Miss Manners

Jane Austen and the Contradictions of Conduct

by

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> Marianne Dashwood was born to an extraordinary fate. She was born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract, by her conduct, her most favorite maxims.
>
> — *Sense and Sensibility*

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Introduction

Ironic Inversions: The Truth of the Self in Society

Jane Austen is perhaps most famous for the brilliance of her wit, which she characteristically displays in the narration of her most critical depictions of human nature. In an observation which is exemplary of Austen's style of ironic criticism, Gary Kelly writes that in her novels "the greatest talkers...are the emptiest heads" (120). By means of such ironic inversions, Austen demonstrates that the form of language can actually reveal a contradictory truth about what is written or said. It is telling of Austen inherently skeptical disposition that she would choose to let the characters that know the least say the most. As a meticulous interpreter, Austen's writing often seems detached and at times even ambivalent. While risking the possibility that gullible readers might believe the false words of her most garrulous characters, the intention of Austen's irony must have been instructive: to teach her readers about the difficulty of understanding human nature in a complicated world. Through looking at *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park*, I hope to expand upon Kelly's claim through demonstrating that those characters who express their

sensibility most may actually possess the least self-knowledge, and furthermore, those who appear to be the most sociable may in fact be the least genuinely benevolent. In order produce a novelistic form of skepticism, Austen demonstrates that false sentiments can be produced in the epistolary form and false virtue can be displayed in forms of performative exhibition. In Austen's novels, the reader learns to interpret the ironic undercurrents of speech, sentiments, and manners in society: Mrs. Jennings speaks constantly but she only knows gossip, Willoughby appears to be a sentimental hero but possesses no authentic interior, and Mary Crawford has excellent manners but no understanding of conventional morality. Austen utilizes these inversions in her work in order to imitate the difficulty of knowing the true nature of people in the real world. Accordingly, Austen's authorial style is marked by restraint because she teaches her readers about human nature through the force of her skepticism; after all, in a world in which the emptiest heads are the greatest talkers, how else could we trust her word?

My analysis of the contradictions of conduct in Austen's work centers around two terms—sentiment and manners—and the difficulty of defining both terms is indicative of literary and social changes during the time in which Jane Austen wrote. Around the turn of the eighteenth-century, the Romantic period of literature, in response to the Enlightenment and the movements of sensibility and sentimentalism, continually redefined the relationship between the self and society. During the eighteenth-century, the notion of sensibility "suggested the capacity for highly refined and sensitive emotional response" (Rowland 193). Critics writing about the fiction of sensibility describe the difficulty of finding a precise definition

for the word "sentimental", a relatively new term that was employed in the narration of interiority. Regardless of its exact meaning, the major purpose of sentimental novels was to distinguish the self from society. Sentimental fiction framed the human subject in fundamental in opposition to a hostile world, and furthermore, it created the notion that people can refine their sensibility and the authenticity of their sentiments through interior development. By creating the notion that people possess an interior identity separate from their social roles, these authors narrated "the self as a transcendental and supra-social" (Kelly 113). Sentimental writers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that the authenticity of individuals was compromised by their subjugation to oppressive social structures. He constructed his heroes and heroines as "surpa-social" through writing their sentiments in the epistolary form, which he claimed to be capable of circumventing corrupting social forces. In his sentimental epistolary novel *Julie, or the Nouvelle Heloise* (1761), Rousseau proclaimed that his intention was to narrate the authentic sentiments of two lovers through a series of their intimate letters. Epistolary novelists asserted that the letter-form was a narrative and stylistic solution to the fundamental dilemma in the fiction of sensibility—that society oppresses the self—because its intimate nature fosters unmediated expression.

After Rousseau's death, supporters of the French Revolution adopted his works as the foundation of their ideology. Beginning in 1789, the French Revolution intensified prior debates from the Enlightenment concerning the relationship of the self to society and the nature of hierarchy. Supporters of the revolution reacted against the fundamental assertion of hierarchy: that one's rank is society is more

important than one's individual value. In the English Jacobin novel *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb William* (1794), William Godwin maintains Rousseau's notion that society prevents individuals from living in harmony with their authentic selves. In telling the story of his protagonist, Godwin applies conventions of the sentimental novel through depicting Caleb's authentic interior life as existing in conflict with his social role. Edmund Burke, a pronounced critic of the Jacobins as well as the philosophy of Rousseau, argued that Rousseau's notion of individual authenticity threatens valuable structures in society, such as the aristocracy and the church. Burke believed that through constructing the individual in opposition to society, and implicitly hierarchy as well, the revolutionaries sought to replace patriotism and affection for one's surrounding society with vanity and selfishness.

Akin to Jacobin novels, the novel of manners also developed out of the eighteenth-century sentimental novels. Fanny Burney, among the most remarkable novelists in this sub-genre, narrated the experiences of women as they left home and navigated different social circles. In the epistolary novel *Evelina; or, A Young Woman's Entrance into the World* (1778), Burney narrates Evelina's growth as an individual as she observes people's manners and learns to emulate the social forms of virtuous conduct. Along involving itself in the debate about the relation of the self to society, the novel of manners also indicated a culturally significant transformation in the meaning of the word "manners". The definition of manners as "conduct in its moral aspect; morality" became obsolete around the turn of the century, and during the nineteenth-century, manners instead came to connote

simply "the customary rules of behavior in a particular society; outward bearing, deportment" (Oxford English Dictionary). When defined as moral conduct, manners signified actual morality, and thus, genuine virtue; however, manners eventually began to convey the mere surface deportment of virtue. Therefore, the meaning of manners moved from authentic virtue, understood as moral substance, to the imitation of virtue, understood as a purely social form.

The transformation in the word "manners" is often explained as a consequence of the development of commerce in Europe, which also greatly increased the amount of social intercourse on the continent. An additional effect of the rise of commercial culture was the development of paper currency. As people began to socialize within ever-expanding social circles, codes were produced in order to denote value, both in regards to one's individual virtue and commercial worth. Paper currency signified an abstract worth, but it did not possess the actual value, in gold, that it represented. The creation of currency which no longer held any substance of worth mirrored the concern over the genuine worth of manners in a commercial society. Philosopher David Hume argued that the larger social circles and more frequent social interactions provide the most effective method for instructing and improving manners. Conversely, Edmund Burke held that commercial culture threatens virtue since it transforms manners from fixed properties of traditional virtue into malleable forms of fashionable behavior. Thus, the eighteenth-century was a time of notable contradictions: while the culture of sensibility attempted to constructing authentic interiority as against an oppressive

society, the novel of manners asserted that society was a necessary structure in the teaching of virtue.

When Austen began her career as a novelist, she undoubtedly found herself engaged in the multiplicity of debates concerning the self and society that had been articulated within the Enlightenment, the culture of sensibility, the French Revolution, and the meaning of manners. It is not surprising that Austen, who is known for her authorial restraint, refuses in her works to posit a definitive point of view in regards to the rhetoric of sentimentalism and authenticity as well as the claim that social structures oppress individuals. In response to these debates, rather than indicating a fixed point of view in her works, Austen proved the impossibility of choosing one side by exposing the contradictions inherent to living in a social world. In the first chapter, through assessing the epistolary form, I argue that sentiments can be insincere, and therefore, manners are a better signifier of interior virtue. However, in the next chapter, in an exploration of theatricality, I show the possibility that manners can be purely performative, and thus, I argue that only with the substance of sentiments can manners be truly virtuous.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen challenges the epistemological claim of epistolary fiction: the idea that the sentiments of one's interior can be authentically expressed in an unmediated form. She questions the epistolary form through juxtaposing the letters of her characters with a third-person narrator and the technique of free-indirect discourse, Austen's hallmark style in which the heroine's innermost thoughts are conveyed by the voice of the narrator. While the epistolary form asserts that a person's written sentiments should be taken as absolutely true,

the form of free-indirect discourse depends on skepticism in order to question the true meaning of what is said and written. Furthermore, Austen criticizes the idea help by supporters of sentimental expression, especially Rousseau, that manners conceal and contaminate people's authentic selves. Through refuting the argument that the epistolary style is an absolutely authentic form of self-expression, Austen brings elements of empiricism, especially probability, into the pedagogy of her novels. Austen shows the epistemological value of social structures such as manners through arguing that in order to best understand human nature, we must rely not only upon what others write, but also upon the way in which their actions are consistent with their words. In the character of Elinor Dashwood, Austen creates a heroine who possesses both refined sensibility and polite manners.

In *Mansfield Park*, Austen engages in the debate over what manners should mean through depicting two divergent notions of manners: fixed, traditional virtues versus adaptable forms of social conduct. Austen includes Elizabeth Inchbald's play *Lovers' Vows* in the novel in order to provide a literal representation of performance in conjunction with the implicit suggestion that society is a stage. In the novel, the traditional definition of manners as "moral conduct" relates to the philosophy of Edmund Burke, and the commercial definition as of manners as "outward bearing, deportment" is representative of David Hume's philosophy. Rather than choosing one side in the debate, she shows how both definitions of manners are untrustworthy due to their concern with appearance. The manners of Fanny Price, Austen's heroine, function to restore interior sentiments to the traditional notion of

manners. Thus, Fanny's manners are depicted as moral conduct that is supported by virtuous interior sentiments.

In both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park*, Austen's restraint as a narrator is mirrored in the lives of her heroines. In *Sense and Sensibility*, neither "sense" nor "sensibility" prevails. Instead, Austen unites the two qualities in order to bring out the best in each; she shows how both reason and emotion are most productive when they work together. Fittingly, Elinor rises in the context of the novel because of her sentimental restraint, characterized by her role as an "anti-epistolary heroine" (Favret 145). Austen writes of Elinor, "her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them" (8). In *Mansfield Park*, Austen does not choose Burke or Hume's side in the debate over manners. Rather, she shows how traditional values, due to the rise of commerce, can no longer sustain themselves as an external performance of decorum; instead, they must be revived through nurturing the sentiments of interiority. Fanny becomes a heroine in *Mansfield Park* due to her social restraint: she refuses to perform in *Lovers' Vows* and to display insincere sentiments at Mansfield Park. When asked to act in the play, Fanny remarks, "It would be absolutely impossible for me" (115). Perhaps Austen chose to imbed her own principle of restraint in the character of her heroines in order to show that that interior sentiments do not need to be expressed in order to be authentic and interior virtue does not need to be performed in order to be valuable. In order to articulate the contradiction of sentiments, that they can be insincere, and of manners, that they can be immoral, Austen analogously demonstrates the contradictions of the epistolary form and of

theatrical performance. She shows that the epistolary form can express inauthentic sentiments and the performance of manners can express false virtue. Austen's appears to contradict itself, but it actually serves to demonstrate the real world truth that what a person says or writes and the way in which one acts may hold no substance of real sentiments or virtue.

I

Sentiment and Skepticism

In *Sense and Sensibility*

> Marianne was silent; it was impossible for her to say what she did not feel, however trivial the occasion; and upon Elinor therefore the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it, always fell. (89)
>
> — *Sense and Sensibility*

Jane Austen's style of realism marks a dramatic departure from the sentimental novels of the eighteenth-century, both in terms of form and substance. Whereas the eighteenth-century sentimental novel claims to express the interior lives of individuals with absolute authenticity, Austen's mature works employ free indirect-discourse as a skeptical reaction to such claims. The framing of subjectivity in the sentimental novel defines the individual in fundamental opposition to a hostile world. Individuals set themselves apart from oppressive social forces through cultivating interiority. During the eighteenth-century, this notion of interiority as the substance of subjectivity was conveyed through expressions of

sentiment.[1] The epistolary novel, in its sentimental conception, claimed to be capable of rendering the interior transparent through expressing sentimental feeling with absolute truthfulness. Thus, the epistolary novels written by Samuel Richardson and Jean-Jacques Rousseau offered the promise of unmediated, authentic self-representation through writing. By the turn of the century, however, Austen questioned the ability of any material form to express purely authentic sentiments, and furthermore, she questioned the pedagogical validity of any form that portrays knowledge as certain.

In Rousseau's claims regarding the authenticity of sentimental expression, he decries manners as an inauthentic social form that bears no likeness to real virtue (see Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* 60). Rousseau and advocates of the culture of sensibility asserted that manners are a purely social form, which serves only to disguise the genuine sentiments of interiority. However, Austen uses the epistolary form within her works in order to show that epistolary sentimental expression can also be used to disguise the truth of human nature. Furthermore, Austen proves that because the epistolary form claims to be authentic, it masks the inescapable role that self-fashioning plays in self-expression. In opposition to the epistolary rhetoric of authenticity, Austen uses the technique of free-indirect discourse in order to articulate the profound truth that forms of self-expression are mediated, and therefore, susceptible to the possibility of deceit. By showing that epistolary sentiments may not be authentic, Austen demonstrates that skepticism is a

[1] Sentiment is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as: "Refined and tender emotion; exercise or manifestation of 'sensibility'; emotional reflection or meditation; appeal to the tender emotions in literature or art" (Definition 8a).

necessary device for understanding the complexities of social life. Because the authentic value of interior, sentimental expression cannot be trusted, we must judge the character of others according to the similitude of their conduct to their words. Through the epistemology of skepticism, Austen restores the value of manners as reliable signifiers of virtue, and she teaches her readers that virtuous conduct is the principle means through which individuals can consistently, and therefore most truthfully, prove their genuine virtue.

The Novel Genre and the Knowledge of Human Nature

While Austen argued within the form of the novel for the aesthetic achievements of free-indirect discourse over the epistolary form, all forms of the novel were under attack during her time (see Kelly 7). The debate regarding the genre of the novel versus the genre of history allows for a larger representation of the same ideas that were at stake in Austen's departure from the rhetoric of authenticity and certainty within her genre. In William Godwin's essay "Of History and Romance" (1797), he argues that novels are more instructive about human nature than histories:

> The writer of romance collects his material from all sources, experience, report, and the records of human affairs; then generalizes them; and finally selects, from their elements and various combinations they afford, those instances which he is best qualified to pourtray,

> and which he judges most calculated to impress the
> heart and improve the faculties of the reader. (299)

Godwin claims that novelists have the advantage over historians because the novelist writes about human nature without needing to prove that his characters exist or can be described with absolute certainty, whereas the objective of history is to depict the world based upon certain knowledge. In order to prove his authority, the historian must ignore the inherent contradictions of historical knowledge, as well as the ever present reality of epistemological uncertainty regarding the truth-value in all forms of representation. Along with the inability to understand the past with total certainty, Godwin also argues that it is impossible to completely understand another person, writing, "We never know any man's character" (300). Godwin asserts that because authenticity is dubious and certainty is impossible, fiction should not be regarded as inferior to history.

In *Northanger Abbey* (1817), Austen allows her authorial voice to enter into first person in order to agree with Godwin's defense of the novel genre. Austen argues that "while the nine-hundredth abridger of the history of England" may be "eulogized by a thousand pens,—there seems to be an almost general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist" (25). Austen goes on to describe the novel as the "work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language" (25). According to Austen, novel writers call upon the wealth of all their experiences in order to create fictional accounts that

may provide their readers with a greater understanding of human nature. Austen insists that the human imagination contains so much power that it is capable of expressing human nature is a more realistic and lively form than even the allegedly authentic depictions of individuals in history. Likewise, within the form of the novel, Austen argues that those portrayals of human nature that do not claim to be authentic or certain may actually convey more valuable truth than the allegedly authentic descriptions of interiority in the epistolary form.

Rousseau's Rhetoric of Authenticity

Godwin asserts that the purpose of novels is to investigate human nature. Regarding how human nature should be investigated, Godwin writes that in order to study a man:

> I would follow him into the closet. I would see the friend and the father of a family, as well as the patriot. I would read his works and his letters, if any remain to us. I would observe the turn of his thoughts and the character of his phraseology…I should rejoice to have, or be enabled to make, if that were possible, a journal of his ordinary and minutest actions. (294)

Whether public or private, formal or intimate, written or spoken, Godwin describes an inductive process of collecting the impressions of one's observations in order to study all aspects human nature. Godwin's statement asserts that we cannot truly know a man solely through reading his writing; however, this was the very claim

that Rousseau attempted to prove in his sentimental novel *Julie, or the New Heloise* (1761) and his autobiography *The Confessions* (1782). Rousseau believed the epistolary form to be an unmediated form of expression, capable of fostering intimacy, and a form that expresses absolute truth. However, skeptics of Rousseau's conception of subjectivity recast Rousseau's authenticity as cynical, manipulative, and even false.

Rousseau's purpose for writing *Julie* was to represent the authentic subjectivity of two lovers through the form of intimate letters describing their interior sentiments. Rousseau believed that interior sentiments are corrupted by the repressive force of social structures and public forms. He depicts man's first sentiment as the isolation of his existence because he experiences his interiority as fundamentally alienated from society (see Gauthier). Although man initially perceives himself as separate from society, over time he begins to participate in social forms, and eventually he learns to identify solely with his public self. Gauthier describes the three stages comprising Rousseau's idea of man's relationship to society as "alienation", "participation", and "identification" (65). Thus, over time man feels his existence no longer as an individual but rather as part of a collective whole, and his sentiments move from internal subjectivity to an external role as a social character. According to Marshall Berman, Rousseau held that "all existing modes of personal identity—both traditional and modern—were actually modes of depersonalization" (88). Although Rousseau felt that all forms of identity in society corrupt man's authentic nature, he believed that intimate relationships create a place between the private and the public in which humans can preserve their

unadulterated sentiments of interiority while participating in an external relationship. Gauthier writes:

> Between the solitude and society Rousseau has placed the power of love… The lover avoids the sad state of absolute solitude, but equally avoids putting his self into things that are alien to him. (187)

Thus, Rousseau believed that intimacy works in resistance to society through preserving the purity of authentic sentiments.

In the preface to the second edition of *Julie*, Rousseau argues that the sentiments expressed in private love letters are authentic, unlike the empty forms of conduct that are intended to express sentiments in public life. He claims that the intention for his novel is to teach man "to love human nature, whilst in extensive society we learn to hate mankind" (7). Rousseau argues about the form of an authentic love letter:

> Though we are not struck with the strength of the sentiment, we are touched by its truth; and our hearts, in spite of us, sympathize with the writer. But men of no sensibility, who love nothing more than the flowery jargon of the passions, are ignorant of those beautiful, and despise them. (8)

Rousseau claims that his readers who possess authentic sensibility will believe what he writes because his words express genuine interior sentiments rather than conventional sentimental language. Rousseau believed that "flowery jargon" lacked

any underlying meaning and possessed power only through its widespread acceptance within social codes of sentimental language. He articulates a similar argument in opposition to manners, which he felt operated in society only in order to create the appearance of virtue at the expense of true feeling. Describing corrupt forms of literature and manners, Rousseau accuses his fictional editor of preferring books which represent "mankind only as they choose to appear, rather than as they truly are" (9). Rousseau describes his characters Julie and St. Preux as "young people, simple if you will, but sensible, who, mutually expressing the real sentiments of their hearts, have no intention to display their wit" in order to set them apart from sentimental writers who rely on cliché forms of sensibility (9). In his sentimental novel, Rousseau attacks public forms of virtuous conduct, also known as manners and politeness, in order to elevate the virtue within his form of sentimental expression.

In *Julie*, Rousseau demonstrates his belief in the power of intimacy to authentically join humans to one another apart from the corruption of public manners. In letter eighty, two, Saint-Preux writes to Julie from Paris about the supremacy of codes of politeness over individual sensibility in the city:

> I have never heard so much talk of sentiment, nor ever comprehended so little of what was meant by it; so inconceivable these French refinements! Our simple hearts, [Julie], were never governed by any of these fine maxims. (313)

In his letter, St. Preux argues that people use politeness in order to disguise a lack of individual authenticity. After a dinner party in which the guests only discuss people who are not present, he writes:

> You know, [Julie], how far otherwise it was with us, when we supped together…how we could find means, in spite of constraint and secrecy, to turn the discourse to subjects that related to ourselves. (311)

In their relationship, Saint-Preux insists that he and Julie are able to express their authentic selves apart from public forces that value socially sanctioned forms above authentic sentiments.

In Rousseau's autobiography *The Confessions*, he employs first-person narration again, this time in order to represent his own authentic interior. Rousseau uses a form similar to that of the intimate love letter, but he represents the interiority of a real man, himself, rather than fictional characters, and in doing so, he argues that it is possible to authentically express the interior sentiments of individuals in society through writing. In Rousseau's own novel *Julie* and Richardson's epistolary novel *Pamela*, the authors attribute the unmediated content of their works to the fact that they were written privately without the intention of public distribution. However, in *The Confession*, Rousseau asserts not only that he knows his interior with absolute certainty, but also that he can render this absolute truth completely transparent to the public.[2] Rousseau opens his work with the

[2] Watson writes about the narrative style of sentimentalism, describing Rousseau's subjectivity as "essentially self-authorizing rather than produced through subjection to any social structure" (24).

statement, "Here is the only portrait of a man, painted exactly according to nature and in all its truth, that exists and will probably ever exist" (3). On the final page of his autobiography, Rousseau asks his audience to judge him according to what he has said rather than his reputation, writing:

> I have told the truth. If anyone knows some things contrary to what I have just set forth, even if they are proved a thousand times, he knows lies and impostures. (550)

Berman describes the epistemological purpose of Rousseau's autobiography as " a process of unmasking, of differentiating, of bringing his authentic self into being" (86). Rousseau held that his insistence on authenticity would lead him to acquire absolute knowledge of his interiority through writing, and in order to live as an authentic being within society, he asks his audience to accept the 'unmasked self' that he describes as true.

Although Rousseau declared that he wrote *The Confessions* in order to reveal his unmasked and true self, critics of the time recast the identity that he expresses as merely another mask, fashioned through the technique of manipulative language rather than authentic sentiments. By the turn of the eighteenth-century, the epistolary form had come under attack for its susceptibility to stylization and insincerity, and Rousseau's depiction of sensibility was attacked along the same grounds. While Rousseau hoped to reveal himself as a pre-modern Cynic by criticizing aspects of commercial society for corrupting humans, David Mazella argues that Rousseau was also thought of as a modern cynic who used self-

fashioning and manipulation in order to paint a false portrait of his interior in society (119). Through portraying Rousseau as a modern cynic, Rousseau's critics were able to render his depiction of sentiments as nothing more than a skill of self-fashioning. Edmund Burke, perhaps Rousseau's most notable critic, describes Rousseau's character and writing as vain and deceitful, characteristics which Burke countered with the celebration of affection and social attachments. In *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (1791), Burke employs the epistolary form in order to disparage Rousseau's notion of sensibility, decrying it as nothing more than an "*ethics of vanity*" (315). Burke portrays Rousseau's authenticity as artificial and criticizes both *Julie* and Rousseau's supporters, writing, "by the false sympathies of this Nouvelle Heloise, they endeavor to subvert those principles of domestic trust and fidelity, which form the discipline of social life" (319). Burke claims that the sentiments of Rousseau's heroine are insincere, and furthermore, Rousseau's notion that society threatens the exquisite sensibility of individuals undermines the value of public structures, those very structures that Burke believed to secure the refinements of life. He paints Rousseau as a hypocrite by calling him "a lover of his kind, but a hater of his kindred" (316). Burke argues that Rousseau's lofty philosophical writing conceals his lack of social morality, for, although he espouses his love for mankind, he gave his own children up for adoption.[3] Burke determined that Rousseau's writing acted as a mask covering his true self, and consequently,

[3] Cranston writes of this biographical fact: "The decision to give his children up for adoption, he insists, was one of principle, even though he now sees that he was mistaken. His error, he claims rather lamely, was in thinking that he was performing the act of a father and a citizen of Plato's Republic" (182).

interior expression could serve the purpose of manipulative self-fashioning rather than authentic self-revelation.

The Epistolary Form and Empiricism

The letter was intended to create for a place between the private subjectivity of individuals and the public forms of society, but through creating a material form of sentimental expression, such expression was subjected to the possibility of counterfeit. Mary Favret argues that in nineteenth-century fiction, the letter "had been reduced to a stubborn, solid object, no longer thought capable of authentic expression (149). The perception of the epistolary form transformed from a transparent medium of intimacy to another mask that individuals wear in society in order to conceal their interior or lack thereof. Favret concludes that because claims to authenticity in the epistolary form were challenged, the gap between private and public grew, and "the individual corresponded with society, or with himself…the familiar letter had become a nearly impossible fiction to sustain" (203). Thus, the potential for revelation in the epistolary form pertains not to its ability to render authentic subjectivity transparent, but rather to its eventual function in leading authors to see the contradictions inherent in all forms of self-expression. The possibility of creating a "portrait of a man, painted exactly to nature and in all its truth" as articulated by Rousseau never existed (*Confession* 3). In order to challenge the truth of the epistolary form, Austen sets the letters in her works against the voice of the narrator, and in this style, she exposes the essential truth that the

authenticity of self-expression is always compromised by its form. Austen counters epistolary claims to absolute authenticity with the empirical notion of probability.

During the eighteenth-century in Europe, empirical science led to advances in the study of probability as the foundation of knowledge. The Cartesians and mechanical physicists believed that science could be achieved with absolute certainty, and similarly, French philosophers held that abstract reasoning could lead to absolute self-knowledge (see Osler). British philosophers, following Sir Isaac Newton, depicted the Cartesian philosophy of certainty as characteristic of a French belief that knowledge is based upon absolute truths. The British countered the apparent certainty of Cartesian knowledge with empiricism as well as a corresponding emphasis on probability rather than certainty. British philosophers John Locke and David Hume responded to advances in mechanical philosophy, but they "saw a world different from the physicists… Where the physicists sought a science known with certainty, the philosophers saw at best the possibility of probable knowledge" (Osler 10). In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke differentiates probability from certainty, describing probability as reasoning that "appears for the most part to be so" (428). Probability was formulated as a skeptical response to the lack of certainty people saw in the world around them. Locke writes:

> Probability, then, being to supply the defect of our knowledge, and to guide us whereof that fails, is always conversant about propositions, whereof we have no

> certainty, but only some inducement to receive them for true. (429)

Following in Locke's footsteps, Hume demonstrated that "a science based on appearance can never penetrate into the real essence of things and yield a necessary law of nature" (Osler 21). While empiricism led to significant discoveries in science, it also emphasized the inability of knowledge to ever penetrate the surface of what appears to be true. At the turn of the eighteenth-century, Austen instilled this form of empirical reasoning into her distinctively skeptical portrayals of human nature.

The Narrative Style of Skepticism in *Lady Susan*

In 1795, Austen began writing the story that we now know as *Sense and Sensibility* as an epistolary novel with the title "Elinor and Marianne". Over the next four years, however, she abandoned the epistolary style in favor of a third person narrator. Around the time that Austen began "Elinor and Marianne", she was working on another epistolary work, the novella *Lady Susan*. The ending of *Lady Susan* mirrors Austen's eventual alteration of the form in *Sense and Sensibility*. The novella begins with Lady Susan's written request to visit her brother, Mr. Vernon. Lady Susan also writes to her friend Alicia Johnson about the recent death of her husband, her unabashed flirtation with a married man named Mr. Manwaring, and her scheme to force the marriage between her daughter Frederica and Sir James Martin. During Lady Susan's stay at the Vernons' house, she pursues her sister-in-law's brother Reginald, and their relationship initiates a series of letters between Mrs. Vernon and her mother Lady de Courcy. When Lady Susan's flirtation with Mr.

Manwaring becomes public knowledge, Reginald ends his relationship with Lady Susan, and Mr. Johnson forbids his wife to continue a correspondence with her. This novella differs from Austen's later novels due to the epistolary form, the blatant selfishness of the "heroine" figure, and the fact that the reader learns of Lady Susan's dubious character directly through the letters written to Mrs. Johnson by Lady Susan herself. Although readers are warned by the deceitful nature of her letters to be suspicious of Lady Susan's character, they are not required to interpret the underlying motives of Lady Susan's actions because the confessional letters she writes give them away. The eponymous figure in *Lady Susan* functions as an epistolary anti-heroine in oppositional to Rousseau's *Julie*, in which the purpose of writing letters is to represent one's sentimental subjectivity apart from the corrupting force of the world.[4] Conversely, in Austen's novella, Lady Susan's letters serve as a comprehensive material representation of her selfishness, manipulation, and indeed, the corrupting force of the world.

The epistolary form allows Lady Susan to simultaneously conceal her machinations from the Vernons while revealing her secret plots to Mrs. Johnson and the reader. Moreover, the form in *Lady Susan* serves as an aesthetic portrayal of the ways in which epistolarity came to be dichotomized by the same questions of authenticity that it was intended to venerate. Elizabeth Cook writes that Enlightenment readers understood the epistolary narrative as both "the most direct, sincere, and transparent form of written communication"—as Richardson intended,

[4] Knuth comments on the notable lack of sentiment virtue depicted in this novel: "The forty-one letters and narrated conclusions may thus contain more unabashed expressions of heartless sentiment than all the rest of Austen's novels and correspondences put together" (216).

but at the same time as "the most playful and potentially deceptive form, as a stage for rhetorical trickery"—which Burke argues regarding Rousseau's *Julie* (16). Lady Susan uses "rhetorical trickery" in order to manipulate Mrs. Vernon, Frederica, and Reginald for her own pleasure. Barbara Horowitz attests to this form of trickery in her statement that Lady Susan "paints a false picture of herself using the language of the conduct books" (184). Lady Susan challenges Mrs. Vernon's disapproval of her character with social grace and polite behavior. Hence, Mrs. Vernon writes to her mother:

> She is clever and agreeable, and has all that knowledge of the world which makes conversation easy, and talks very well, with a happy Command of Language, which is too often used I believe to make Black appear White. (251)

Susan uses her "Command of Language" to captivate Reginald through making her scandalous reputation appear attractive. She writes to Mrs. Johnson about Reginald, "I have made him sensible of my power, and can now enjoy the pleasure of triumphing over a Mind prepared to dislike me, and prejudice against all my past actions" (257). If Reginald could only read Lady Susan's letter to Mrs. Johnson, he would realize that their relationship is nothing more than a game to her, and furthermore, Lady Susan considers all language to be a device for self-fashioning which bears no relation to genuine sentiments.[5]

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[5] McKellar argues that Lady Susan's character reverses the traditional power which men held over women during Austen's time. He writes that Lady Susan "speaks

Frederica becomes a victim in Austen's novella precisely because she conforms to Rousseau's mold of the epistolary heroine—she believes in the authentic power of the written form. Mary Poovey writes about the contradiction between Lady Susan's employment and exploitation of propriety. Lady Susan criticizes women like her daughter who "express strong feeling without inhibition or art" (176), while she conceals her motivations and exploits sentimental language for socially improper purposes, such as flirting with a married man and victimizing her own daughter. Lady Susan holds the advantage of her worldly experience over her sentimental daughter in order to control she way she is perceived as a mother and trivialize Frederica's emotions.[6] Frederica goes behind her mother's back by writing a heartfelt letter to Reginald in which she begs for his assistance in preventing her impending marriage to Sir James Martin. In a letter to Mrs. Johnson, Lady Susan coldly remarks, "She shall find that she has poured fourth her Tale of Love in vain, and exposed herself forever to the contempt of the whole world" (283). Frederica writes her interior sentiments to Reginald in an intimate letter, and when he shows the letter to Lady Susan, Frederica become vulnerable to the unfeeling censure of her mother. Thus, as an anti-sentimental heroine, Lady Susan successfully suppresses the sentimental expression of her daughter.

Lady Susan maintains narrative authority throughout the novella as she manipulates Mrs. Vernon, Reginald, and Frederica while boasting about her machinations to Mrs. Johnson. However, at the end of the novel, the introduction of

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often of wanting 'domination' over Reginald's will, but not over his inheritance—or his body" (203).

a third-person narrator effectively trivializes and silences Lady Susan's authorial hand. In conjunction with replacing the epistolary form with third person narration, Austen replaces the reader's absolute knowledge of Lady Susan's character with a skeptical statement which references probability.[7] Whereas Lady Susan writes in her final letter to Mrs. Johnson about her recent marriage, "[I] can safely assure you that I never was more at ease, or better satisfied with myself and everything about me, than at the present hour" (307), Austen contrarily concludes:

> Whether or not Lady Susan was, or was not happy in her second Choice—I do not see how it can ever be ascertained—for who would take her assurance of it, on either side of the question? The World must judge from Probability. (313)

Austen introduces the voice of an omniscient narrator in order to cast doubt on Lady Susan's certainty, an intimation which she would be unable to make within the constrictions of the epistolary form. Lady Susan writes in order to manipulate others, not in order to express her authentic self, and thus, she values writing only so far as it can provide social power and give voice to her vanity. Consequently, because Lady Susan is an untrustworthy writer, Austen asks her readers to make the final judgment as to Lady Susan's character.

Austen's own letters attest to her belief that the epistolary form is incapable of representing unmediated subjectivity. Critics who have turned to Austen's letters

[7] Favret argues regarding the introduction of an omniscient narrator at the end of *Lady Susan*: "Generally, this passage is taken to mark the budding novelist's rejection of the epistolary form and her movement toward third-person, impersonal narrative" (139).

are often disappointed by the lack of emotional material in her writing. Austen's niece Caroline remarks about Austen's letters, "she seldom committed herself even to an opinion—so that strangers would have no transcript of her mind" (Selected Letters ix). It is fitting that while Rousseau utilizes first-person writing as a stage for his public confessions, Austen displays no desire to render her interior transparent, even in the letters she wrote to her family and friends.[8] In a letter to Cassandra, Austen writes:

> I have now attained the true art of letter-writing, which we are always told, is to express on paper exactly what one would say to the same person by word of mouth (Selected Letters 46).

In this ironic statement, Austen expresses her belief that letters, like all aspects of social intercourse, are undeniably restricted by social forms. Just as it is impossible for one to convey in a letter exactly what could be said in conversation, it is also impossible for one to express interior sentiments authentically in a material form. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen counters claims to authenticity with skepticism in order to create a new form of pedagogical narrative on the topic of human nature in which the basis of knowledge is probability rather than certainty.

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[8] Wheeler writes about the historical relevance of the public nature of letters in Austen's *Emma*: "The post office is a public place for gathering and exchanging gossip. Letter, as we have seen, are anything but private, as they are read aloud or passed throughout the novel" (36).

Epistolary Machination and Emotional Manipulation

In *Sense and Sensibility,* the letters act as an invitation either to manipulate or to be manipulated because their form fosters the development of deceitful relationships. Marianne's role as an epistolary heroine is jeopardized by the treacherous possibility in the form first demarcated by Lady Susan and continued by Willoughby and Lucy Steele. Much like Rousseau, Marianne desires to write letters capable of unmediated, interior expression apart from socially constricting forms that dictate how people should behave. However, Austen divorces the epistolary form from any assurance of authentic sentiment through demonstrating that "as itself a mode of display, sensibility lends itself to deception" (Spacks 11). Consequently, she transforms Marianne from an epistolary heroine into an epistolary victim. Willoughby imitates Marianne's sentiments with such talent that he convinces Marianne of the certainty of their relationship; however, his final letter to Marianne reveals him to be a version of the modern cynic because the letter holds no substance beneath its form. Lucy Steele, like Lady Susan before her, acts as the anti-epistolary heroine since her letters are a parody of sentimental forms and entirely bankrupted of true emotion.[9] Willoughby corrupts the form of intimacy through forging sentimental substance and Lucy Steele corrupts the form of privacy through using the letter as a tool for public manipulation.

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[9] Davidson also compares Lucy Steele to Shamela, the main character in Henry Fielding's parody of Richardson's *Pamela*, writing: "The novel sets up the character of Lucy Steele as a foil to Elinor Dashwood, insisting on Lucy's exaggerated or parodic likeness to the eighteenth-century novel's ostentatiously virtuous heroines" (151).

Throughout their courtship, Willoughby fashions the appearance of sentimental substance in order to win over Marianne's affection. In doing so, Willoughby calls into question both the authenticity of Marianne's sensibility as well as the genuine virtue of unrestrained sentimental expression. In Marianne and Willoughby's discussions of music, dance, and literature, Austen writes that their tastes appear to be the same because Willoughby "acquiesced in all her decisions" (36). Marianne believes that their intimacy is authentic because their sentiments appear to unite their interiors. However, Austen skeptically asserts the likelihood that Willoughby is merely copying her sentiments in order to fit the role of a man she would love. Willoughby later admits to Elinor that he "endeavored, by every means of my power, to make myself pleasing to her" (227). Rather than being coupled by their sentiments, they are brought together because Willoughby does not seem to possess an interior of his own. Willoughby tells Elinor about his uncertainty regarding his feelings for Marianne, asking, "had I really loved, could I have sacrificed my feelings to vanity, to avarice?" (227). In the relationship of Marianne and Willoughby, Austen demonstrates the essentially suspicious nature of claims to authentic intimacy in a world in which people do not possess or know their own interiors, and accordingly, are compelled to imitate the sentiments of others.

Marianne is vulnerable to Willoughby's selfish machinations because she believes in the power of the letter ascribed by Rousseau to create authentic intimacy between individuals, but she eventually learns the fallacy of her beliefs when Willoughby's sentiments are exposed to be an empty façade masking vanity and

ambition. Onlookers assume that Marianne and Willoughby are engaged because of Marianne's letters to him. Colonel Brandon says to Elinor "your sister's engagement to Mr. Willoughby is very generally known", citing as evidence that "they openly correspond, and their marriage is universally talked of" (123).[10] Even Marianne is tricked into believing in the binding power of sentimental expression. When Elinor asks her sister if she was ever sure of Willoughby's love for her, Marianne replies, "it was every day implied, but never professedly declared" (132). Willoughby benefits from the private nature of the epistolary form because he is freed from the responsibility of social ethics; thus, he is never forced to publicly commit to Marianne. Marianne mistakenly believes that Willoughby's encouragement of privacy in their relationship indicates a sentimental desire for intimacy apart from stifling social forms, but actually, Willoughby only hopes to escape the ethical codes of conduct enforced by public judgment. Even when Marianne experiences Willoughby's cruelty face-to-face, she refuses to change her opinion of his character unless she receives evidence in the written form. Upon arriving in London, Marianne immediately writes to Willoughby and anticipates his arrival, and he neither responds nor visits her. Although his actions speak volumes about his lack of genuine commitment to Marianne, she refuses to question Willoughby's love for her because she does not receive a letter telling her to do so. When she finally sees

[10] Watson compares the letters in *Sense and Sensibility* to artifacts because their meaning is not understood until Austen provides her readers with the actual text of the letters between Marianne and Willoughby, which demonstrate that "so far from setting the seal upon an engagement, this correspondence is entirely one-sided" (89).

Willoughby, he treats her with the indifference of a stranger, and Marianne writes to him the following morning:

> It would grieve me indeed to be obliged to think ill of you; but if I am to do it, if I am to learn that you are not what we have hitherto believed you, that your regard for us all was insincere, that your behavior to me was intended only to deceive, let it be told as soon as possible. (133)

Marianne's vulnerability as an epistolary heroine is the result of her refusal to acknowledge the value of public structures and social forms as protection against the contrivances of unscrupulous individuals.

In their final letters, Marianne's unrestrained sentiments are set against Willoughby's conniving selfishness. Marianne pours out her heart on a page, whereas Willoughby allows his callous wife to dictate his heartless response. To Marianne, the value in a letter relates only to the sentimental substance apart from the material form, but Willoughby conversely believes that the appearance of a letter—the alleged author and form of handwriting—is all that is necessary to authorize epistolary content. In Marianne's final letter, her unrestrained crying, expressing the very emotions on her face that she articulates in her words, leave smudges on the paper. Her flowing tears, described as "frequent bursts of grief", compromise the formal quality of the paper (127). In a complete reversal, Willoughby's reply produces only the formal aspects of the letter; his wife dictates the content, and his role as author is limited to the form of his handwriting. He later

confesses to Elinor, "I had only the credit of servilely copying such sentences as I was ashamed to put my name to" (233). Willoughby's final letter exemplifies Favret's claim that "a letter's content is nothing, its appearance is all" (146). Whereas for Marianne, "It was impossible for her to say what she did not feel", for Willoughby, his vanity prevents him from internalizing any of the sentiments he claims to feel (89). Willoughby's character, which initially appears as virtuous as Rousseau in the form of the pre-modern Cynic, comes to be recast as a version of the modern cynic, a person for whom words bear no more value than their efficacy as tools of manipulation and expressions of vanity.

Whereas Willoughby adheres to Mazella's notion of the modern cynic, Lucy Steele acts in the novel as a version of Lady Susan, the epistolary anti-heroine. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen creates a character just as conniving and heartless as Lady Susan, but she does not give the reader an epistolary confidant such as Mrs. Johnson, so the task of interpreting Lucy Steele's character falls to the reader. Rather than relying upon confessional letters from Lucy, readers must rely on probability and the narrative access into Elinor's mind, which is narrated through free-indirect discourse. Lucy uses the epistolary form to prove the validity of her secret engagement. After Lucy confides in Elinor about her engagement to Edward, Austen describes Elinor's acute pain upon recognizing that "a correspondence between them by letter, could subsist only under a positive engagement" (98). Thus, while Elinor's interpretation is correct, both Elinor and Austen's readers are prevented from seeing the worthlessness of Edward and Lucy's relationship. In an epistolary novel, the reader would also have access to the letters in which Lucy

admits that she hopes to ruin Elinor and Edward's relationship. In this novel, both Elinor and Austen's readers must interpret Lucy's dishonest motivations beneath her charming self-presentation. Austen describes Elinor's suspicion "that Lucy was disposed to be jealous of her, appeared very probable"(110). Elinor uses her observations of Lucy's behavior in order to predict the truth about her engagement. Through Elinor's judgment, the reader is asked to think of Lucy as a Lady Susan-esque character for whom intimacy is only valuable for selfish or greedy purposes.

Lucy's character further coincides with the manipulative nature of *Lady Susan's* eponymous anti-heroine because her use of letters compromises the seemingly private space of the epistolary form; like Lady Susan, Lucy Steele writes for social and monetary gain. Through Austen's witty use of free-indirect discourse, she shows how Elinor interprets the manipulative quality of Lucy's writing. When Edward loses his inheritance as a result of his secret engagement to Lucy, Lucy sends a letter to Elinor with the stated intention of requesting her help as a friend and confidant, writing:

> …our prospects are not very bright, to be sure, but we must wait, and hope for the best; he will be ordained shortly, and should it ever be in your power to recommend him to any body that has a living to bestow, am very sure you will not forget us, and dear Mrs. Jennings too, trust she will speak a good word for us to Sir John, or Mr. Palmer, or any friend that may be able to assist us. (196)

After Elinor reads the letter, Austen uses free-indirect discourse in order to reveal the most probable selfish motivation beneath Lucy's seemingly friendly words. In her letter, Lucy writes the opposite of what she means. Although she claims to Elinor that she is "very sure you will not forget us", she actually writes this in order to ask Elinor not to forget her and Edward's plight, and furthermore, to assist them in finding a benefactor. Austen writes:

> As soon as Elinor had finished it she performed what she concluded to be its writer's real design, by placing it in the hands of Mrs. Jennings, who read it aloud with many comments of satisfaction and praise. (196)

After narrating Elinor's acute realization of Lucy's attempt at manipulation, Austen also shows how easily other people are tricked into believing the words of conniving writers. Mrs. Jennings is so easily duped into believing in the authenticity of Lucy's sentiments that she says to Elinor, "How attentive she is, to think of every body!" (197). By including both Lucy's letter as well as Elinor's interpretation of the letter, Austen shows that while Lucy does indeed "think of every body", her thoughts are purely selfish.

Although Lucy Steele makes a mockery of the supposed authenticity of the epistolary form, her final letter in the novel is the only letter that secures a formal engagement based upon sincere intimacy because she releases Edward from his engagement to her, and thus, he is able to marry Elinor. Austen describes Lucy as nearly illiterate, and accordingly, her letters utilize the imitative language that Rousseau refers to as "flowery jargon"(*Julie* 8), but in scarcely articulate form. Lucy

epitomizes epistolary insincerity when she uses the form to announce her second engagement to Edward's brother. Austen emphasizes the emptiness of Lucy's sentimental substance in her statement, "your brother has gained my affections, and as we cannot live without one another, we are just returning from the alter" (258). Both Edward and Elinor recognize the worthlessness of Lucy's romantic jargon, but Edward comments that this letter is "the only letter I have received from her, of which the substance made any amends for the defects of style" (258). Although Lucy's writing is a caricature of real sentiment, "only her texts have any power to affection the action" because her final letter releases Edward from an empty engagement and allows him to enter into a formal engagement with the woman he truly loves (Watson 365). By making Lucy the author of the only letter in the novel that allows for romance—and only indirectly—Austen shows just how removed the form of the letter is from the substance of genuine intimacy.

Marianne Dashwood is so easily manipulated by Willoughby because she does not understand the value of skepticism; her role as the epistolary heroine is mirrored by her belief in certainty and absolutes. While Willoughby's vanity leads him to manipulate intimacy, this very same vice that was decried by Burke renders Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne defenseless against his conniving machinations since they do not doubt the authenticity of his sentimental expression. Mrs. Dashwood's parental affection prevents her from criticizing Marianne's sentimental excess as well as acknowledging the possibility that her daughters' suitors could have dishonorable intentions. During Marianne's relationship with Willoughby, Mrs. Dashwood considers their impending marriage as certain, whereas Elinor

constantly questions and evaluates the meaning of Willoughby's actions apart from his words. When Willoughby leaves unexpectedly, Mrs. Dashwood and Elinor discuss the state of his engagement to Marianne, and Elinor remarks, "I have never considered this matter as certain" (60). Mrs. Dashwood replies, "But *I* require no proof. Nothing in my opinion has ever passed to justify doubt" (60). Whereas Elinor argues that doubt is an implicit aspect of understanding, Mrs. Dashwood insists that the truth of what one says should only be questioned provided there is concrete reason for doubt.

Elinor Dashwood and the Virtue of Consistent Conduct

Mrs. Dashwood's faith in the honest intentions of others manifests itself in Marianne through an absolute belief in the importance of always displaying one's sensibility. Marianne adheres to Rousseau's notion that manners are nothing more than an empty façade that people use to disguise their true feelings.[11] She argues that it is more important to be authentic than to be polite. G. J. Barker-Benfield asserts that in Marianne's character "Austen catalogs the extreme language and aesthetic conventions of exaggerated sensibility" (335). Barker Benfield's point is exemplified in a scene in which Mrs. Ferrars and Mrs. Morton vindictively discuss a screen painting by Elinor. The women use polite language in a weak attempt to conceal their contempt for Elinor. Mrs. Ferrars comments that the paintings are

[11] Mazella writes of Rousseau, "Politeness, and the philosophy that had accommodated itself to it, had become equated with a now-universal tendency toward dissimulation, duplicity, accommodation, and the manipulation of others" (115).

"very pretty", but she deliberately says so "without regarding them at all" (167). Marianne counters the cruel propriety of the two women through refusing to control her emotional response on Elinor's behalf. Elinor is able to endure their abuses, but Marianne refuses to be polite, and she furiously informs the women, "This is admiration of a very particular kind!" (167). After criticizing them, Marianne "is urged by such a strong impulse of affectionate sensibility" that she runs to Elinor and cries (167). Marianne believes that manners oppress the sentiments of sentimental individuals while giving insensitive people the ability to disguise their viciousness.

While Marianne expresses her sentimental affection through demonstrations of impulsive emotion, conversely, Elinor expresses her affection for others through the consistent use of good manners. Marianne accuses Elinor of sacrificing her interiority in the social world with the statement:

> I thought our judgments were given us merely to be subservient to those of our neighbors. This has always been your doctrine, I am sure. (69)

However, Elinor counters Marianne's claim:

> My doctrine has never aimed at the subjection of the understanding. All I have ever attempted to influence has been the behavior. (69)

Elinor argues that one's sentimental interior is not oppressed by good manners; rather manners allow people to most truthfully conduct themselves according to their interior virtues. It is through good manners that people consistently display

the sincerity of their sentiments. Conversely, people can use writing to claim the authenticity of their sensibility without having to justify these sentiments through moral action. Elinor is forced to protect Marianne and make up for her impoliteness because Marianne does not understand that manners can also be true virtue.

In opposition to the absolute faith in others held by Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne, Elinor's skepticism concerning the authenticity of self-expression employs a fundamental principle of empirical science: knowledge is based on probability rather than certainty. Elinor is suspicious of Willoughby because he is inconsistent, and he overcompensates for the inconsistency of his conduct with his artful language. Elinor refuses to completely trust Willoughby's words, and she tries to protect Marianne from her own lack of prudence by meticulously scrutinizing every aspect of Willoughby's character, much like a scientist painstakingly gathering data. During the sisters' journey to London, Austen writes about Elinor's investigation:

> Elinor was resolved not only upon gaining every new light as to his character which her own observation or the intelligence of others could give her, but likewise upon watching his behavior to her sister with such zealous attention, as to ascertain what he was and what he meant… Should the results of her observations be unfavourable, she was determined at all events to open the eyes of her sister. (113)

When Willoughby leaves the Dashwoods without providing a sufficient explanation for his hasty departure, Elinor critically remarks to Mrs. Dashwood, "a plain and open avowal of his difficulties would have been more to his honour I think, as well as more consistent with his character" (61). Another source of Elinor's wariness over Willoughby is that during his pursuit of Marianne he often acts impolitely towards others. Elinor observes his habit of "sacrificing general politeness to the enjoyment of undivided attention where his heart was engaged, and in slighting too easily the forms of worldly propriety" (38). While Willoughby's determined attention upon imitating Marianne's displays of sensibility appears to verify his intense affection for her, Elinor interprets Willoughby's lack of general courtesy as an indicator of selfishness and vanity.

The inconsistency displayed by Willoughby is a common theme among the men in this novel, and consequently, much of Elinor's empirical power is devoted to determining the truth beneath their inconsistent behavior. Elinor remains uncertain of Edward's affection due to the capriciousness of behavior towards her; although, Edward's inconsistency is eventually classified as an entirely different species than Willoughby's inconsistency — it is attributed to guilt rather than malice. Edward is already engaged to Lucy when he meets the Dashwoods, and even though he develops genuine feelings of love for Elinor, he tries to hide his emotions in order to honor his formal commitment. After learning of his engagement, Elinor questions her faith in Edward's affection for her:

> … the continuance of his preference seemed very uncertain; and the reservedness of his manner towards

> her contradicted one moment what a more animated
> look had intimated the preceding one. (70)

However, Elinor unites this observation with her observation of Lucy's jealousy in order to determine that Edward's engagement to Lucy is not "an engagement of the heart…what once might have been, she could not believe it was such at present. His affection was all her own" (99). Elinor's observations of inconsistency lead her to doubt the legitimacy of Willoughby's and Marianne's engagement, as well as the genuine sentimental affection in Edward's and Lucy's engagement.

By means of the characters of Willoughby and Lucy, Austen warns her readers of the inescapable reality that selfishness and vanity lead individuals to use the pretense of intimacy as a tool for manipulation. Both characters escape the novel largely unscathed, which serves as a realistic portrayal of the fact that those who operate by imitating sentiments without embodying real affection are equally impervious to feeling grief or remorse. Austen writes of Willoughby, "He lived to exert, and to frequently enjoy himself" (268). Willoughby avoids public judgment for his actions and enters into a marriage of great monetary gain, and unsurprisingly, he is more than able to find pleasure in living through the appearance of good character as well as in his dispassionate marriage. Similarly, Austen invokes Lady Susan in her final description of Lucy Steele. In *Lady Susan*, Austen writes of Lady Susan, "She had nothing against her, but her Husband, & her conscience" (313). In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen writes that Lucy succeeds "in securing every advantage of fortune, with no other sacrifice than that of time and

conscience" (266). Willoughby and Lucy serve as reminders that all forms of sentimental expression have the potential to be inauthentic and manipulative.

Elinor teaches Marianne to be more controlled in her own sentimental expression, but paradoxically, she teaches Edward to be more expressive of his interior sentiments. After Elinor tells Marianne about Willoughby's confession and his selfish motives, Marianne replies, "I have nothing to regret—nothing but my own folly" (249). Marianne's eyes are finally opened to Willoughby's selfishness as well as her lack of sufficient skepticism during their relationship. Mrs. Dashwood also apologizes, blaming Marianne's pain on her "mother's imprudence" (249). The lesson that Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood learn is to be more skeptical of others as well as the reliability of her own sentiments. However, the lesson that Edward must learn is to be more aware about his genuine sentiments and less concerned with honoring commitments that are not of the heart. Edward apologizes to Elinor for his inconsistency, admitting to "an ignorance of his own heart, and a mistaken confidence in the force of his engagement" (260). Austen implies that true intimacy has a different power than uniting the authentic sentiments of individuals. Intimacy in Austen's novels actually leads individuals to become more self-aware and virtuous on their own. Due to their relationships with Elinor, Marianne and Edward come to improve there own character through learning to value skepticism and doubt, and as their interior awareness grows, so to does their ability to properly act upon genuine sentiments.

Marianne's character development in this novel corresponds to the language of probability: she avoids a probable and tragic fate at the hands of her seducer.

Colonel Brandon is originally drawn to Marianne because her sensibility reminds him of a woman he once loved, Eliza, and her daughter, also named Eliza. Both Elizas expressed their sensibility freely, much like Marianne, and as a result, they were exploited by cold, manipulative men. Colonel Brandon says to Elinor:

> Your sister, I hope cannot be offended…by the resemblance I have fancied between her and my poor disgraced relation. Their fates, their fortunes cannot be the same; and had the natural sweet disposition of the one been guarded by a firmer mind, or a happier marriage, she might have been all that you will live to see the other be. (147)

The younger Eliza is seduced and abandoned by Willoughby, and Marianne turns out to be his next target. However, Marianne is saved from experiencing Eliza's fate because Elinor possesses the "firmer mind" that protects Marianne. When Colonel Brandon sees the pain Marianne has endured from Willoughby, Elinor watches his sympathetic reaction and attributes it to "the probable recurrence of many past scenes of misery to his mind, brought back by that resemblance between Marianne and Eliza" (241). Marianne becomes "a right thinking substitute for the two Elizas" because she learns "to discover the falsehood in her own opinions" (Watson 89; Austen 268). Marianne's lesson in this novel — "to counteract, by her conduct, her most favourite maxims" — reflects her eventual appreciation of the value of manners for interpreting and displaying genuine virtue (268).

By challenging the epistolary form, Austen also challenges Rousseau's notion that written sentimental expression should be understood as authentic and absolutely true, and furthermore, she recasts all knowledge in this world of social forms as uncertain. By means of the form of free-indirect discourse and the epistemology of skepticism, Austen ascribes to manners an essential purpose in the investigation of human nature. She teaches her readers that people's conduct is often a much more valuable tool for understanding their character than the alleged authenticity of written sentimental expression; and hence, in *Sense and Sensibility*, the virtue of consistent moral conduct prevails over the rhetoric of sensibility.

II

Manners at Play

In *Mansfield Park*

> It is in my character to break oaths of love; as it is in your nature, my lord, never to have spoken anything but wisdom and truth. (227)
>
> — *Lovers' Vows*

> He was, perhaps, but at treacherous play with her. (107)
>
> — *Mansfield Park*

In my previous chapter, I argued against the authentic claims of the culture of sensibility and in favor of the reinstatement of manners as signifiers of genuine virtue. However, it would be understating the complexity of Jane Austen's realism to argue that she was content to simply elevate manners and denigrate sentimental expression. Indeed, Austen's depictions of human nature are remarkably realistic because she does not try to smooth over the contradictions of living in a social world. Describing these contradictions, Lionel Trilling writes, "Jane Austen was

involved in the question of principle as against personality, of character as against style" (133).[12] Whereas Trilling argues that in Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), genuine virtue and modern life are irreconcilable, I believe that in Austen's novel, although the fashionable manners of the Crawfords are empty of moral meaning, and the traditional manners of Sir Thomas are empty of sentimental feeling, Austen still manages to bring the inherited values of Mansfield Park into harmony with the modern world through the character of Fanny Price. In my last chapter, I showed the possibility of Jean-Jacque Rousseau's rhetoric of authenticity and the epistolary form to be false and manipulative, but in this chapter, I will show how sentimental expression acquires value through the form of virtuous conduct.

Characterizing this novel as a "novel of manners", Dorothy Hale writes, "Austen brings to life a social world that, because it is varied and yet unified, stratified and yet symbiotic, can be taken for a whole, can be felt to represent 'English' life" (657). In *Mansfield Park*, Austen represents the variations of and stratifications to 'English' life at the turn of the century brought about by commercial culture, as well as the threat that commerce posed to the fixed values of the aristocracy and the clergy. Austen studies the conflict between commercial, Humean manners and traditional, Burkean manners in order to depict the ways in which both notions of manners rely upon the performance of virtue rather than the interior cultivation of principle. The concern of the previous chapter was that

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[12] In his essay "Mansfield Park", Trilling argues that in this novel, Austen decided that the performative aspects of social interaction are entirely counterproductive to morality: "[*Mansfield Park*] takes full notice of spiritedness, vivacity, celerity, and lightness, but only to reject them as having nothing to do with virtue and happiness, as being, indeed, deterrents to the good life" (127).

sensibility can be false, but in this chapter, my concern shifts to the possibility of counterfeit manners: charming social performances that conceal a lack of genuine virtue. In the character of Fanny Price, Austen unites the substance of a sentimental interior with the form of virtuous manners, and thus, she depicts personality as a product of principle and manners as the expression of sentimental virtue. In this novel, Austen revisits her criticism of sentimental expression in *Sense and Sensibility* and argues that the necessary function of performance in society can be re-imagined in order to express the sentimental interior on the social stage.

In *Mansfield Park*, the characters engage in a private performance of the play *Lovers' Vows* by Elizabeth Inchbald, and the external facade of "wisdom and truth" at Mansfield Park is destabilized by the Crawford's "treacherous play" of exhibition (Inchbald 227, Austen 107). Sir Thomas Bertram has raised his children and Fanny to behave according to the traditional codes of conduct at Mansfield Park. Although his children appear to respect their father's patriarchal authority, during his absence, they welcome the opportunity to invite fashionable guests to the estate. The newcomers, Mr. Yates and the Crawfords, bring the "infection" of theatricality to Mansfield Park. Accordingly, alluring aspects of commercial life, including performance and flirtation, challenge the rigid decorum of Mansfield Park, which has remained unquestioned under Sir Thomas's authority. The lack of genuine principles in the Bertram children is revealed by their inability to resist the attractions of fashionable society. Because the future inheritors of Mansfield Park fail to defend its inherited values, Austen shows that the manners of the aristocracy have deteriorated into an oppressive performance of decorum.

Manners at Mansfield Park have become a parody of antiquated virtues, and Sir Thomas's children defy his authority by performing in of a scandalous play during his absence. The novel's characters explore performance by acting on a private stage, and the metatheatrical event allows Austen to analyze manners as performance. The definition of manners as "conduct in its moral aspect; morality" became obsolete around the turn of the nineteenth century, and manners instead came to reflect, "the customary rules of behavior in a particular society; outward bearing, deportment" (Oxford English Dictionary). Austen dichotomizes manners into both moral conduct—calling upon Edmund Burke—and as mere deportment—in reference to David Hume. Sir Thomas disapproves of the Crawfords manners because they are not tied to tradition or the fixed values of an estate. However, Austen shows that Sir Thomas's notion of manners is weak against the attractive force of the Crawford's charming sociability. Furthermore, the traditional notion of manners as moral conduct has deteriorated as a result of its resistance of modern culture into an oppressive performance of the way in which virtue should appear.

The Signified Values of Character and Currency

Fanny's subjectivity in *Mansfield Park* is narrated as the conflict between her transparent interiority and the opacity of performative manners, characterized in Sir Thomas as solemn decorum and in the Crawfords as lively sociability. By narrating Fanny's unique subjectivity in conjunction with the theatrical roles that the other characters play in *Lovers' Vows*, Austen depicts two conflicting portrayals of character, expressed as interiority and exhibition. Lisa Freeman argues that the

theater "represent[ed] identity as an effect of character", while the novel replaced the "reigning sense of identity as theatrically constituted" with "transparent, material subjects" (12, 16). The identity of a theatrical character is fashioned as exhibition without the support of an underlying substance.[13] The actor on a stage performs without embodying the identity of a character; thus, identity depends solely upon surface forms. The "subject" in the novel developed in opposition to the surface level of identity in theatrical characters.[14] The term subject implies the authority of an external structure looking at an individual as an object, the representation of the object within a social system, and the ability of the object to be judged by external signifiers, such as manners. Freeman states, "the 'subject' was created as a result of the complex play—between surface and depth, public and private, and self and other" (16). The idea that people possess an interior substance apart from the form of their appearance in society implies that a person's personality may not express their genuine principles.

Thus far I have described character in relation to literature. However, the term "character" was first used in reference to the mark on currency. In regards to both literature and currency, 'character' implies value: the value of a person's identity or the value of a coin. During the eighteenth-century in England, the value of currency was complicated by the debasement of the metal in coins and the

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[13] Wahrman argues that the theatrical character in the *ancient regime* was concerned only with surfaces: "the function of character in eighteenth-century literature and arts…was primarily not about depth but about legibility and replicability'" (182).

[14] Freeman describes the fashioning of interiority: "Novels, in short, appear to render the inner depths, the conscious and even unconscious motives and thoughts of character, transparent to the reader, even as, under the cloak of 'realism' they conceal the very mechanics of character conveyance" (7).

creation of paper currency.[15] Currency made from precious metals such as gold is comprised of materials that are actually worth its stated value. In this model, the value of currency expresses a "one-to-one correspondence between what we would now commonly refer to as the signifier and signified" (Freeman 20). However, currency made out of cheap metal and paper does not possess the actual worth of its stated value, rather it holds an abstract value. Currency is produced in a society, and a social authority assigns its value; thus, the signified value bears no relation to the material substance of the currency. Because the material substance of money was no longer valuable, the signified value of a coin "came under scrutiny for its 'truth' value" (Freeman 20). Additionally, the use of less valuable materials heightened the danger that currency could be forged. Concerns over the abstraction of monetary value and the possibility of counterfeit money parallel many of the concerns over manners in a commercial society. The purpose of currency is to facilitate commerce, and similarly, manners are a way to facilitate social intercourse. Just as currency allows for the exchange of money and goods, manners allow for the exchange of thoughts and feelings. Although both currency and manners are socially useful forms, their formal qualities create the possibility of forgery and counterfeit. People can manufacture fake money, and they can also display inauthentic sentiments. The danger of manners is that they imply that humans, like money, are interchangeable social entities that can be valued as commodities, and furthermore, that no one can be trusted to exhibit authentic value.

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[15] Freeman writes of the character on currency, "the 'face' value of a coin, its extrinsic mark, was understood to be equivalent to its intrinsic value; the sign was understood as real value" (20).

Paul Langford writes about the transformation of manners in British culture during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He argues that the social emphasis on refinement led to a widespread polishing of manners, which Langford describes as an "externalization of standards" in pursuit of a more refined "collective persona" (189). These standards were implemented through social codes that functioned as external signifiers of individual worth such as politeness and etiquette. He characterizes the manners of commercial culture by social charm, volubility, and the knowledge of polite social codes. Langford refers to the encouragement of refinement as "police programming", which reflects the concern that these new forms of manners suppressed actual emotion (189). The stylization of manners allowed for better communication and facilitated social intercourse, but it also "ran the risk of disregarding the interior self and its emotional energies" (Langford 189). While new forms of currency abstracted the value of money during Austen's time, the polishing in regards to forms of conduct threatened to abstract the value of genuine virtue.

The Divergent Meaning of Manners argued by Hume and Burke

During the eighteenth-century, the philosophers David Hume and Edmund Burke dramatically diverged in their reactions to the effect of commercial culture on traditional manners. Hume argued that commercial culture created a surplus of experience, through encouraging both social intercourse and leisure, and acted as "the motor force which created the growth of manners" (Pocock, *Virtue* 199). In

opposition, Burke asserted that commerce sought to erode the "historical edifice of manners" by destabilizing the solid foundations of virtue (Pocock, *Virtue* 199).

J. G. A. Pocock demonstrates that the manners of the British aristocracy in the eighteenth-century cannot be extracted from its tradition of civic humanism. Within the discourse of civic humanism, "personality was considered in terms of virtue" (Pocock, *Virtue* 45). England's foundation in the philosophy of civic humanism also meant that that for the landowning class, "property was both an extension and a prerequisite of personality" (Pocock, *Virtue* 103). Because landed property served as the symbol of the moral solidity within the aristocracy, the liquidity of commerce posed a direct threat to the traditional values of British society. Property was considered to be the "material anchor" of identity, but the expansion of commercial culture destabilized the weight of this anchor through obscuring the relationship between social value and real worth (Pocock, *Virtue* 111). Property ownership gave each individual a stake in political power with virtue as "a synonym for autonomy in action" (Pocock, *Virtue* 50). Civic humanists felt that commercial culture caused an unhealthy level of interdependency in society because worth is socially signified and determined by exchange rather than property. Thus, this perceived loss of individual autonomy caused philosophers such as Burke to worry that manners would subsequently lose their solid worth transform into social codes of "moral abstraction" (Pocock, *Virtue* 50).

In his essay on the "Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature" (1742), David Hume describes a theatrical understanding of manners in which codes of conduct are fashioned by society and function to produce more virtuous members of society.

Hume argues that people do not possess a pre-existing essential nature; instead he claims that society creates cultural codes, such as manners, and these codes are taught through social intercourse. He writes that the development of culture creates a "similarity of manners" among the citizens (249). When humans perform well, they are reinforced by their surrounding society, and consequently, they learn to conform to social standards. Hume writes, "To love the glory of virtuous deeds is sure proof of the love of virtue" (156). Similar to Pascal's words, "Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe", Hume argues that if one acts well mannered, then one will develop the interior substance of virtue (Pepper 156). According to Hume, if a man has a "high notion of his rank and character in the creation", he will naturally desire to live up to this notion, and he will eventually embody "that figure which he makes in his own imagination" (151). Thus, Hume conceived of a notion of manners in which virtue is first observed externally and later embodied as interior principles.

Hume argues that if humans correctly exhibit the cultural signifiers of good character, then their interior value will increase as well. In theater, the playwright creates a character in his imagination, and an actor embodies this character on the stage. Thus, in Hume's conception of manners, a well-mannered person acts as both playwright and actor in society because he both fashions and represents his character. In "The Paradox of the Actor" by Dennis Diderot (written in 1769), he writes that the best actor "acts from the head, from studying human nature, from constantly imitating some ideal model" (103). Just as Diderot writes that an actor portrays a character through imitation, Hume argues that people produce their own

character through imitating the principles that they admire. Hume believed that the imitation of interior value actually produces virtuous sentiments; however, I will show how Austen refutes this claim through the character of the Crawfords.

In reaction to Hume's theatrical notion of manners, Edmund Burke argues for a hierarchal and paternalistic social structure in which manners are embodied, preserved, and taught by the aristocracy and its institutions, such as the clergy. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Burke writes:

> Nothing is more certain than that our manners, our civilization, and all the good things which are connected with manners, and with civilization, have, in this European world of ours, depended for ages upon two principles; and were indeed the result of both combined. I mean the spirit of a gentleman, and the spirit of religion. The nobility and the clergy, the one by profession, the other by patronage, kept learning in existence, even in the midst of arms and confusions. (117)

As evidenced through his emphasis on the aristocracy and the clergy, Burke believed that "the nation's institutions were the fruit of its experience" (Pocock, *Politics* 203). According to Burke, people within a society are parts that make up a harmonious whole, and their place in a larger, inherited structure must take precedence over self-fashioned notions of identity. Furthermore, manners must be learned before people become involved in commercial intercourse in order to

prevent selfishness from destroying the time-tested principles of the nation. Burke believed that the "destruction of chivalric manners" would be "fatal to property, commerce, trade and manufacture" (Pocock, *Virtue* 199). Although chivalry is an aristocratic principle, Burke argues that it is a necessary principle to have in commercial culture. Burke's notion of manners differs from Hume's theatrical notion of manners because he argues that the knowledge of traditionally virtuous manners must precede social intercourse since proper manners provide the foundation for commercial life.

Although Burke argues against the idea that manners can be taught on the social stage, performance still plays a necessary role in the way in which the aristocracy and clergy teach traditional manners to society. Burke writes about inherited property, "the tenure of which is the performance of some duty", and he claims that landowners must project "at least an exterior decorum and gravity of manners" (241). Thus, while property is the basis of inherited virtue, the material value of property must be performed as a social value, and it is the responsibility of the aristocracy to diffuse this value through society.[16] In *The Rights of Man* (1791), Thomas Paine responds to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, accusing him of valuing the forms of virtue over real human feeling. Because he sympathizes with Louis XVI and not the people who have suffered under his reign, Paine writes, "It is power, and not principles, that Mr. Burke venerates" (15). Because of Burke's sympathetic identification with the King rather than the people of France, Paine

[16] Botting writes about Burke's notion that the family serves as the "little platoon" in which individual's are first taught the traditional virtues of their society. She writes, "Burke defends the hierarchical family as the source of the social bonds that hold society together in a civilized fashion" (204).

argues that Burke values the inherited structures of society more than he values the principles that these structures are intended to preserve. In response to Burke's tragic portrayal of Marie Antoinette's death, Paine asserts that Burke is more affected by the force his own theatrical description of tragedy than he is by the reality of grief among all the subjects in France. In the memorable statement, "He pities the plumage, but forgets the dying bird" (17), Paine claims that Burke cares more for the theatrical splendor of the aristocracy more than the real emotion of human sorrow. In the character of Sir Thomas, Austen shows how Burke's notion of manners as a performance of traditional virtue fails to embrace the significant value of sentimental feeling.

The Emptiness of the Crawfords' Exhibition

In *Mansfield Park*, Austen shows the failure of Humean manners to produce real virtue through her portrayal of the Crawfords. The Crawfords are social actors because they lack a solid identity, and in a Humean manner, they fashion their character as an imitation of the people who they desire to be. While they perfect the exhibition of sociable manners, they fail to develop interior virtue. In *A Future for Astyanax*, Leo Bersani characterizes the Crawfords as "ontological floaters" who "suffer from a "disintegrated personality" (76). Bersani argues that the volubility and the transformative abilities of the Crawfords endanger the fixed values Mansfield Park because they introduce "an improvised self, or the possibility that there is no 'best self' to which one 'must be true'" (76). The Crawfords threaten the idea of an 'authentic self' due to their complete lack of interior worth rather than

their concealment of it. On the stage, an actor disguises his true identity in order to assume another role, but in the context of *Mansfield Park*, the Crawfords appear to have no identity beneath the form of their social roles. When Fanny watches Henry's remarkable skills on the stage, she thinks that although she does not "like him a man…she must admit him to be the best actor" (129). Although Fanny sees no virtue in Henry's character, she recognizes his skill as an imitator of social forms. Furthermore, when Edmund finally recognizes the lack of substance beneath Mary's charm, he tells Fanny, "it had been a creature of my own imagination, not Miss Crawford, that I had been too apt to dwell on for many months past" (260). Edmund initially perceives Mary as a virtuous and sentimental person due to the charm of her sociable manners, but he finally comes to recognize her utter lack of genuine principles.

Austen portrays Henry as a theatrical character through his discussions about love, the clergy, and the navy. When Henry first comes to Mansfield Park, Austen writes that he dislikes "any thing like a permanence of abode, or limitation of society" (33). He prefers the ability to play different parts and to be watched by a large audience to the intimacy that is formed within a rural setting. Henry constantly asserts his ability to become whatever he pleases and flirt with whomever he desires; he views romance as a performance. When Mrs. Grant tries to match Henry with Julia, he immediately rejects her choice and speaks of his preference for Maria while sarcastically concluding that he "shall always like Julia best because you order me" (36). He depicts affection not as something that organically develops between individuals but instead as a rational decision divorced

from real feeling. Henry prefers engaged women to single women because an engaged woman can "assert all her powers of pleasing without suspicion" of any true substance of affection (36). Henry uses self-fashioning to play the role of many lovers to many women without being trapped in the fixed role of husband. When he decides to court Fanny, Henry tells Mary that he wants to make "a small hole in Fanny's heart" (179). Because Henry has no real sentimental substance of his own, he views love as a one sided act of penetration, much like an actor on a stage tries to captivate the heart of the audience without feeling anything in return.

Just as Henry thinks that the purpose of love is to win over the heart of another, he thinks that the purpose of a career is to be admired by society. Austen uses Henry's discussions of the clergy to demonstrate the failure of Humean manners to produce virtue below the surface. Diderot writes in "The Paradox of the Actor", the actor "weeps like an unbelieving priest delivering a sermon on the Passion" (108). Henry argues that the clergy's function is to entertain the parish. Henry tells Edmund, "it is more difficult to speak well than to compose well" (267). Henry recognizes no difference between a sermon and a script for a play; both works of writing are reduced to lines that are delivered to entertain others. He goes on to say, "a good sermon, thoroughly well delivered, is capital gratification" (267). Henry tells Edmund he has "half a mind to take order and preach" himself, because he would enjoy performing well in front of an audience. However, Henry realizes that he would not want to be bound to fixed principles, and thus, his mind is fragmented by his desires to be both admired and independent of obligation.

Similar to his idea of the clergy, Henry does not think that the purpose of the navy is to defend one's country; instead he thinks that it is to be seen as a hero. When Henry meets Fanny's brother, he is envious of William's accomplishments in the navy, and he wishes that he too could enjoy the "glory of heroism" (185). Henry impulsively believes that he would like to be more heroic, but Austen writes that the "wish was rather eager than lasting" (185). Analogous to his theory of courtship, Henry would not want to join any profession that restricts his ability to do and move as he pleases, and he concludes that he would rather "be a man of fortune at once" (185). He decides that the sacrifice necessary to become a true believer or a hero is too large of a price to pay, and instead he would prefer to act the part of clergyman or navy man without making any sacrifice. Henry conflates all professions with acting, and he values professions according to the ways in which they are superficially valued. Diderot writes, "no one ever became an actor out of a love for virtue, the desire to be of use in society and to serve his country or family" (134). Diderot asserts that a talent for acting is not compatible with genuine moral worth. Thus, Henry is too vain for authentic love, religious passion, or heroism, but his talents as a performer provide him with the possibility of acting as a lover, clergyman, or hero. Although Henry can act many parts, his acting does not express any genuine interior worth.

Mary Crawford is also shown to be an "ontological floater" because she assumes the theatrical identity of both a lover and a friend without developing any authentic sentimental feelings. In Diderot's essay, he describes the actor "like a prostitute, feeling nothing, but swooning in your arms" (108). When Austen

introduces Mary's character to Mansfield Park, she writes, "matrimony was her object" (33). Mary acts as though she is in love with Edmund, but her affections vacillate as she continues to hope that Edmund will enter a profession with greater commercial value than the clergy. Rather than loving Edmund for his interior virtues, Austen writes, "Edmund would be forgiven for being a clergyman, it seemed, under certain conditions of wealth" (343). When Tom becomes ill, Mary writes to Fanny, "If he is to die, there will be *two* poor young men less in the world" (341). Mary optimistically views Tom's death as an opportunity for Edmund to assume Tom's role as the inheritor of Mansfield Park. Lovers are exchangeable to her, just as the same actress must perform love with several men in different plays.

Mary also assumes the role of friend to Fanny on several occasions, and during these instances, her good manners allow her to act kindly to Fanny, when even Edmund is too reticent to show his empathy. When Mrs. Norris accuses Fanny of being ungrateful because she will not act, Mary uses her charm to distract Fanny. Mary tries to "raise her spirits, in spite of being out of spirit herself…and the really good feelings by which she was almost purely governed, were rapidly restoring to her all the little she had lost in Edmund's favor" (116). By acting as a good friend to Fanny, Mary also escapes the harsh judgments of Mansfield. Mary is oppressed by Edmund's disapproval because he holds her to the principles of Mansfield Park, but Mary values charm and sociability over gravity and tradition. When Henry seduces Maria, Mary also defends her brother, and she claims that the affair is a "*folly*" rather than a moral transgression (357). Mary is more forgiving than Fanny and Edmund

because she thinks that good character can be taught through social experience, and thus, there is no such thing as virtue and vice below the surface of one's manners.

Mansfield Park's Deterioration under the Decorum of Sir Thomas

Whereas Austen argues that Humean manners cannot create virtue, she also demonstrates that Burkean manners transform virtue into a superficial form through denying the value of genuine sentiments. Because he fails to cultivate and express his own sentiments, Sir Thomas teaches manners to his children as solemn forms of propriety rather than an expression of genuine principles. When Sir Thomas learns that theatricality has spread throughout Mansfield Park in the form of *Lovers' Vows*, he puts an end to the production, and proceeds to ensure the "destruction of every unbound copy of 'Lovers' Vows' in the house" (149). Sir Thomas is unable to differentiate between the paper form of the play and the greater dangers that theatricality represents. Burning the paper form of *Lovers' Vows* is just another form of exhibition, as well as targeting the play as a transgression rather than the actions of his own children. Sir Thomas is "more willing to believe they felt their error, than to run the risk of investigation" (147). Sir Thomas replaces the lively theatricality of *Lovers' Vows* with a theatrical exhibition of his disapproval. Although Sir Thomas's restores the appearance of order at the Mansfield Park, in the scene which follows his unexpected return, Austen demonstrate that the private life of each inhabitant has been undeniably disrupted:

> The evening passed with external smoothness, though almost every mind was ruffled; and the music which Sir Thomas called for from his daughters helped to conceal the want of real harmony. (150)

In these lines, Austen suggests that the guardians of the aristocracy will lose their pedagogical power if they continue to ignore the significance of real emotion.

Austen demonstrates that Sir Thomas fails as a guardian to his daughters because he teaches them the "understanding" of manners rather than the actual "disposition" of virtue (364). Maria and Julia are taught traditional values, but they do not embody real principles because they align Sir Thomas's instruction with oppression. While walking with Mrs. Norris and Mrs. Rushworth in Sotherton, Julia practices "the politeness which she had been brought up to practice as a duty", but she is miserable because she lacks "that higher species of self-command, that just consideration of others, that knowledge of her own heart" (72). As Sir Thomas learns from Fanny to cultivate his interior sentiments, he recognizes that in both of his daughters "something must have been wanting *within*" (364). Bersani writes in *A Future for Astyanax*, "the danger pointed to by *Mansfield Park* is not the disintegration of order in social life; it is the survival of mere parodies of social order" (81). Sir Thomas has taught his children that good manners are produced through concealing actual feelings, and thus, their imitation of good manners is a parody of antiquated virtues rather than an expression of genuine principles.

Both the Crawfords and Sir Thomas use performance in order demonstrate the value of their identities: the Crawfords perform an exhibition of charming

manners as social actors in order to be recognized by fashionable society and Sir Thomas performs a parody of traditional manners in order to represent his estate. Diderot writes of a social actor:

> …he excels in pretending, when in fact he feels nothing: a much more difficult task than the actor's, because he has to find the words as well, and has two tasks, the poet's and the actor's. (157)

In *Rights of Man*, (1791-92), Thomas Paine criticizes Burke's preoccupation with "showy resemblance" over the "reality of distress touching his heart" (288). Paine argues that Burke's sympathy for the nation regards only to the decorous forms of tradition rather than the emotions of its citizens. Sir Thomas fashions his character as an exhibition of traditional codes of decorum in order to preserve the values of Mansfield Park, but he ignores the sentimental substance beneath these values. The parody of decorum at Mansfield Park is vulnerable to the "infection" of *Lovers' Vows* because Sir Thomas has preserved only the decorous forms of virtuous manners. Upon discovering the home theatrical, Sir Thomas remarks he had "not the smallest suspicion of [their] acting having assumed so serious a character" (144). Indeed, Sir Thomas realizes that he had entirely misjudged the real principles and values of his children.

Society as a Stage: The Performance of *Lovers' Vows* at Mansfield Park

Lovers' Vows (1798) was written by Elizabeth Inchbald as an adaptation of a German play. In Ichibald's play, Frederick returns home to ask his mother, Agatha,

for his birth papers, and she tells him that he is the illegitimate son of the Baron. Frederick swears to find the Baron and force him to make amends to his impoverished mother. At the same time, the Baron is searching for a suitor for his daughter, Amelia, and he is considering Count Cassel, a materialistic and selfish man. The Baron asks the clergyman, Anhalt, to speak to his daughter about marriage, and during their talk, Amelia confesses her love for Anhalt. While the Baron is out hunting, he meets Frederick, who begs for money for his mother, and when the Baron refuses to be generous, Frederick attacks the Baron. The Baron puts Frederick in jail, and Frederick realizes that the Baron is in fact his father. In the end, the Anhalt advises the Baron to marry Agatha, and the Baron allows his daughter to marry Anhalt. In *Mansfield Park,* Yates plays the Baron because he desires a significant part, Rushworth plays Count Cassel because he wants to wear the opulent costumes, and Henry plays Frederick in order to flirt with Maria, who plays Agatha. Mary plays Amelia, and she convinces Edmund to play Anhalt in order to flirt with him. Austen uses the tactic of ironic inversions in assigning theatrical roles to the characters in her novel; thus, the parts played by her characters show a contradiction between the form of their manners and their actual principles.

Mr. Rushworth plays a near replication of himself on the stage, because his merits are only birth and fortune. However, in the play Count Cassel possesses the interior quality of self-awareness, a quality that Mr. Rushworth completely lacks. Count Cassel even describes himself as a "flimsy, frivolous coxcomb" (227). In *Lovers' Vows*, the Baron asks Anhalt to "form the Count after your own manner" (207). Likewise, in *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas hopes to Rushworth's conduct in

order to make him a more suitable husband for his daughter. Through giving Rushworth a nearly identical character to play on the stage, Austen parodies his worthlessness as an individual apart from his seemingly valuable position as a member of the aristocracy.

Maria also plays a character in *Lovers' Vows* very similar to her character in *Mansfield Park*; in both she is a seduced woman; however, only Agatha feels guilty about her actions. In the play, Agatha is in the process of repenting for affair years ago with the Baron, while in the novel, Maria is in the process of committing adultery with Henry. In *Lovers' Vows*, Agatha writes that the Baron's "flattery made [her] vain", thus, she blames herself for believing his empty vows (196). During the play, Maria uses the stage as an excuse to flirt with Henry without breaking rules of propriety. Henry's flirtation with Maria is just as empty as the Baron's vows to Agatha; however, Maria's vanity leads her to believe that they are truly in love, and she abandons Mr. Rushworth to be with Henry. Agatha punishes herself for her sins by living a life of seclusion and poverty, and she is rewarded by marrying the Baron in the end, whereas in *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas banishes Maria from the estate because she "had destroyed her own character" and he refuses to "attempt to restore what never could be restored" (365). Austen shows that Maria is able to play Agatha's character, but she fails to develop any of Agatha's virtuous principles, such as guilt and repentance. Maria learns nothing from Agatha's guilt; instead, the context of the play leads her to commit the same sexual transgression as her theatrical character.

Henry Crawford, whom Austen describes as "considerably the best actor of all" (129), plays the clergyman Anhalt in the play. While choosing roles, Henry announces, "I feel as if I could be anything or every thing" (97). In the play, Frederick begs the Baron for money in order to help his sick mother, and when the Baron refuses to be charitable, Frederick tells the Baron he "will find that I do not impose a falsehood…for [Agatha] I am ready to die" (210). In *Mansfield Park*, Henry imposes false love and seduces Maria before deserting her in order to escape punishment. After being attacked by Frederick, the Baron remarks, "Vice is never half so dangerous, as when it assumes the garb of morality" (210). In the context of the play, the Baron's statement is an ironic inversion because he "assumed the garb of morality" through pledging false vows to Agatha, and consequently, Frederick is forced to act like a thief in order to save his mother. In *Mansfield Park*, Henry assumes the "garb of morality" when he plays Frederick, because Henry seduces Maria, and therefore, his character in the novel has much more in common with the Baron. Austen has Henry play Anhalt in order to show that while Frederick's love for his mother leads him to behave like a criminal, Henry's vanity, characterized as love for only himself, leads him to act as though he loves Maria without feeling any real emotions. Thus, Frederick's manners contradict the benevolence of his sentiments, and Henry's manners conceal his lack of genuine affection and principles.

Austen depicts the likeness between Mary and Henry Crawford, both as "ontological floaters", through showing that while Henry feels that he can be anything, Mary feels that she can be in love with anyone. Upon learning that she will

play Amelia in *Lovers' Vows*, Maria asks, "What gentleman among you am I to have the pleasure of making love to" (113). In the play, Amelia wants to marry Anhalt, her clergyman and tutor, instead of Count Cassel because she values his principles above the titles fortune and birth. She tells Anhalt:

> My father has more than once told me that he who forms my mind I should always consider my greatest benefactor. And my heart tells me the same. (211)

In *Mansfield Park*, Mary sees little social value in the clergy, and she tries to convince Edmund to strive for a more prestigious profession. Thus, in *Lovers' Vows*, Amelia loves Anhalt for his virtue, but in *Mansfield Park*, Mary wavers in her affection for Edmund due to his desire to join the clergy. Amelia values sentimental affection over titles and money, but Mary hopes to find a wealthy partner with a title in the aristocracy. Mary's character on the stage appears very similar to her character in the novel, but she does not embody any of the principles of her character or develop any genuine feelings of love for Edmund.

Edmund initially opposes the idea of putting on a private theatrical performance, but he eventually falls prey to the attraction of performing. He compromises his values because he does not want a stranger to be invited to Mansfield Park in order to play the role of Mary's lover. Thus, he claims that he has only agreed to play the part of Anhalt in order to protect Mary and maintain his authority over the estate during his father's absence. In *Lovers' Vows*, Anhalt refuses to marry Amelia although he loves her because he knows that her father, the Baron, would not approve. The Baron tells Amelia that Anhalt "acted honestly" by refusing

to marry her, and Amelia replies, "but not politely" (299). In *Mansfield Park*, the allure of theatricality leads Edmund to perform in the play, and in doing so, he acts politely towards the other characters but dishonestly to his own principles. While describing the role of the clergy to Miss Crawford, Edmund argues that the clergy influences public manners: "The *manners* I speak of, might rather be called *conduct*, perhaps, the result of good principles" (74). However, Edmund's conduct during the performance of *Lovers' Vows* defies the very principles that he should embody as a future member of the clergy.

Mr. Yates plays the role of Baron Wildenhaim, the aristocratic patriarch in *Lovers' Vows*, but in *Mansfield Park*, Yates challenges the patriarchal power of Sir Thomas by bringing theatricality to *Mansfield Park*. Austen describes Yates as a character with "not much to recommend him beyond habits of fashion and expense" (95); thus, he represents the fashionable aspects of commercial culture that threaten the inherited values of the aristocracy. When Sir Thomas returns to the estate and puts an end to the performance, Yates continues to reject his authority, claiming that he sees no value in "parental claims or family confidence" (138). However, by the end of the play and the novel, both the Baron and Yates develop as characters. Within the play, the Baron atones for seducing Agatha by asking her to marry him. At the end of *Mansfield Park*, Austen describes Sir Thomas's reflection that Yates "was not very solid; but there was hope of his becoming less trifling" (362). The Baron learns to embody the principles that he teaches as a patriarchal figure, and Yates begins to value the solid, traditional values of Mansfield Park. Completing Austen's theme of ironic inversion in the casting of the play, Yates, an

anti-paternalist proponent of commercial society, plays the part of the patriarchal figurehead, thus, revealing the ways in which the manners of the aristocracy, like commercial society, rely too much on performance and too little on real feeling.

Fanny Price and the Virtue of a Sentimental Substance

When the power of Sir Thomas is undermined by the Crawford's fashionable manners and the theatricality introduced by Mr. Yates, Fanny Price's determined refusal isolates her within the novel. When asked to choose a role in the play, Fanny exclaims, "I could not act any thing if you were to give me the world. No, indeed, I cannot act" (115). Austen has given Fanny the world of the novel, but Fanny is isolated in such a world by her rejection of exhibition. While the other characters are consumed with their theatrical roles, Austen describes Fanny as "sad and insignificant; she had no share in any thing" (125). Fanny retreats to the East Room and finds solace in her memories of Mansfield Park before the infection of theatricality. Austen writes:

> Everything was a friend, or bore her thoughts to a friend; and though there had been sometimes much of suffering to her—though her motives had often been misunderstood, her feelings disregarded, and her comprehension under-valued; though she had known the pains of tyranny, of ridicule, of neglect, and yet almost every recurrence of either had led to something

> consolatory…— And the whole was now so blended together, so harmonized by distance, that every former affliction had its charm. (120)

During this scene, Austen shows that even as Fanny has felt oppressed by Sir Thomas's authority, she still longs for the guidance of his solid principles. Although Sir Thomas's Burkean manners are not sentimental, Austen depicts Fanny as a sentimental heroine while she affectionately reflects on her past experiences at Mansfield Park. When the rest of the Bertrams are found guilty of taking part in the home theatrical, Edmund tells Sir Thomas, "You will find in Fanny every thing you could wish" (147). Fanny possesses the same respect for traditional values as Sir Thomas, but she also contains the substance of sentimental virtue, and that is what Sir Thomas eventually finds 'in Fanny' and learns to embody in his own character.

Fanny's pleasure in remembering the past and self-reflection is contrasted with the surplus of experience and sociability of the Crawfords. Fanny invests Mansfield Park with values deeper than the purely commercial values with which the Crawfords assess the estate. Barker-Benfield writes that critics of sensibility argued that the "sentimental heroine's innocence and chastity represent 'the self unrealized and inexperienced'", but in Austen's novel, although Fanny has much less worldly experience than the Crawfords, she has a much greater knowledge of her own interior (304). During a walk on the grounds of Mansfield, Fanny remarks to Mary:

> How very wonderful the operations of time, and the changes of the human mind…If any one faculty of our

> nature may be called *more* wonderful than the rest, I do think it is memory. (163)

While Fanny describes the wonders of "our powers of recollecting", Austen describes Mary as "untouched and inattentive" (163). After Fanny remarks on the continuous beauty of Mansfield Park throughout the changing seasons, Mary replies that she desires to live on estate for the "continual engagements" and the "best balls in the country" (164). Also during their walk, Mary remarks that the name Edmund sounds "pitiful" and she prefers Mr. Bertram, and Fanny invokes Burke in her defense that the name Edmund "seems to breathe the spirit of chivalry and warm affections" (165). Whereas Mary Crawford values Mansfield for its social and commercial value and Edmund for his title as a possible inheritor of the estate, Fanny invests the material value of the estate and Edmund's position with greater sentimental value through her reflections upon the past. Furthermore, Fanny's love for Edmund, akin to her love for Mansfield Park, develops through her reflections upon their experiences together and her growing insight into his interior. Fanny's role develops from Edmund's cousin, to friend, to confidant, and finally, to lover, and this progression reflects the merging of their interiority through the "progression of time and variation and occasion in this world of changes" (293).

Austen demonstrates the genuine affection between Edmund and Fanny when they dance at the ball because they do not need to perform social roles.[17] Edmund tells Fanny that he is "worn out with civility" and he has been "talking all night, and with nothing to say" (218). He asks Fanny to dance with him silently

[17] Fritzer argues that Austen uses dancing in her novels as "a symbol for life itself, particularity courtship" (35).

because he knows that he does not have to assume a form of manners that contradicts his interior feelings. Austen writes that their "sober tranquility" proves to onlookers that there is no romance between them (218). During the ball, the emotional connection between Fanny and Edmund is disguised because they do not perform the social style of intimacy, and their dance cannot be interpreted and valued by their audience. The irony of this moment reflects the irony described by Lionel Trilling in *Mansfield Park* that "style, which expresses the innermost truth of any creation or action, can also hide the truth" ("Mansfield Park" 135). Through Austen's novel, the benevolent style of Mary's conduct hides her vanity the selfish ambition of her pursuit after Edmund, and conversely, the style in which Fanny and Edmund dance during the ball hides the substance of their sentimental bond. When Edmund chooses Fanny over Mary, Austen writes:

> Her mind, dispositions, opinions and habits wanted no half concealment, no self deception on the present, no reliance on future improvements. (370)

When Edmund marries Fanny, their unification in society mirrors the unification of their sentimental interiors, and thus, Austen writes that their happiness "must appear as secure as earthly happiness could be" (372). Austen writes that Fanny's new home at the parsonage is "as thoroughly perfect in her eyes as every thing else, within the view and patronage of Mansfield Park" (372). Fanny perfects the values of Mansfield Park by adding the substance of her sentimental virtue to the traditional forms of conduct at Mansfield Park.

Conclusion

Jane Austen and the Epistemology of Contradiction

> 'And what are you reading, Miss—?' 'Oh! it is only a novel!' replies the young lady; while she lies down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame. 'It is only *Cecilia*, or *Camilla*, or *Belinda*'; or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displaying, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language. (24)
>
> — *Northanger Abbey*

In my first chapter I referred to this significant quote from *Northanger Abbey* in which Austen defends the novel genre. In these lines, Austen forgoes her emblematic style of narrative restraint in order to make a notable assertion about the value of novels. These words reveal Austen's intention as a novelist: to meticulously observe, interpret, and portray human nature. My argument thus far has centered on Austen's criticism of two forms of human expression: the epistolary form and theatrical performance. Somehow, amid her doubts over the creditability of these forms of representation, Austen still believed in the possibility of faithfully representing human nature in the novel form.

The novel is an ideal genre for representing human nature because it is not fixed or absolute in its form or content; a fundamental quality of the novel is that it continues to evolve through its relevance to the real world. In "The Epic and the Novel" (written during the 1930s), Mikhail Bakhtin distinguishes the novel genre from all other literary forms due to its relative newness, and accordingly, the fact that reading existed before novels. The epistemology of the genre continues to evolve as more novels are written and read. The form and content in every novel is subject to criticism by other novelists, and furthermore, it is through reading the works of others that novelists refine their own styles and ideas. What the novel adds to other genres of literature is "a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality" (Bakhtin 7). Through writing, an author has the ability to change the beliefs of a reader. Moreover, the power of reading has the ability to change the way people act in society. The novel maintains its force through the continuous interplay between reading and writing: people read to understand the world better, and people write to articulate this understanding. But how does this relate to the works of Jane Austen?

In Austen's novels, the "semantic openendedness" inherent to the genre functions as an aesthetic interpretation of what it means to understand human nature in a social world. On the formal level, Austen consistently resists the authorial impulse to put forward absolute truths; instead she teaches through the language of probability and free-indirect discourse. Whereas in *The Confessions*, Rousseau asserts his authority directly, with such statements as, "Here is the only portrait of a man, painted exactly according to nature and in all its truth, that will

probably ever exist" (3), Austen proves her credibility as an author through articulating the profound reality that life is not comprised of absolute truths. On the level of content, Austen also resists the didactic urge to say what is morally right and wrong. Rather than telling her readers the correct notion of sensibility or the proper meaning of manners, Austen shows the process by which people come closer to understanding their interior and how to best conduct themselves in society. Therefore, in *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne comes "to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract, by her conduct, her most favourite maxims" (268). The lesson in the novel is not that Marianne's sensibility is entirely wrong, but rather that the true value of her 'sensibility' can be improved through learning the principle of 'sense'. Likewise, in *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas learns his error as a patriarchal instructor, "by teaching [his daughters] to repress their spirits in his presence, as to make their real disposition unknown to him" (363). He learns that he cannot instill the solid values of Mansfield Park in his children without also encouraging the cultivation of their interior virtue. Furthermore, the framing of Austen's novels mirrors the notion that the novel is an openended form. Austen always concludes with one or more marriages, suggesting a new beginning rather than an ending. Her novels embrace the fact that the world is a place of uncertainty and continual change by describing the ways in which her characters improve over time.

While Austen's novels directly relate to eighteenth-century concerns regarding the self and society, her insight into human nature is even more remarkable for its timeless quality. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen directly criticizes

the claims of authenticity in epistolary novels, but she also teaches an enduring lesson about the value of skepticism in interpreting all forms of representation. In *Mansfield Park*, Austen responds to divergent notions regarding manners, but she also engages in an eternal discussion over the role performance plays in social life. Her novels are not about absolute truths or certain beliefs; instead they are about human nature and society, as well as knowledge and epistemology. As a result, her pedagogical goal is not to teach her readers what is absolutely true or certainly moral, but rather, to show her readers how they can become more knowledgeable individuals as well as more self-aware members of society.

In the first chapter, I discussed Jane Austen's reaction to the epistolary form in *Sense and Sensibility*. The epistolary novels of sentimental writers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau claimed to be capable of revealing the authentic, interior self with absolute truthfulness. Furthermore, Rousseau asserts that society and its values, such as manners, prevent individuals from living in harmony with their authentic selves. In response to Rousseau's doctrine of authenticity and certainty, Austen instates skepticism into the epistemology of writing. In doing so, Austen's pedagogical purpose is to teach readers how to best understand the world through the application of probability. Furthermore, Austen advocates the value of manners because they are the means by which people demonstrate the consistency of their virtue. Austen constructs Elinor in opposition to the mold of the epistolary heroine in order to demonstrate the value of skepticism, restraining one's sentiments, and polite conduct..

My second chapter focused on Austen's investigation of the meaning of manners in *Mansfield Park*. While the first chapter ended with Austen's affirmation of the virtuous value of manners, in this chapter, Austen focuses her skepticism on manners with a demonstration of the possibility that along with a a person's letters, their manners can also be insincere. At Mansfield Park, Austen constructs a traditional, Burkean notion of manners as real virtue and moral conduct. Sir Thomas's principles are challenged when the Crawfords bring theatricality and commercial culture to the estate. The Crawfords' manners function as a critical depiction of Hume's notion of manners; they are entirely social and performative, and therefore, divorced from any real values or principles. Austen creates Fanny as a sentimental heroine who cannot act, and therefore, her manners appear Burkean, but they are also representative of her interior virtue.

In the introduction I discussed Jane Austen's brilliant use of irony. Lionel Trilling writes of her irony, "It perceives the world through an awareness of its contradictions, paradoxes, and anomalies. It is by no means detached" (124). Austen exercises restraint in her works in order to be truthful. Because epistolary sentiments can be forged and virtuous manners can be performed, Austen maintains her authority through her skepticism of all forms of representation. It is perhaps Austen's greatest irony that her ironic language may actually convey her greatest truth: if sentiments can be inauthentic and manners can be unprincipled, then the essential nature of the world is its contradictions.

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