was often elevated to the status of truth in Austen's period (Pearson, 52). Again, its morality was stressed: historical reading provided the female reader with real examples of "virtues to be imitated, and ... vices to be shunned" (Pearson, 50-1). Similarly, biographies and memoirs offered "the female reader ...role models to teach 'admiration' and 'ambition,' but also 'humility,'" according to a 1787 issue of the *Ladies*

Magazine (Pearson, 52). But aside from its morality, the status of historical truth was not universally accepted in the period. “Some women, conservative and radical, were aware that history was not unmediated fact but was constructed in the light of... political agendas” (Pearson, 52). It can be argued that Austen supported a critical reading of supposed historical “truths:” Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* prefers reading novels to reading history with “hardly any women at all” (*NA*, 79; Pearson, 53). We can see an interesting parallel with Fanny and Susan’s reading of history in Portsmouth.

When she is in Portsmouth, Fanny undertakes a course of reading with her sister Susan, who “had no cousin Edmund to direct her thoughts or fix her principles” (*MP*, 312), and who lacked the “early habit of reading” (*MP*, 328). Austen writes, “Susan had read nothing, and Fanny longed to give her a share in her own first pleasures, and inspire a taste for the biography and poetry which she delighted in herself” (*MP*, 313). Like the overlap of reading modes we saw in Chapter Two, Fanny’s reading of history blends the distinction between oral and silent reading: her “explanations and remarks [are] a most important addition to every... chapter of history” (*MP*, 328) because they contextualize the lesson, but also because they add her own perspective as a reader. This sociable way of reading makes history less dry for Susan; that it is read aloud by two women also makes the history less male-dominated, since Fanny and her sister are free to interpret what they read through their own experiences. What Fanny tells Susan “of former times, dwelt more on [Susan’s] mind than the pages of Goldsmith; and she paid the compliment of preferring her style to that of any printed author” (*MP*, 328). Like Edmund, Fanny makes Susan’s reading “useful by talking to her of what she read[s]” (*MP*, 18), bringing Fanny’s education full circle. Clark argues: “Through her soliloquizing dialogues,

readings aloud, and conversations with her sister Susan in their upstairs haven in Portsmouth, Fanny graduates from pupil to tutor and from sister to comforting friend” (377). By reading with her cousin, her sister, and alone, Fanny takes full advantage of reading’s self-educating potential.

We shall see how Fanny’s solitary reading exemplifies what women were supposed to read in the Regency period, but the period’s notions of “appropriate reading” were complex and difficult to achieve for female readers. Drama-reading could be as dangerous as novel-reading, especially a comedy like *Lover’s Vows*, yet a “lively response to drama [could demonstrate] sensibility and even virtue” (Pearson, 61). We have already seen the tension in *Mansfield Park* between reading a play and acting it, and how the choice of play could legitimize or condemn women’s involvement. Pearson points out that reading Shakespeare became emblematic of virtue, taste, and even “British national identity” (Pearson, 62) in the period, showing Fanny’s good taste and decorum yet again in what she reads aloud to her aunt. Fanny is perfectly comfortable with the text of Shakespeare, because she knows his reputation is impeachable, but refuses *Lover’s Vows* for its impropriety.

Accusations against Novel Reading

One of the most controversial genres of women’s reading, however, was the novel. If Austen’s society was concerned about the negative potential of general female reading – to distract women from their duties, inflate their imaginations, and remove them from their proper sphere – then novel reading was seen as particularly dangerous. Michaelson comments on the “moral danger” of reading novels, that arises when a woman “grant[s] authority to texts that [have] not been approved by her parents” (153).

But this fear of losing control over female thought and desire is only one objection against the genre. Not only did novel reading waste time; it caused “discontent with the uniformity of common life” and created “false expectations” for real life (Pearson, 83): it “warmed” the imagination to a dangerous degree. Austen famously treats the image of the ingenuous female reader in Catherine Morland, the heroine of *Northanger Abbey* (1818) who confuses an English household with a Gothic castle; but the characterization is nuanced, and Austen uses “the female quixote plot as a smokescreen behind which to launch a vigorous defence of the novel in general, and women writers in particular” (Pearson, 210). Her defensive attitude is not atypical of female novelists in the period.

As noted above, conservative writers feared that “women’s... livelier imagination and more acute sensibility could lead them into frivolity, luxuriousness, or excessive sexual desire” (Richardson, 169). To illustrate this conservative fear, Pearson points to the seduction narrative in the period’s fiction and didactic writing, which portrayed the female imagination as “sexually vulnerable” (82). In fact, “the endangering of the heroine by unwise reading [such as novels]... became ‘one of the most hackneyed situations in the novel of this period’” (Pearson quoting Jones, 8). Fordyce’s metaphor of “female novel-readers as spiritual prostitutes” in 1765 was “taken literally by many conservative commentators” (Pearson, 110), and “promiscuous” reading became linked with uncontrolled female sexuality. For instance, “in 1806 Edward Barry placed novel-reading among ‘incentives to seduction’ and the *Edinburgh Review* considered female novel-readers ‘upon the borders of prostitution;’” immoral novels were even blamed for “the collapse of family life” (Pearson, 111). Female novelists like Austen had to confront these biases in their own writing, and in their depictions of female novel readers.

Though novel-reading (and writing) was an ambiguous pursuit, it could also be positive for women. Some female authors struggled with novels' ambiguities, writing novels themselves while "condemning the genre as a whole" (Richardson, 186). For example, Hannah More warned that novel reading "has spread so wide, and descended so low, as to have become one of the most universal [and]... pernicious sources of corruption among us" (Richardson, 186), yet she wrote about the positive potential of novels in *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1808) (Pearson, 174). Not all conduct book writers critiqued novel reading, and some characterized it as an innocent alternative to worse pastimes: "cards, scandal, and the toilet" (Pearson, 84).¹⁴ Similarly, Charlotte Smith argued that, since novels are "almost the only reading that young women of fashion are taught to engage in," they might provide some basic information, or even "awaken a wish for useful knowledge" (Pearson, 85-6). But these tentative defenses of the novel are most developed in Austen's genre: the novel of manners.

Like Smith, who defended the novel by arguing that life can be stranger than fiction (Pearson, 86), Austen is aware that novel-reading can prepare one to meet the challenges of real life. Furthermore, Richardson shows how the novel of manners, such as Edgeworth's, Ferrier's, or Austen's fiction (190), vindicates itself from charges of corruption "by bringing [the conduct books'] central concerns – proper conduct, right and wrong methods of schooling, the growth of a sound moral and intellectual character – into the genre" (187). As an alternative to the extremely dull "books of a serious stamp,... written solely for [young women's] benefit" (*P&P*, 52), the novel of manners offered "instruction" (*P&P*, 52) that could also delight the reader. Had Mr. Collins picked

¹⁴ That Elizabeth Bennet "prefer[s] reading to cards" (*P&P*, 27) therefore vindicates her love of books.

up an Edgeworth novel instead of Fordyce's *Sermons*, Lydia Bennet might have actually attended to his reading lesson in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Lydia Bennet and "Imaginary" (or Nonexistent) Reading

What women read, however, was not nearly as important as *how* they read (Michaelson, 154), and Austen is quick to satirize those who read badly, or not at all. One of the ways Austen defends female novel reading is, ironically, through a character who does not read them *enough*: Lydia Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. Though Lydia possesses the over-active female imagination critiqued in conduct literature, Austen shows that Lydia's unrealistic expectations arise as much from *lack* of reading as from *improper* reading. Austen had already depicted the avid novel-reader Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, whose imagination causes her to confuse fiction and reality. But Catherine's overactive imagination is redeemed by Austen, for "in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty" (*NA*, 183). In contrast, Lydia's imagination is limited to the scripting of her future as a "determined flirt" who makes "herself and her family ridiculous" (*P&P*, 176-7).

Pondering her upcoming visit to Brighton in Volume II, Lydia imagines her flirtation with officers, which later translates into her elopement with Wickham:

She saw with the creative eye of fancy, the streets of that gay bathing place covered with officers. She saw herself the object of attention... She saw all the glories of the camp; its tents stretched forth in beauteous uniformity of lines, crowded with the young and the gay, and dazzling with scarlet; and to complete the view, she saw herself seated beneath a tent, tenderly flirting with at least six officers at once (*P&P*, 177-8).

Lydia's unrealistic daydream is connected to her desire; as in the "seduction narrative" where the heroine becomes sexually vulnerable through unwise reading (Pearson, 8; 82),

Lydia's warmed imagination seems to prime her for such a fate. That Lydia *does* elope with a man and consent to live with him before marriage shows the seriousness of the issue (*P&P*, 207), but she does *not* arrive at this state through her reading.

Elizabeth had warned her father against sending Lydia to Brighton, "represent[ing] to him all the improprieties of Lydia's general behaviour, ... and the probability of her being yet more imprudent ...at Brighton, where the temptations must be greater than at home" (*P&P*, 176). Lydia has already rehearsed her seduction without stopping to consider the moral or social ramifications. In Elizabeth's estimation, Lydia's moral judgment has suffered because she has "never been taught to think on serious subjects.... She has been allowed to dispose of her time in the most idle and frivolous manner, and to adopt any opinions that came in her way" (*P&P*, 214). Elizabeth's criticism of Lydia's idleness, her days spent in "amusement and vanity" (*P&P*, 214) and not in reading sounds very much like the criticism of idle female readers noted above. Reading could have cured "the ignorance and emptiness of [Lydia's] mind," but as it is, she is "Vain, ignorant, idle, and absolutely uncontrouled!" (*P&P*, 177).

Reading as an Accomplishment: Mary Bennet and Caroline Bingley

Austen provides another negative example of female reading in *Pride and Prejudice*'s Mary Bennet, who prides herself on her reading. Mary exemplifies the superficially accomplished reader, who "performs reading as she does...the piano: to show off" (Benedict, 187). Like her musical performance, Mary's reading is meant to showcase her abilities. As Benedict summarizes, "Female literacy...allowed women to demonstrate their capacity for moral improvement, social mobility, intelligent companionship with men, and affordably quiescent appetites" (161). Mary seizes any

“opportunity of exhibiting” her talent (*P&P*, 77), like her musical exhibition at the Netherfield Ball in Volume I (*P&P*, 76-7), yet she fails to think critically about her reading, to allow it to change her, or to communicate it effectively.

Mary does speak about the thematically relevant issues of vanity and pride, “piqu[ing] herself upon the solidity of her reflections” (*P&P*, 13-14), but she fails to connect to her listeners sympathetically. After Lydia’s elopement with Wickham in Volume III, Mary offers a catalogue of homilies taken from her reading: “Unhappy as the event must be for Lydia, we may draw from it this useful lesson; that loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable---that one false step involves her in endless ruin---that her reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful” (*P&P*, 219). Katie Halsey argues that this attempt at consolation comes off as “inauthentic and dictated by convention rather than sympathy” (47). Wrapped up in her books, cut off from her social sphere, Mary’s “reading has destroyed her ability to sympathise with her sisters, or to understand the reality of Lydia’s plight” (Halsey, 47). Mary’s frequent and ineffective quotations arise from her reading of moral extracts, a reading practice discussed in Chapter Two. Though Fanny’s literary quotation is treated more positively in *Mansfield Park*, here Mary’s quotes reveal her inability to engage with either the text or other people intellectually or emotionally.¹⁵

Austen provides little room for sympathy in her characterization of Mary, whose “bookishness” (Wolfson, 115) is the target of continual satire. Wolfson describes the characterization of “bookish, spinster-bound Mary” as a “bluestocking satire[:]” Mary is

¹⁵ According to Katherine Quinsey, Mary’s use of quotations as a substitute for real conversation is also in the tradition of satirizing “sentiments” or “maxims” seen in late eighteenth-century literature: for example, Oliver Goldsmith’s *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) (personal communication, June 6, 2014).

“obtuse in social display, laughable in intellectual ambition, her learning good only for arid maxims, and stupid, even heartless moralisms” (Wolfson, 121). She reads because she is “the only plain one in the family,” and “work[s] hard for knowledge and accomplishments,” because she is “impatient for display. Mary had neither genius nor taste; and though vanity had given her application, it had given her likewise a pedantic air and conceited manner” (*P&P*, 17). Mary’s desire to be “the most accomplished girl in the neighbourhood” (*P&P*, 8) may be a survival attempt: with a father whose estate is entailed, and four sisters more beautiful than she is, Mary’s chances of securing a husband are slim.

Wolfson suggests that “Mary is more than a little Austenian,” and her moral reflections, though “arid,” accord with the themes of the novel (Wolfson, 121), but her reading is still flawed. Mary’s love of books does not distinguish her from the “generality of female minds” (*P&P*, 170) because she does not read *well*. Despite memorizing large quantities of extracts, Mary is just as “silly and ignorant” as Lydia and Kitty, who read very little (*P&P*, 2). Austen actually equates Mary’s reading with Kitty’s beauty routine: “One came from her books, and the other from her toilette” (*P&P*, 219). Mary displays her reading as she would a bonnet, and fails to achieve the “improvement of her mind by extensive reading” (*P&P*, 219).

Continuing her analysis of reading as an accomplishment, Austen particularly satirizes Caroline Bingley, and others who turn reading “into an exhibition of marriageability” (Benedict, 187). In a discussion of accomplishments in Volume I of *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Bingley assumes that every woman who can “paint tables, cover skreens and net purses” deserves the title, but Caroline and Darcy “comprehend a

great deal [more] in [the] idea” (*P&P*, 29). Caroline recites a list of accomplishments: “a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages,” along with some intangible qualities of manner and voice (*P&P* 29). Darcy adds “extensive reading” to the list, but his emphasis is on “the improvement of the mind” (*P&P*, 29), rather than the woman’s external qualities. To Caroline, reading is just another marketable trait that has little to do with the woman’s intellect.

Reading on Display in Mansfield Park

In *Mansfield Park*, reading can be valued as an asset in finding a husband, or as a resource for private contemplation, self-development, and community. Austen sets up a contrast between accomplished readers such as Mary Crawford and the Bertram sisters, and Fanny, who refuses to display her reading in oral performance, conversation, and acting (Michaelson, 132). We will see how Fanny’s reading accords with the conduct book ideal, enriching her morality, intellect, and spirituality through private perusal. The guardians and parents of the novel are also poor educators: neither Sir Thomas nor Aunt Norris understands the intrinsic value or purpose of women’s reading, and Mrs. Price neglects her daughters so far that Betsey is “trained up to think the alphabet her greatest enemy” (*MP*, 307). Lady Bertram pays “not the smallest attention” to “the education of her daughters” (*MP*, 16), and Aunt Norris sees reading as just another quality that wealthy men are looking for in a potential wife. Aunt Norris delights in “displaying [her nieces’] accomplishments, and looking about for their future husbands” (*MP*, 27); perhaps this is why she is supportive of the Bertram sisters’ participation in *Lover’s Vows*, a text Sir Thomas assumed Mrs. Norris would see as improper (*MP*, 147).

Sir Thomas is also guilty of placing improper emphasis on reading, though he is concerned with respectability rather than money. As with Sir Thomas' failure to read aloud to his family, or discuss their reading in conversation, he fails to take advantage of reading's potential to build relationships. His lack of relationship with his daughters is one of the causes for their eventual disgrace (adultery and injudicious elopement), and Sir Thomas reflects that

Something must have been wanting *within*... To be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments---the authorised object of their youth... [had] no moral effect on the mind. He had meant them to be good, but his cares had been directed to the understanding and manners, not the disposition (*MP*, 363-4).

Sir Thomas' mistake is in putting all the emphasis on the *external* effects of reading; in so doing, he sacrifices his daughter's moral education.

Looking at the period's conduct book literature also illuminates Sir Thomas's feeling that "Something must have been wanting *within*" (*MP*, 363). Armstrong shows how, in conduct literature, "splendour" and "brilliancy" "fail to provide a reasonable way of assessing women" and how "any outward and visible signs of value... imply some emotional lack in the woman that significantly lowers her value on the marriage market" (76). Conduct books sought to prove that idle women who display their accomplishments are of lesser value than quietly virtuous women (Armstrong, 77). *Mansfield Park* follows a similar purpose. Many of the novel's accomplished women possess exterior brilliance but lack inner virtue, with Fanny as the counter-example. Fanny's "mild and retiring virtues" are deliberately contrasted with Mary Crawford's "bold and dazzling ones" (Armstrong quoting Darwin, 80), and "Fanny's subjectivity, her possession of a deeper inner life than most of the other characters ... marks her superiority" (Richardson, 197). Richardson argues that "Fanny's psychic depths provide the space in which the self is

disciplined, the grounding of true principle, the refuge from (and alternative to) the materialism and frivolity of the social world” (197). This inner life is informed by Fanny’s solitary reading, as we shall see. Austen’s condemnation of reading solely as an accomplishment has more to do with the *ethics* of women’s reading than connotations of idleness: Sir Thomas and Mrs. Norris are most to blame, because they fail to recognize reading’s intrinsic moral potential.

Mary Crawford’s Amoral Reading

Similarly, Mary Crawford is a truly accomplished woman (*MP* 33; 156) whose reading has not resulted in her moral growth. Mary not only “suffers from a lack of principle,” but “does not even recognize the need for principles, failing, for example, to register the proper ‘modest loathings’ when Maria commits adultery with...Henry” (Richardson, 196). The Crawford siblings’ are “tainted” by the bad influence of their uncle and aunt in London (*MP*, 211), but also by their “education” (*MP*, 211). Presumably, this education involved reading texts of questionable morality,¹⁶ but is there evidence of Mary’s unsanctioned reading? Though she may have read too widely and indiscriminately, absorbing the philosophies of “immoral” texts, Mary may also have read appropriate texts inappropriately, failing to absorb their moral lessons.

Similar to Elizabeth Bennet, Mary’s “playfulness” and liveliness of mind are her main characteristics (*MP*, 211; 51). But Austen is less supportive of Mary’s unorthodox remarks than she was of Elizabeth’s, partly because Mary is less willing to reconsider her opinions. One of the indications of Mary’s amoral tendency is her lack of regard for her religious reading. When she doubts the influence of clergymen over the “conduct and ...

¹⁶ Richardson suggests that Mary’s education in London is “deformed by the revolution in female manners which writers like West and More deplore” (196).

manners” of his congregation, she jokes, that even “two sermons a week, ...supposing the preacher to have the sense to prefer Blair's to his own” cannot make any difference on people’s behaviour (*MP*, 73). Pearson argues that the “failure of moral publications to construct the moral reader” is inevitable in Austen’s fiction (143), but Mary’s inattentiveness to the *meaning* of Blair’s sermons may reflect her own “hypocritical or ineffectual” reading (Pearson, 46). Biased reception of texts may be as much to blame for Mary’s lack of understanding as the texts themselves.

Other evidence of Mary’s reading and her playful tendency with language is her reference to an eighteenth-century satirical poem in Volume I. With her habitual irreverence, Mary rewords a quotation from Browne: “Do you remember Hawkins Browne’s address to Tobacco, in imitation of Pope?--- ‘Blest leaf, whose aromatic gales dispense, to Templars modesty, to Parsons sense.’ I will parody them. Blest knight! whose dictatorial looks dispense, to Children affluence, to Rushworth sense” (*MP*, 126-7). Though, in propriety, Mary should not be joking at Sir Thomas’ and Mr. Rushworth’s expense, insinuating the tyranny of the one and the stupidity of the other, her mind has a naturally satirical turn (much like Austen herself!). Mary’s reading of satirical poetry is more political than conduct writers would have approved, but still within bounds for women.

Where Mary’s reading becomes the most radical, however, is her allusion to Voltaire’s *Le Siecle de Louis XIV* (1751) in Volume II. Austen deliberately contrasts two modes of reading – poetic and philosophic – in order to contrast the moral sensibilities of Fanny and Mary. As the women stroll through a shrubbery, Fanny demonstrates her sensibility, piety, and knowledge of botany. Fanny’s rhapsody on the beauty of the

“evergreen” (*MP*, 164) is in accordance with botanical notes to eighteenth-century “topographical poetry” (Stabler, 408); but Mary is “untouched and inattentive” (*MP*, 163) by the beauties of nature. Instead of according with the confirmation of religious principles, “femininity, modesty, and innocence” that botanical reading can inspire (Pearson, 67), Mary refers to Voltaire, “I am something like the famous Doge at the court of Lewis XIV; and may declare that I see no wonder in this shrubbery equal to seeing myself in it” (*MP*, 164).

In her explanatory notes, Stabler points out that “Conservative and Evangelical critics in England disapproved of Voltaire because of his sceptical arguments for free thought, criticism of all religion, and lack of respect for Shakespeare” (409). As part of the “new philosophy,” Voltaire’s writings were dangerous for their “revolutionary potential” (Pearson, 78). Vicesimus Knox believed that Voltaire’s “seducing doctrines” would “darken the understanding...and corrupt the heart” (Pearson, 77-8), especially for female readers. In this walk through nature, Fanny shows her sensibility and taste for poetry, qualities of the ideal female reader; but Mary exposes her self-interestedness, secular tendencies, and knowledge of revolutionary philosophy. Mary’s reading reveals her amorality; but Fanny’s private course of reading, detailed as it is, sketches out her personality in much more depth.

Solitary Reading

Chapter Two discussed how solitary reading can be anti-social, an excuse to ignore others, to behave badly, or conceal ulterior motives. Most of the examples that were used involved a solitary reader among a group, such as Edmund reading his newspaper in the living room, ignoring Mr. Crawford’s conversation with Fanny (*MP*,

268). But this type of reading becomes more complex when it involves a solitary *female* reader. Though women were sometimes encouraged to read aloud to each other working while they listened, private reading was more suspect. Quoting Roger Chartier, Pearson characterizes this opposition of reading modes in the eighteenth century: “‘solitary’ and ‘silent’ reading was potentially rebellious or self-indulgent, while reading aloud formed the ‘bond and expression of social ties’ and was especially appropriate for women within domestic ideology” (Pearson, 152). The woman’s duty to care for her household involved “self-regulation” (Armstrong, 81) or subjugation of personal desires, so any motivation for personal pleasure was doubtful according to conduct book standards. Pearson gives the example of Betsy Sheridan, who “longed to read Cowper,” but her “father [had] barred family readings of poetry” (171). Betsy was conflicted about choosing her own reading material, and “unhappy about reading as a ‘solitary pleasure’ which she felt was like ‘sitting down to a feast alone’” (Pearson, 171).

Solitary reading enacted different purposes for the eighteenth-century reader, particularly for women. It could be a place to indulge the imagination, reading novels or other literature under the patriarchal radar; we see this in Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, where Catherine reads *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) in between meals and before bed, though she sometimes feels “ashamed” for reading Gothic novels (NA, 25; 32). Of course, Austen defends novels through Henry Tilney, who states that “the person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid” (NA, 77). The “pleasure” of a good novel, Austen shows, can also be united with instruction, and though “solitary reading in the eighteenth century figured [an] escape

from parental authority, and as such, attracted much commentary” (Michaelson, 142), Austen defends the independence of judgment that reading can inspire.

Fanny’s Solitary Reading

In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny’s solitary reading in the East Room does not distract her from her duty, but rather enables Fanny to regulate her mind, and to judge her circumstances accurately. The first chapter discussed the positive aspects of Fanny’s private reading: her books are her “friends” (*MP*, 119), providing comfort and escape from the “suffering” of her daily life (119). It is part of Fanny’s routine to actively console herself to the injustices she must bear with. But in Chapter Three, we saw the turmoil Fanny experiences when this space is invaded by Mary and Edmund’s rehearsal of *Lover’s Vows*. Fanny’s reading in her own (borrowed) space provides a safe haven for the most part, but it does not cut her off from the rest of the household.

In Volume I, Edmund interrupts Fanny’s reading in the East Room to announce his decision to act. Though he had refused to participate in the play on moral grounds, he attempts to justify his moral inconsistency. Fanny is deeply distressed, but Edmund assumes that she can simply return to her “nest of comforts” (*MP*, 120) when he leaves:

‘You in the meanwhile will be taking a trip into China, I suppose. How does Lord Macartney go on?--- (opening a volume on the table and then taking up some others.) And here are Crabbe’s Tales, and the Idler, at hand to relieve you, if you tire of your great book. . . . as soon as I am gone, you will empty your head of all this nonsense of acting, and sit comfortably down to your table’ (*MP*, 123).

Solitary reading does allow Fanny to “escape from grief, loneliness, boredom and frustration” (Pearson, 93), as it does in Portsmouth (“if reading could banish the idea for even half an hour, it was something gained,” *MP*, 313) but its calming effect fails here.

Fanny cannot ignore the impact of Edmund's decision, and "there was no reading, no China, no composure for Fanny" (*MP*, 123).

The books in the East Room reflect Fanny's conservative education (Halsey, 76-7), but they also represent her growing individuality and sense of right and wrong. Halsey discusses the symbolic significance of Fanny's reading: Samuel Johnson's *Idler* "reflects and represents [Fanny's] moral code, while [George] Crabbe's *Tales* shows her...unexceptionable literary taste" (Halsey, 77). Edmund may be listing Fanny's books as a way to distract her from his moral compromise; Fanny's reading has the reverse effect. Pearson highlights Fanny's reading of Lord Macartney's *Journal of the Embassy to China* (1807) as a "[tactic] of resistance" (56). Pearson argues, "a key episode [in Macartney's *Journal*] is the ambassador's refusal to prostrate himself before the Emperor, thus providing 'an example of someone who successfully said "No"', and "prepar[ing] her for her rebellion" against Sir Thomas Bertram (57). As Mary Hammond has recently argued,¹⁷ "private reading ...defies moral policing: no-one can monitor a reader's thoughts, or control his or her emotional (or indeed physical) responses to a text" (n.p.). Reading can itself become an act of rebellion, helping the reader express her "individuality" and distancing her from her parents' or guardians' "ideological assumptions" (Flint, 316). For Fanny, private reading facilitates her moral independence, even at the terrifying prospect of disagreeing with Sir Thomas. However, her reading is far from radical, since it facilitates her conservative values and her sensibility.

¹⁷ Hammond, Mary. "Book History in the Reading Experience." L. Howsam, ed. *Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book* -- CUP forthcoming (2014).

Fanny's Poetic Quotation

Through poetry, Fanny's education "reinforces the virtues of natural familial piety...as well as friendship," uniting useful moral lessons with sociability (Clark, 370-71). This kind of study is in line with recommended women's reading in the Regency period. For women, poetry was either recommended to train the imagination and cultivate proper feeling, or discouraged as an excitement to too much imagination and feeling, if in excess (Pearson, 57). Poetry could be a useful subject for conversation, but beyond that, it could be dangerous: "Hannah More, though herself a writer and reader of poetry, deprecated a 'poetical education for girls,' considering poetry a dangerous stimulant to female 'imagination,' likely to produce 'vanity' and 'delirium'" (Pearson, 57). If combined with history, the effects are not as dreadful (58). "Religious and descriptive poetry," especially by Milton, Pope, Young, Thompson, and Cowper was "universally acceptable," the latter being "frequently recommended in didactic works" (Pearson, 59). Romantic poetry was more questionable, and was often disapproved by conservative moralists (especially Burns and Byron) (Pearson, 59). Halsey points to Fanny's reading of Cowper as a sign of her "poetic sensibilities" (77) and of other characteristics, such as "her modesty, her timidity, her self-abnegation, her struggles with envy and with independence of spirit" (Halsey, 83).

Halsey shows how Fanny's "quotations and allusions" *enable* her to "[express] how she feels" (77). This is also true of Maria Bertram, who quotes Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768) to express her "feeling of restraint and hardship" (MP, 78) in Volume I of *Mansfield Park*. At the "iron gate" that separates her from her destination with Henry Crawford on Rushworth's estate, Maria quotes the

well-known novella: “I cannot get out, as the starling said” (*MP*, 78). The landscape symbolizes her sense of imprisonment in her engagement to Mr. Rushworth, but her poetic quotation voices her inappropriate sexual desires.

In contrast, Fanny’s poetic reading enables her to express her conservative values. Fanny quotes from conservative poets William Cowper and Sir Walter Scott, “approved poets” (Pearson, 58) that nonetheless help Fanny to give voice to issues that really matter to her (Halsey, 77). For example, Fanny quotes Scott when surveying the chapel at Sotherton: “Here are no aisles, no arches, no inscriptions, no banners... No signs that a ‘Scottish monarch sleeps below’” (Austen, 68). Though the chapel was “formerly in constant use both morning and evening,” and “[p]rayers were always read in it by the domestic chaplain,” the late Mr. Rushworth left it off” (*MP*, 68) Fanny’s concern for the deterioration of religious values prompts her to venture an opinion, which she rarely does.¹⁸ Her reading of poetry has equipped her to moralize: “There is something in a chapel and chaplain so much in character with a great house, with one’s ideas of what such a household should be! A whole family assembling regularly for the purpose of prayer, is fine!” (*MP*, 68). This passage suggests Fanny’s religious reading as well.

Religious Reading

Solitary reading could also be a way to dedicate oneself to personal, moral, or spiritual growth through the intensive perusal of religious texts. In *Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt connected this type of reading to the “growth of individualism, and...to the influence of Protestantism, with its emphasis on private reading, introspection and thought” (Tadmor, 163). In *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975), Marilyn Butler

¹⁸ the other notable instance being Fanny’s query about the slave trade in Volume II (*MP*, 155); see Chapter Two.

draws attention to Austen's recent conversion at the inception of *Mansfield Park*. Butler argues that "Austen was espousing evangelical ideals of sincerity and Christian humility" in her novel, since the "principles of evangelical Protestantism ... favor reading and reflection as paths to moral improvement" (Benedict, 263, n. 96). Austen "represent[s] solitary reading as a sign of moral purity" in *Mansfield Park* (Benedict, 187), but this connection between reading and religion can be seen in the period's prescriptions and descriptions of women's reading.

Pearson notes the importance of religious reading to "conduct writers like Sarah Green or [John] Gregory," where "'the Scriptures' came first in any programme of female reading" (44). Even though abstract and "spiritual" virtues were seen as subordinate to a woman's "practical duties" (Armstrong, 68), women's spiritual growth was still important for their role as educators to their children. Similarly, Brewer's study of Anna Larpent's reading shows the importance of religious texts to actual readers in Austen's day. Anna daily "read either the Bible, the Psalms, or a pious text or sermon" (Brewer, 239), with "favourite sermons" and scriptures every Sunday (239). Brewer points out the privacy of Anna's religious reading, which was not "a subject for polite conversation, ... but an act of personal devotion, an affirmation of her Christian faith" (239). Like the intensive reading of manuscript culture, "Anna's daily examination of the scriptures or of a religious work was a private act of self scrutiny intended to strengthen her moral resolve and Christian faith" (Brewer, 239). Religious reading is "transformational" (Pearson, 44), and as such, it is an important aspect of *Mansfield Park's* evangelicalism.

Fanny's piety is implied in Volume I of *Mansfield Park*, mostly through Austen's depiction of her heroine's mental process. The language Austen uses to describe Fanny's reflections in the East Room has a distinctly religious flavor. In her private, cell-like chamber, Fanny finds "consolation" and "comfort" in her collection of "books" (*MP*, 119), which most likely includes a copy of the Bible; she gains relief from "any thing unpleasant below" (*MP*, 119), a phrase that reads like a metaphor for one's earthly troubles; her pain and "suffering" at the hand of her family is cured by her fond "remembrance" of their goodness (*MP*, 119), following the moral dictum to see the good in others; and she looks to her geraniums, one of God's creations, to "inhale a breeze of mental strength" and "find her way to her duty" (*MP*, 119-20). Fanny practices the precepts of Christianity through her private devotions, struggling against vice and building her virtue.

Though both religious and secular reading may be done in private, Brewer argues that the latter becomes part of the reader's "social identity" (240) informing their "conversation and sociability" (239), while religious reading remains "truly private" (239). We can see this in *Mansfield Park*, where Fanny's reading of the Bible and other religious texts is not made explicit because it is part of the heroine's private devotion. Austen contrasts Fanny's piety with the Bertram sisters, who "fail to internalize their father's conventional notions of duty and religion" (Richardson, 195). Fanny's estimation for private devotion is revealed when she exclaims about the "discontinued" practice of family devotions at Sotherton's chapel, where prayers had been read daily by the "domestic chaplain" (*MP*, 68). As noted above, this concern for the deterioration of religious observance is channeled through reading – she quotes Scott's poetry – but it

also aligns Fanny with Edmund, a future clergyman. Whereas Mary had joked about the young women at Sotherton chapel “starched up into seeming piety, but with heads full of something very different,” Edmund admonishes her for her “amusing sketch” (*MP*, 69). As a clergyman, Edmund “has the guardianship of religion and morals” in England (*MP*, 73), so he is concerned about people’s religious reading habits. He argues, if young women’s public devotions are so aimless, “what could be expected from the *private* devotions of such persons? Do you think the minds which are suffered, which are indulged in wanderings in a chapel, would be more collected in a closet?” (*MP*, 69). Fanny’s private religious reading, which reflects her general reticence and privacy as an individual, prepares her as a future bride for Edmund,¹⁹ while Mary’s secular, irreligious ideas of reading mark her unsuitability for the future churchman. Austen shows how women’s reading can predict their futures, especially in terms of courtship.

Elizabeth’s Reading: Learning How to Read Correctly

If reading is important to characters’ destinies in the novels, then Austen must have correct, positive ways of reading outlined so her heroines can achieve the best result. Austen provides many negative examples of female readers: Mary’s secular, radical reading; Caroline and Mary’s superficial reading as an accomplishment; and Lydia’s complete lack of serious reading. Conversely, we have seen the positive ways that Fanny reads in *Mansfield Park*. Now, we shall consider a reader who demonstrates good *and* bad ways of reading: *Pride and Prejudice*’s Elizabeth Bennet. Elizabeth’s transformation from a prejudiced reader to a critical one takes place throughout the

¹⁹ Ironically, Fanny’s devoutness also makes her more appealing to Henry Crawford, who is “inspired by ... her being well principled and religious” though he is “too little accustomed to serious reflection to know [good principles] by their proper name” (*MP*, 230).

narrative, and Austen shows how women can achieve the status of discriminating and informed readers, prepared for any eventuality through their interaction with text.

Elizabeth's education through reading is different from Fanny's, but it shows that reading depends on the *choice* and intention of the reader. In reply to Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who inquires whether the Bennets were educated in accomplishments, or whether Elizabeth had a governess, Elizabeth admits that she and her sisters are self-educated, and "those who chose to be idle, certainly might" (*P&P*, 126-7). However, the Bennets were never prevented from learning: "such of us as wished to learn, never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary" (*P&P*, 127). Elizabeth seems to have made good use of her time reading, but her sisters have not. Aside from Jane, one of the less silly Bennet sisters, Kitty and Lydia seem to fit the description "those who chose to be idle" (*P&P*, 127). Though Elizabeth's education is not "directed" as it was for Fanny (*MP*, 18), it is suggested that she has freedom to choose what she reads. We know that Mr. Bennet did not prevent his daughters from having access to his library: "Elizabeth is welcome there and we are assured that all the girls had ready access to books" (Jackson, para. 2). Mary has read widely: but her reading does not help her in the social sphere, because she reads to impress others rather than connect with them. Mary Bennet's self-education in literary extracts has clearly backfired, leaving her rich in quotations but poor in relationships.

Elizabeth's reading is also different from Mary's in terms of performance. If musical performance can indicate a character's stance on exhibiting one's reading, then Elizabeth's "easy and unaffected" musical performance at a ball in Volume I contrasts her to Mary, whose manner is "conceited;" Elizabeth is "listened to with much more

pleasure, though not playing half so well” (*P&P*, 17). Women must keep their reading visibly invisible, enriching their conversation without explicitly showing off their reading. Austen also contrasts Elizabeth’s reading to Caroline’s pretense at reading. In Volume I, Elizabeth draws Mr. Darcy’s attention through reading, even though Caroline has been trying to get his notice by multifarious means and stratagems. That Elizabeth “prefer[s] reading to cards” (*P&P*, 27) indicates her intellectual superiority to Caroline, and impresses Darcy. Frustrated, Miss Bingley insinuates that “Miss Eliza Bennet . . . despises cards. She is a great reader and has no pleasure in any thing else,” but Elizabeth argues for her more balanced approach: “I deserve neither such praise nor such censure[.] . . . I am *not* a great reader, and I have pleasure in many things” (*P&P*, 27). Elizabeth does not memorize books like Mary, or pretend to read them like Caroline, but keeps her reading relevant to her social life. For instance, we saw how Lizzy uses her reading to converse with Colonel Fitzwilliam, letting her knowledge of books enhance her social interaction (*P&P*, 132).

Though she denies being “a great reader” (*P&P*, 27), Elizabeth shares Fanny’s “fondness for reading” (*MP*, 18) without sacrificing more physical pleasures: she walks through the countryside, attracting Darcy’s notice by her “fine eyes . . . brightened by the exercise” (*P&P*, 26). But Darcy also admires the “liveliness” of Elizabeth’s mind (*P&P*, 291), demonstrated in her reading skills. Reading also facilitates Darcy’s courtship of Elizabeth, since Darcy’s letter opens a line of communication between them.²⁰ As we have seen, the theme of reading and courtship is treated differently in *Mansfield Park*: Mary Crawford also has a “lively mind” (*MP*, 51) (as noted above), but wit and

²⁰ Though my main analysis of reading in Austen has been limited to published texts, I have chosen to include an example of letter-reading from *Pride and Prejudice* where Austen clearly analyzes the effects of reading on social (romantic) relationships.

impertinence is less positive in this novel. Mary's liveliness attracts Edmund's notice as Elizabeth's does for Darcy, but it also reflects her amoral reading habits, playing with meaning and being skeptical of religious and moral texts. Mary's "faults of principle" (*MP*, 358) reflect her improper reading, and unlike Elizabeth, who overcomes her initial prejudices through rereading, Mary's "blunted delicacy" remains unchanged (*P&P*, 358).

The intellectual, spiritual, and moral transformation that reading can inspire is central in Austen's fiction, but especially so in *Pride and Prejudice*. Not only do "sympathy of read[ing]" and "openness to re-reading" become tests of character in the novel (Wolfson, 113); reading is important structurally and thematically. As noted in the preface, *Pride and Prejudice* has a hermeneutic tendency, where people, situations, and even the past become "texts" to be read (Wolfson, 113), and Austen even "plots Elizabeth's happiness on an arc of genuine reading, from first impressions and prejudices, to reflections and revisions, to rereadings and surer comprehension, to union with a man of equal capacity" (Wolfson, 115). Wolfson argues: "By careful reading, heroine Elizabeth will find 'the man who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her'" (113). One of the clearest examples of learning to read people and situations accurately is also the pivotal plot point of *Pride and Prejudice*, and the final argument of this thesis: Elizabeth's reading of Darcy's letter in Volume II.

Not only does Austen allow us to read the entirety of Darcy's letter in Chapter Twelve of Volume II – the midpoint of the novel – she also records Elizabeth's reader-response; in the next chapter, Elizabeth learns to overcome her prejudice after her first reading, and re-evaluate her judgment of Darcy through careful re-reading. In this scene, she must reflect on her own experiences and attitudes as she absorbs another's story,

putting aside her own emotions to use her critical faculties. At first she can only see Darcy's style: "It was all pride and insolence" (*P&P*, 156). But when she calms down enough to "read, and re-read [the letter] with the closest attention," she is able to pay attention to the letter's "particulars" and is "forced to hesitate. She put down the letter, weighed every circumstance with what she meant to be impartiality---deliberated on the probability of each statement" (*P&P*, 157). Comparing what she *knows* of Wickham to what she had *assumed* about him, Elizabeth also re-reads her own memories, until she is forced to conclude her error: "she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd" (*P&P*, 159). Reading Darcy's letter culminates in Elizabeth's self-knowledge: "till this moment, I never knew myself" (*P&P*, 159). To indicate the revolution of thought her heroine has undergone, Austen remarks how "widely different was the effect of a second perusal" (*P&P*, 159), where she looks past Darcy's insulting tone and sees the truth of his words. Elizabeth has gotten past the emotional reaction to reading – the stereotype of the overly-subjective female reader – and allowed her judgment to dictate her interpretation. Through reading, she overcomes prejudice and begins her relationship with the man most suited to her (*P&P*, 237).

Conclusion: Reading Books, Interpreting People: the Application of Women's Reading in Mansfield Park and Pride and Prejudice

Not only does Elizabeth attain self-knowledge and accurate discernment through reading; Fanny also learns the connection between reading and judgment. For Fanny, reading is a way to communicate her perceptiveness to others, rather than to hone her own powers of understanding (as it was for Elizabeth). Discussing the implications of readers' "absorbed attention," Joe Bray examines reading as a metaphor for interpreting

or judging the world in *Mansfield Park*. As the novel progresses, Fanny gains “increased autonomy and confidence as a reader” (Bray, 173), evidenced by her use of the circulating library in Portsmouth, her tutoring of Susan, and her increased confidence in her own judgment (Bray 173-4). By novel’s end, Fanny becomes “an attentive reader of others” (Bray, 174), relying on her observations with more assurance. Even though she refuses to advise others for most of the novel’s duration, Fanny becomes the moral centre of the novel (Bonaparte, 60). Her words to Henry reveal her inner strength, and her conviction in training the mind to judge accurately: “We have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be, (*MP*, 324). Unlike the reading condemned by the period’s conduct book writers, Fanny’s reading has equipped her to navigate her world. Elizabeth, too, learns to read appearances critically, as one would read a text. Austen shows that female readers have a better chance at understanding their world, relating to others, and developing their own potential than those who fail to read. Reading transforms us, opening up worlds of possibility on the page and in our minds.

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