

JANE AUSTEN AND
THE THEATRE

PENNY GAY

University of Sydney



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CHAPTER ONE

Jane Austen's experience of theatre

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

THE JUVENILIA

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

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

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

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

(*MW*, p. 56)

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

CHLOE. Where am I? At Hounslow. Where go I? – To London. What to do?
 To be married –. Unto whom? Unto Strephon. Who is he? A Youth. Then
 I will Sing a Song.

SONG.

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

CHORUS. Be fun, be fun, be fun,
 And that to me will be fun.

The parodies that these three playlets constitute are knowing, extremely accurate satire. Obviously well before she was an adult Jane Austen knew a great deal about contemporary theatre. There is even a theatrical in-joke in the final paragraphs of *Love and Friendship*: ‘Philander & Gustavus, after having raised their reputation by their Performances in the theatrical Line at Edinburgh, removed to Covent Garden, where they still exhibit under the assumed names of *Lewis & Quick*’²³ (*MW*, p. 109). Elsewhere in the juvenilia Austen cites specific playwrights by name. In the ‘History of England . . . By a partial, prejudiced, & ignorant Historian’ she unabashedly draws much of her ‘history’ from Shakespeare’s plays, which she expects her audience to

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

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

HOME THEATRICALS

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

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

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

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

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

VIOLANTE. [*Half regarding him.*] Won't I do what?
 DON FELIX. You know what I would have Violante. Oh! my heart!
 VIOLANTE. [*Smiling.*] I thought my chains were easily broken. [*Lays her hand in to his.*]
 DON FELIX. [*Draws his chair close to her and kisses her hand in a rapture.*] Too well thou knowest thy strength. Oh, my charming angel my heart is all thy own! forgive my hasty passion, 'tis the transport of a love sincere!

(Act v)

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

Hannah Cowley's *Which is the Man?*² and Garrick's *Bon Ton* had been under consideration for performance in 1787, at Eliza's instigation. The former, one of the most popular of the highly successful dramatist's works, will be discussed in chapter 5. Garrick's *Bon Ton, or High Life above Stairs* (1775) is a lively two-act comedy satirising the pretensions of well-off urbanites. Like many comedies of the period, it has a strong anti-Gallic tone¹⁰ ('those monsters, foreign vices, and *Bon Ton*, as they call it') – a francophobia which Austen also exploits in her comic masterpiece *Emma*, as I shall argue in chapter 6.

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

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

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

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

VISITS TO LONDON AND BATH

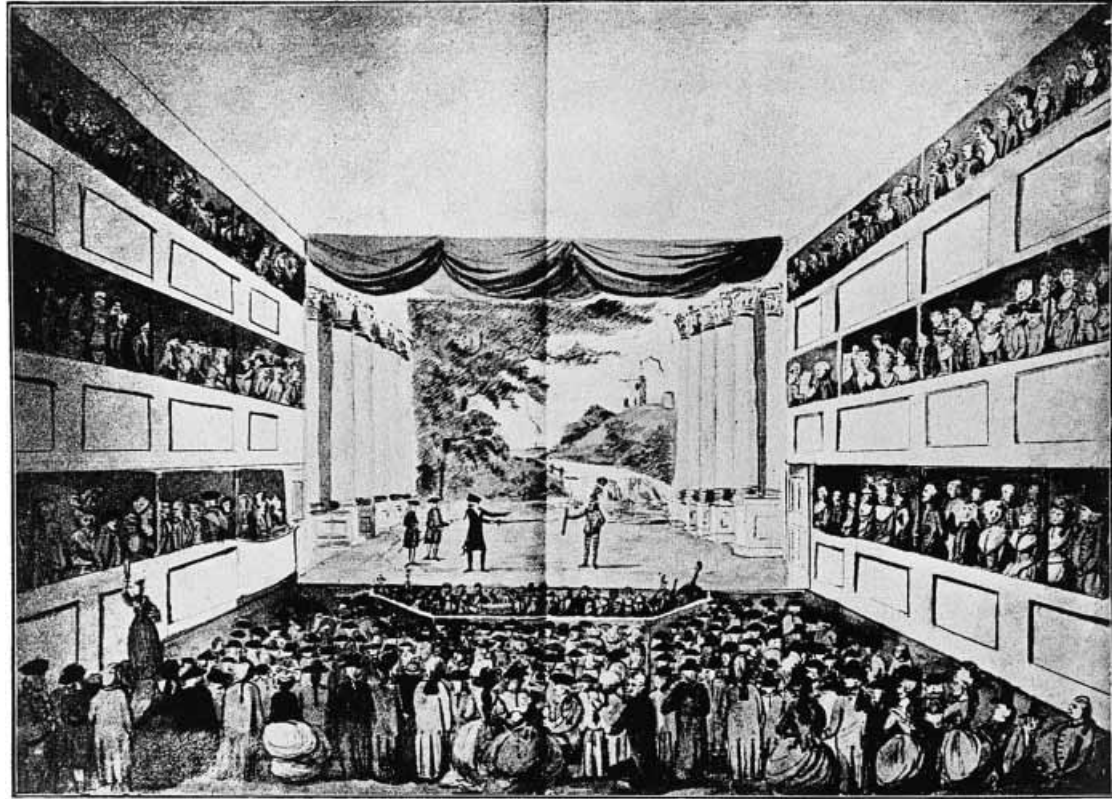
The young Jane Austen, during intermittent visits to England's first and second fashionable cities in 1796, 1797, and 1799, undoubtedly went to the theatre, and may well have seen the great Sarah Siddons and her brother John Philip Kemble, reigning stars of the London stage. Of the plays mentioned in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

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

THE BATH YEARS, 1801–1806

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

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



1 Interior of the Orchard Street Theatre, Bath

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

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

it was a play she wanted very much to see. . . . She was not deceived in her own expectation of pleasure: the comedy so well suspended her care, that no one observing her during the first four acts would have supposed she had any wretchedness about her. On the beginning of the fifth, however, the sudden view of Mr. Henry Tilney and his father joining a party in the opposite box recalled her to anxiety and distress. The stage could no longer excite genuine merriment, no longer keep her whole attention. Every other look upon an average was directed towards the opposite box; and for the space of two entire scenes did she thus watch Henry Tilney, without being once able to catch his eye. No longer could he be suspected of indifference for a play; his notice was never withdrawn from the stage during two whole scenes. At length, however, he did look towards her, and he bowed, but such a bow! No smile, no continued observance attended it: his eyes were immediately returned to their former direction. Catherine was restlessly miserable; she could almost have run round to the box in which he sat, and forced him to hear her explanation. (*NA*, p. 92)

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

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

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

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

performances (presumably readings).²⁵ *The Spoilt Child* (Bickerstaff)²⁶ and *Innocence Rewarded* (untraced) were the plays. Austen was always a lively reader-aloud: on another occasion, remembered her niece Caroline, she took up 'a volume of *Evelina* and read a few pages of Mr. Smith and the Brangtons [sic] and I thought it was like a play. She had a very good *speaking* voice . . .'.²⁷ A Hampshire gentleman remembered being present at a 'Twelfth-day party where Jane Austen drew the character of Mrs. Candour [from *The School for Scandal*] and assumed the part with great spirit'.²⁸ It is reasonable to conclude from evidence such as this that Austen took pleasure in acting, in the dramatic embodiment of such characters as she herself created in her fiction and which she delighted to recognise in the fiction of her sister novelists.

SOUTHAMPTON, 1807–1809

Jane Austen, her mother, her sister, and Martha Lloyd moved to a house in Castle Square, Southampton in early 1807. Claire Tomalin notes that when a family party came to visit the Austen ladies in September 1807 they 'went to the theatre to see John Bannister in *The Way to Keep Him*, Arthur Murphy's perennially popular satire on women who stop bothering to please their husbands after marriage'.²⁹ The theatre at Southampton (in French Street, not far from Castle Square) was smaller and less prestigious than Bath's Orchard Street Theatre;³⁰ it was mainly used by provincial companies, although Tucker indicates that 'the celebrated Mr. and Mrs. Charles Kemble played there for a few nights in August 1808'.³¹ In a letter of 20 November 1808, Austen writes, '*Our Brother* [James, it is presumed] we may perhaps see in the course of a few days – & we mean to take the opportunity of his help, to go one night to the play. Martha ought to see the inside of the Theatre once while she lives in Southampton, & I think she will hardly wish to take a second view [sic].' The implication – borne out in the novels – that one needs a gentleman as escort and assistant on any venture to the theatre, suggests that Jane's theatre-going would certainly have been curtailed after the death of her father.

THE CHAWTON YEARS, 1809–1817

Once she was settled at Chawton Cottage, Austen's only theatre-going would have been during visits to London. Her surviving letters indicate that she saw a wide range of contemporary theatre. In 1811 she saw

Bickerstaff's *The Hypocrite*, adapted from Molière's *Tartuffe*, which played at the Lyceum. In 1813 she saw *Midas*, a burletta by Kane O'Hara, and *The Clandestine Marriage* (Garrick and Colman), both at Covent Garden; and again at the Lyceum *Don Juan*, a pantomime by Delpini, and Beazley's *Five Hours at Brighton (The Boarding House)* (Austen's party missed the first act of this two-act musical farce – 'none the worse' she commented, *Letters*, 15–16 September 1813). They also saw *The Beehive*, a musical farce by Millingen, 'rather less flat & trumpety', Austen remarked. In 1814 she saw the new acting sensation Edmund Kean in *The Merchant of Venice* at Drury Lane; at Covent Garden there was *Isabella* (Garrick's adaptation of Southerne's *The Fatal Marriage*), the farce *The Devil to Pay* with Dora Jordan, Arne's opera *Artaxerxes*, and *The Farmer's Wife*, a new musical by Charles Dibdin Jnr.

Austen's occasional comments on these theatre-going experiences in her letters, written at the same time as she was working on her mature novels, are of great interest. She clearly valued the spoken drama over the lightweight burlettas³² and musicals which were the most common genre of entertainment. A night at the theatre, even one of the royal patent houses (Covent Garden and Drury Lane) which had the sole right to present 'legitimate'³³ drama, offered a pot-pourri, up to five hours worth of entertainment. A German visitor wrote with some amazement:

Each evening two plays must be given, one in five acts and an afterpiece, often also in two or three acts. Usually at the end some farce is played, on rare occasions a short opera, often some absurdity based on one of the new English novels, full of night and horror. No-one is concerned whether the afterpiece has been chosen to be appropriate to the main play or contrasts with it so violently [as to offend] any person of refined sensibility. It is enough that the spectator gets value for his money.³⁴

Of course there was no obligation to attend the entire evening; pre-booked boxes were held only until the end of the first act of the main-piece. After the third act everyone was let in at half-price, a custom which, Johanna Schopenhauer said, was 'unpleasant for the better part of society. With a great hubbub all the creatures of the night . . . swarm in . . . the worst of company – of course in the prescribed dress – spreads through the whole house. For this reason women never go to the theatre without men to accompany them.'³⁵

Austen had hoped to see the legendary Sarah Siddons, now in the twilight of her career, as Constance in *King John* at Covent Garden in April 1811, but was frustrated in her plans by inaccurate information

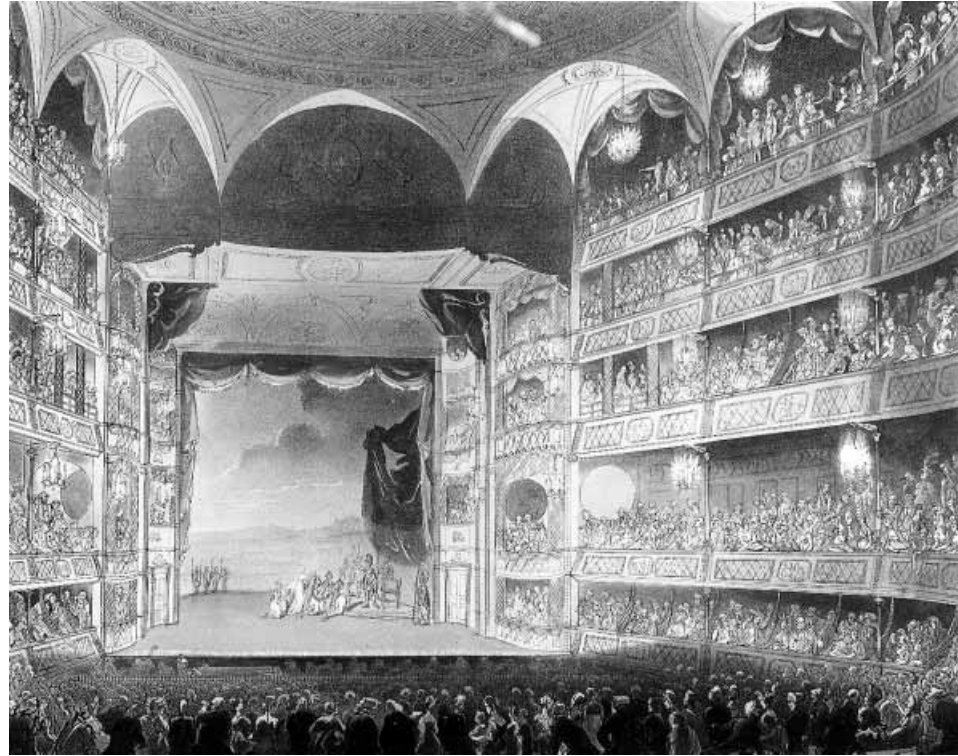
that Siddons had cancelled – ‘I should particularly have liked seeing her in Constance, & could swear at her with little effort for disappointing me’ (*Letters*, 25 April 1811).³⁶ Instead she and her brother Henry ‘went to the Lyceum, & saw the Hypocrite, an old play taken from Molière’s *Tartuffe*, & were well entertained. Dowton & Mathews were the good actors. Mrs Edwin was the Heroine – and her performance is just what it used to be.’³⁷ Bickerstaff’s *The Hypocrite* is a lively and well-constructed five-act comedy, which considerably reduces the element of farce found in Molière’s *Tartuffe*, and increases the psychological and social complexity of the characters. It is notable particularly for a witty and unpredictable heroine, whose relation with her lover is reminiscent of that of Millamant to Mirabell in Congreve’s *The Way of the World*. She is active in the plot to catch the hypocrite, and also has the play’s last moralising speech, a commonsense denunciation of hypocrisy (while being careful not to decry ‘true piety’). It is not hard to see why Austen would have enjoyed this.

SPECTACLE AND THE ENLARGEMENT OF THE PATENT
THEATRES, 1790–1800S

When Jane Austen went to the Covent Garden or Drury Lane theatres during visits to London in 1811–14 she would have had a materially different experience from her earlier visits to the theatre in Bath and Southampton. Both London patent theatres, enlarged radically in the 1790s (Figure 2), had been sumptuously rebuilt after fires: Covent Garden in 1809 (and further altered 1812–13), Drury Lane in 1812. Drury Lane’s capacity after the rebuilding of 1794 was 3,611; this was slightly reduced, to around 2,800, after the 1809 fire. Covent Garden’s rebuilding competed for a similarly huge audience.

In these remodellings the doors onto the forestage (the proscenium) were finally eliminated for dramatic use (they were used only for curtain calls). Actors performed further upstage, ‘within the scene’. The loss of intimacy is testified by numerous observers of the period. Richard Cumberland, the dramatist, wrote in his 1806 memoirs:

Since the stages of Drury Lane and Covent Garden have been so enlarged in their dimensions as to be henceforward theatres for spectators rather than play-houses for hearers, it is hardly to be wondered at if their managers and directors encourage those representations, to which their structure is best adapted. The splendour of the scenes, the ingenuity of the machinist and the rich display of dresses, aided by the captivating charms of music, now in a great degree supersede the labours of the poet.³⁸



2 Interior of Drury Lane Theatre after the rebuilding of 1794 (By permission of the V&A Picture Library)

Sir Walter Scott found 'the paltry-puppet show exhibition' of these spectacles ridiculous:

The persons of the performers are, in these huge circles, so much diminished, that nothing short of the mask and buskin could render them distinctly visible to the audience. Show and machinery have therefore usurped the place of tragic poetry; and the author is compelled to address himself to the eyes, not to the understanding or feelings of the spectator. . . . we have enlarged our theatres, so as to destroy the effect of acting, without carrying to any perfection that of pantomime and dumb show.³⁹

Austen's impatience with much London theatre – 'I believe the Theatres are thought at a low ebb at present' (*Letters*, 25 September 1813) – may well have been the result of this market-driven fashion for extravagant spectacle. As Robert D. Hume comments, 'Given the difficulty of hearing dialogue clearly in such barns we cannot be surprised that ranting melodrama flourished while wit comedy languished.'⁴⁰ Elizabeth Inchbald, adapter of *Lovers' Vows*, prefaced her own domestic comedy *To Marry or Not to Marry* (1805),

The stage delights the eye far oftener than the ear. Various personages of the drama, however disunited, amuse the looker-on; whilst one little compact family presents a sameness to the view, like unity of place; and wearies the sight of a British auditor fully as much. Incidents, too, must be numerous, however unconnected, to please a London audience: they seem, of late, to expect a certain number, whether good or bad. Quality they are judges of – but quantity they *must have*.⁴¹

A not dissimilar development, though on a smaller scale, was seen in the new Theatre Royal which opened at Bath in October 1805, seven months before the Austens left Bath for Southampton. An opulently seated audience now gazed upon a picture-frame within which (as well as the older domestic comedies) the new spectacular drama of heightened passions and violent experiences was shown. By contrast, in the Orchard Street Theatre Royal, the audience would have been witness to performances which, because of the room-like structure of the forestage with its doors of entrance on either side and audience boxes above, had the appearance of representing artificially exaggerated but still recognisable behaviour of 'real people', sharing a space with the audience. Donald C. Mullin comments:

The forestage was within the enclosure of the auditorium, in the same room as the audience. The scenes and related special effects were outside the audience chamber. The proscenium, for lack of a better word, marked the boundary

between the closely observable world of daily life on the forestage and the world of exoticisms, surprises, or flights of fancy in the scenic space.⁴²

The Orchard Street Theatre did pride itself on scenic effects, as the illustration of its interior indicates (Figure 1) – and as its investment in the crowd-pleasers *The Castle Spectre* and *Blue Beard* testifies (see chapter 3). But the theatre was nevertheless small by the standards of the London patent houses – the distance from the ‘front boxes’ (behind the pit) to the stage was about 45 feet. Its forte was *intimacy*, not separation, between actor and audience; the effect was that theatre’s artificiality could be acknowledged across the footlights, a shared pleasure in theatricality which implicated the audience, making them almost as much participants as consumers. The prologues and epilogues to eighteenth-century plays reinforced this collusive relation by means of a set of witty couplets in which a principal actor ‘came forward’ and reminded his audience of their necessity to the success of the performance. Frequently he or she would comment on contemporary fashionable behaviours, that is, on the audience’s own involvement in theatricality.⁴³ Cowley’s epilogue to *The Belle’s Stratagem* (1780) offers a typical example of this familiar address:

Nay, cease, and hear me – I am come to scold –
Whence this night’s plaudits, to a thought so old?
To gain a Lover, hid behind a Mask!
What’s new in that? or where’s the mighty task?
For instance, now – what Lady Bab, or Grace,
E’er won a Lover – in her *natural* Face?

The experience of theatre-going in the smaller eighteenth-century theatres thus had much in common with the dangerous domestic intimacy of home theatricals. In the extract from chapter 12 of *Northanger Abbey* quoted above, Henry Tilney, in the audience, is as much part of the spectacle for Catherine as the actors on stage. The auditorium was fully lit in this period, and the audience went almost as much to be seen as to see; to be gazed on and to gaze, equally at the stage and other members of the audience.⁴⁴ Interestingly enough, Austen commented on a visit to the unaltered and relatively small Lyceum⁴⁵ in 1813, where they sat in a stage box, ‘One is infinitely less fatigued than in the common way’ (*Letters*, 15–16 September 1813). This, I imagine, refers to the weariness that arises when one is in a constrained social situation where the rewards are too few to compensate for the lack of ease – as in the huge new theatres. On this evening, there was some interesting acting to be seen, and at close range: of this performance of Delpini’s pantomime *Don Juan* – based on

Gluck's successful ballet of 1761, and using his music – Austen remarked, 'I must say that I have seen nobody on the stage who has been a more interesting Character than that compound of Cruelty & Lust' (*Letters*, 15–16 September 1813). This piece was described in playbills as 'A Tragic Pantomimical Entertainment';⁴⁶ it included songs and dancing, but virtually no spoken words – only a few in the climactic scene between Don Juan and the Ghost of the Commandant who comes to urge him to repent. In one of the published versions of the pantomime's scenario, Delpini remarks on the dramatic effectiveness of 'the Pantomime, or continued representation by means of dumb shew . . . At the time the eye is delighted, the understanding is employed in those sentiments and that language which is wisely left for the spectator to supply.'⁴⁷ Austen had, in fact, just months earlier finished supplying language for her own version of the fascinating mythical figure of Don Juan, in the character of Henry Crawford. My guess is that she had not before encountered this powerful dramatic embodiment of the rebel against the Father's law, and she was struck by the coincidence between the Don and her own imaginative creation of the modern libertine. Henry Crawford (whose ancestry is more directly traceable to Richardson's Lovelace) is undoubtedly a 'compound of cruelty and lust', overlaid – as in the near-contemporary Mozart version⁴⁸ – with performative charm, civility, and sexual vitality.

By contrast, her visit to Covent Garden the following evening elicited these comments: 'the *Clandestine Marriage* was the most respectable of the performances, the rest were Sing-song and trumpery, but did very well for Lizzy & Marianne, who were indeed delighted; – but *I* wanted better acting. – There was no Actor worthy naming. – I believe the Theatres are thought at a low ebb at present' (*Letters*, 25 September 1813). Garrick and Colman's *The Clandestine Marriage* (1766) is a mainpiece comedy, with an exasperatingly sentimental plot,⁴⁹ but a good cast of Fielding-esque supporting characters. Still, Austen wanted 'better acting'.

'ACTING SELDOM SATISFIES ME'

The best acting was provided at last in March 1814 when Austen saw Edmund Kean in what was to become one of his most famous roles, Shylock (Figure 3). He had made his London debut in this role just six weeks earlier. Even at Drury Lane, where they could only manage to get 'the 3d & 4th row' in a 'front box' (behind the pit) his genius and originality were evident: 'I cannot imagine better acting', said Austen, 'but the part was too short, & excepting him & Miss Smith, & *she* did not

quite answer my expectation, the parts were ill filled & the Play heavy' (*Letters*, 6 March 1814).

William Hazlitt reviewed 'Mr Kean's Shylock' at his first appearance at Drury Lane in January 1814:

For voice, eye, action, and expression, no actor has come out for many years at all equal to him . . . There was a lightness and vigour in his tread, a buoyancy and elasticity of spirit, a fire and animation . . . in giving effect to the conflict of passions arising out of the contrasts of situation, in varied vehemence of declamation, in keenness of sarcasm, in the rapidity of his transitions from one tone and feeling to another, in propriety and novelty of action, presenting a succession of striking pictures, and giving perpetually fresh shocks of delight and surprise, it would be difficult to single out a competitor.⁵⁰

Revisiting the production a fortnight later, Hazlitt added to his encomium on Kean: 'His style of acting is, if we may use the expression, more significant, more pregnant with meaning, more varied and alive in every part, than any we have almost ever witnessed. The character never stands still; there is no vacant pause in the action; the eye is never silent . . . he reminds us of the descriptions of the "far-darting eye" of Garrick.'⁵¹ Such was the rage for Kean that tickets had to be booked a fortnight ahead. 'I shall like to see Kean again excessively, & to see him with You too', Jane told Cassandra, who was expected in town – 'it appeared to me as if there were no fault in him anywhere; & in his scene with Tubal there was exquisite acting' (*Letters*, 6 March 1814).⁵²

After Kean's performance, 'We were much too tired to stay for the whole of *Illusion* (*Nourjahad*) which has 3 acts; – there is a great deal of finery & dancing in it, but I think little merit.'⁵³ This oriental 'melodramatic spectacle' was a more typical Drury Lane offering; Austen was disappointed that Robert Elliston, whose work she had admired earlier in Bath, was performing in this piece, 'not at all calculated for his powers. There was nothing of the *best Elliston* about him. I might not have known him, but for his voice.' Elliston had begun his career in the Bath theatre, and was its star from 1793–1804 – years when Jane Austen undoubtedly saw him. Elliston was renowned for his good voice and lively manner, and was at his best in comedy, but as we have seen, that repertoire was no longer fashionable – indeed, barely playable, in the huge barns of spectacle that the London patent theatres had become.

Cassandra being Jane's chief correspondent, information about their activities is thin when they are together. We do not know if Austen saw

Kean again with Cassandra – though in the next letter she is inviting her to ‘Prepare for a Play the very first evening, I rather think Covent Garden, to see [Charles] Young in Richard’ (*Richard III*, presumably; *Letters*, 9 March 1814).⁵⁴ We do know that Austen went twice to Covent Garden before Cassandra’s arrival, seeing Arne’s opera *Artaxerxes* (popular since its premiere in 1762) on 7 March, and the Charles Dibdin burletta *The Farmer’s Wife* the following night. Both starred the popular soprano Catherine Stephens:

her merit in singing is I dare say very great; that she gave *me* no pleasure is no reflection upon her, nor I hope upon myself, being what Nature made me on that article. All that I am sensible of in Miss S. is, a pleasing person & no skill in acting. (*Letters*, 9 March 1814)

Again we note the importance for Austen of ‘skill in acting’. The ballad farce *The Devil to Pay*, on the same bill as *Artaxerxes*, amused Austen more, possibly because it featured Dora Jordan, now at the end of her career, but still able to shine in the comic role of the cobbler’s wife (Figure 4).⁵⁵ Similarly, ‘Mathews, Liston & Emery’, three well-known comic actors in *The Farmer’s Wife*, provided ‘some amusement’ in this new comic opera whose plot is driven by the Henry Crawford-like attempts of Sir Charles Courtly to seduce the virtuous Emma.

Austen’s last experience of professional theatre, as far as we know, was during a visit to London in November 1814. At Covent Garden she saw the celebrated new actress Eliza O’Neill (aged twenty-three), famed for her ability to draw the audience’s tears in tragic parts. The play was *Isabella*, Garrick’s revision (1757) of Southerne’s *The Fatal Marriage*, in which the heroine eventually goes mad and stabs herself. It was one of Sarah Siddons’s most famous roles (I discuss it in chapter 2), but as that queen of ‘she-tragedies’ had at last retired, Miss O’Neill was attempting to show herself worthy of the crown. For Austen,

I do not think she was quite equal to my expectation. I fancy I want something more than can be. Acting seldom satisfies me. I took two Pocket handkerchiefs, but had very little occasion for either. She is an elegant creature however & hugs Mr Younge delightfully. (*Letters*, 29 November 1814)

Posterity has agreed with this judgement of Eliza O’Neill; Hazlitt was commenting only eighteen months later, ‘She whined and sang out her part in that querulous tone that has become unpleasant to us by ceaseless repetition . . . We half begin to suspect that she represents the bodies, not the souls of women, and that her *forte* is in tears, sighs, sobs, shrieks,