

# PAROLE RUBATE

RIVISTA INTERNAZIONALE  
DI STUDI SULLA CITAZIONE



# PURLOINED LETTERS

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL  
OF QUOTATION STUDIES

*Rivista semestrale online / Biannual online journal*

<http://www.parolerubate.unipr.it>

---

Fascicolo n. 16 / Issue no. 16

Dicembre 2017 / December 2017

***Direttore / Editor***

Rinaldo Rinaldi (Università di Parma)

***Comitato scientifico / Research Committee***

Mariolina Bongiovanni Bertini (Università di Parma)

Dominique Budor (Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris III)

Roberto Greci (Università di Parma)

Heinz Hofmann (Universität Tübingen)

Bert W. Meijer (Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Instituut Firenze / Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht)

María de las Nieves Muñiz Muñiz (Universitat de Barcelona)

Diego Saglia (Università di Parma)

Francesco Spera (Università Statale di Milano)

***Segreteria di redazione / Editorial Staff***

Maria Elena Capitani (Università di Parma)

Nicola Catelli (Università di Parma)

Chiara Rolli (Università di Parma)

***Esperti esterni (fascicolo n. 16) / External referees (issue no. 16)***

Gioia Angeletti (Università di Parma)

Franca Dellarosa (Università di Bari Aldo Moro)

Gillian Dow (University of Southampton)

Michael C. Gamer (University of Pennsylvania)

Michele Guerra (Università di Parma)

Francesco Marroni (Università “G. d’Annunzio” Chieti – Pescara)

Liana Nissim (Università Statale di Milano)

Francesca Saggini (Università della Tuscia – Viterbo)

Anna Enrichetta Soccio (Università “G. d’Annunzio” Chieti – Pescara)

Enrica Villari (Università Ca’ Foscari, Venezia)

Angela Wright (University of Sheffield)

***Progetto grafico / Graphic design***

Jelena Radojev (Università di Parma) †

Direttore responsabile: Rinaldo Rinaldi

Autorizzazione Tribunale di Parma n. 14 del 27 maggio 2010

© Copyright 2017 – ISSN: 2039-0114

# INDEX / CONTENTS

## Special Jane Austen

AUSTEN RE-MAKING AND RE-MADE.  
QUOTATION, INTERTEXTUALITY AND REWRITING

Editors Eleonora Capra and Diego Saglia

<i>Austen in the Second Degree: Questions and Challenges</i> DIEGO SAGLIA (Università di Parma)	3-11
<i>The Anonymous Jane Austen: Duelling Canons</i> EDWARD COPELAND (Pomona College – Claremont)	13-39
<i>“Comedy in its Worst Form”? Seduced and Seductive Heroines in “A Simple Story”, “Lover’s Vows”, and “Mansfield Park”</i> CARLOTTA FARESE (Università di Bologna)	41-56
<i>Bits of Ivory on the Silver Screen: Austen in Multimodal Quotation and Translation</i> MASSIMILIANO MORINI (Università di Urbino Carlo Bo)	57-81
<i>Remediating Jane Austen through the Gothic: “Pride and Prejudice and Zombies”</i> SERENA BAIESI (Università di Bologna)	83-99
<i>Revisiting “Pride and Prejudice”: P. D. James’s “Death Comes to Pemberley”</i> PAOLA PARTENZA (Università “G. d’Annunzio” Chieti – Pescara)	101-122
<i>P. R. Moore-Dewey’s “Pregiudizio e Orgoglio”: An Italian Remake of Jane Austen’s “Pride and Prejudice”</i> ELEONORA CAPRA (Università di Parma)	123-142
<i>Recreating Jane: “Austenland” and the Regency Theme Park</i> MADDALENA PENNACCHIA (Università di Roma Tre)	143-154
<i>Writing in the Shadow of “Pride and Prejudice”: Jo Baker’s “Longbourn”</i> OLIVIA MURPHY (Murdoch University – Perth)	155-169
<i>Reading the Austen Project</i> PENNY GAY (University of Sydney)	171-193

MATERIALI/ MATERIALS

- James Frazer, il cinema e “The Most Dangerous Game”*  
DOMITILLA CAMPANILE (Università di Pisa) 197-208
- Jeux et enjeux intertextuels dans “Le Soleil ni la mort  
ne peuvent se regarder en face” de Wajdi Mouawad*  
SIMONETTA VALENTI (Università di Parma) 209-233
- Re-membering the Bard : David Greig’s and Liz Lochhead’s  
Re-visionary Reminiscences of “The Tempest”*  
MARIA ELENA CAPITANI (Università di Parma) 235-250

LIBRI DI LIBRI / BOOKS OF BOOKS

- [recensione – review] *‘Open access’ e scienze umane. Note su diffusione  
e percezione delle riviste in area umanistica*, a cura di Luca Scalco,  
Milano, Ledizioni, 2016  
ALBERTO SALARELLI 253-257



CARLOTTA FARESE

**“COMEDY IN ITS WORST FORM”?  
SEDUCED AND SEDUCTIVE HEROINES IN  
“A SIMPLE STORY”, “LOVERS’ VOWS”,  
AND “MANSFIELD PARK”**

1. *Two novels and a play*

The intertextual relationship between Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814) and the German play *Das Kind der Liebe* by August von Kotzebue (1790), adapted by Elizabeth Inchbald into *Lovers’ Vows* (1798), has been the object of intense critical scrutiny in the last years. The role of the theatricals within the novel, the correspondence between the themes and characters of the three texts, Austen’s attitude towards the theatre in general, and this famously controversial play in particular, have been discussed at length.<sup>1</sup> However, these issues have only occasionally been

---

<sup>1</sup> See G. Kelly, *Reading Aloud in “Mansfield Park”*, in “Nineteenth-Century Fiction”, XXXVII, June 1982, pp. 29-49; C. Pedley, “*Terrific and Unprincipled Compositions*”: *The Reception of “Lovers’ Vows” and “Mansfield Park”*, in

examined in the context of a possible, more general relationship to the work of Elizabeth Inchbald. This paper will take precisely this approach, focusing in particular on the links connecting Inchbald's first novel *A Simple Story* (1791), *Lover's Vows* and *Mansfield Park*. I will argue that many aspects of Austen's novel recall *A Simple Story*, and I will show how bringing this novel into the picture would enhance our understanding of Austen's intertextual practices and shed new light on the ways in which she engages with her sources to question and revise the thematic, ideological, and formal features of different genres.<sup>2</sup> The 'triangular' relationship between *Mansfield Park*, *Lovers' Vows*, and *A Simple Story* moves across the boundary between novelistic and dramatic writing, allows for a new understanding of the contrast between the two heroines of *Mansfield Park*, and confirms recent critical interpretations suggesting that Austen's attitude might be more radical than envisaged by traditional readings of her work.

When *Lovers' Vows* was staged for the first time at Covent Garden – on 11 October 1798 – it gained an unexpected triumph. The popularity of the play was immediate, spread all over England, and lasted well until 1815. However, its success was in fact counterbalanced by a large number of attacks and negative reviews that depicted the play as morally and

---

"Philological Quarterly", LXXIV, Summer 1995, pp. 297-316; P. Gay, *Theatricality and the Theatricals in "Mansfield Park"*, in "Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal", 17, 1995, pp. 121-129; P. Byrne, *Jane Austen and the Theatre*, London, Hambledon and London, 2002; P. Gay, *Jane Austen and the Theatre*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002; E. G. Stanley, *Jane Austen's "Mansfield Park" and Kotzebue's "Das Kind der Liebe"*, "Lovers' Vows": "that we should have such a scene to play!?", in "Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen, CCXLII, 2005, pp. 300-317; S. Allen Ford, *It Is All About "Lovers' Vows": Kotzebue, Inchbald, and the Players of "Mansfield Park"*, in "Persuasions. The Jane Austen Journal On-Line", XXVII, Winter 2006, web address [www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol27no1/ford.htm](http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol27no1/ford.htm); C. Farese, *From German into English, from Novel into Play: "Lovers' Vows" and "Das Kind der Liebe"*, in *The Languages of Performance in British Romanticism*, editors L. M. Crisafulli and C. Pietropoli, Bern, Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 201-217.

<sup>2</sup> See C. Farese, *Elizabeth Inchbald: scandalo e convenzione. Romanzo e teatro nell'Inghilterra della Reggenza*, Roma, Aracne, 2012, pp. 75-107.

politically questionable, especially for the presence of Amelia, a heroine who is in love with her tutor Anhalt, a Protestant minister to whom she will eventually get married.<sup>3</sup> Although today it might be difficult for us to understand why this seemingly harmless play caused such a violent reaction, I would argue that Inchbald's contemporaries were not entirely mistaken in denouncing its radical features. In particular, there is an aspect of the play that seems to surpass in dauntlessness Inchbald's notoriously radical novels – *A Simple Story*, published in 1791, and *Nature and Art* published in 1796. Although usually labelled as Jacobin novels, these two books respect the conventions of the theme of the seduced heroine insofar as they show how the consequences of a transgression cannot be but fatal, and their heroines pay a high price for their unruly behaviour.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. *Vindicating the coquette: Inchbald's Miss Milner*

*A Simple Story* is particularly interesting for us as its parallels with *Lovers' Vows* are indeed striking. The novel tells the love story between the *coquette* Miss Milner and her tutor Dorriforth, a Catholic priest who – after having inherited his family fortune, following the sudden death of his

---

<sup>3</sup> See W. Reitzel, "Mansfield Park" and "Lovers' Vows", in "Review of English Studies", IX, 36, 1933, pp. 451-456; A. Jenkins, *I'll Tell You What. The Life of Elizabeth Inchbald*, Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 2003, p. 427; C. Bode, "Unfit for an English Stage?" *Inchbald's "Lovers' Vows" and Kotzebue's "Das Kind der Liebe"*, in "European Romantic Review", XVI, 3, 2005, pp. 297-309.

<sup>4</sup> As to the relationship between Elizabeth Inchbald and English Jacobinism see G. Kelly, *The English Jacobin Novel 1780-1805*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976; T. L. Hoagwood, *Elizabeth Inchbald, Joanna Baillie, and Revolutionary Representation in the Romantic Period*, in *Rebellious Hearts. British Women Writers and the French Revolution*, Edited by A. Craciun and K. E. Lokke, Albany (N. Y.), State University of New York Press, 2001, pp. 293-316; A. Garnai, *Revolutionary Imaginings in the 1790s. Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, Elizabeth Inchbald*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; B. P. Robertson, *Elizabeth Inchbald's Reputation. A Publishing and Reception History*, London – New York, Routledge, 2013.

cousin – will eventually renounce his vows and marry her. During a prolonged absence of her husband, Miss Milner commits adultery and, as a consequence, will be repudiated and die in disgrace. Her vanity and foolishness contrast with the behaviour of her daughter Matilda, who is a model of obedience and, in the final part of the novel, will reap the reward of her virtue. Notwithstanding this punitive structure, Miss Milner has always been perceived by readers as an extremely ambiguous character. On one hand, she lacks the “negative virtues of feminine propriety”, but on the other she possesses “the outgoing ones that transcend that ideal – passionate love, generosity, warm, reckless sympathy”.<sup>5</sup> In her 1791 review of the book, Mary Wollstonecraft was probably the first of the many readers who noticed that the character’s moral defects are “softened, or rather gracefully withdrawn from notice by the glare of such splendid, yet fallacious virtues, as flow from sensibility”.<sup>6</sup> In other words, Miss Milner is a sinner whose sin is caused, and to some extent justified, by the ‘virtues’ of passion and sensibility; a sinner for whom the reader cannot help but feel a strong sympathy, inevitably undermining the moral condemnation suggested by the structure of the novel. Indeed, according to Wollstonecraft’s unsympathetic review, the positive description of the “vain” and “giddy”<sup>7</sup> Miss Milner seriously undermined the praiseworthy moral purpose of *A Simple Story* – to advocate the importance of female education for the development of a young woman’s self-awareness. But the novel’s dangers and limits stigmatised by Wollstonecraft were paradoxically to be appreciated and interpreted as qualities by subsequent

---

<sup>5</sup> K. M. Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth-Century England*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1982, p. 198.

<sup>6</sup> [M. Wollstonecraft], [review of “*A Simple Story*”], “The Analytical Review or history of literature, domestic and foreign, on an enlarged plan”, X, May-August 1791, p. 101.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.



readers. A perceptive Victorian reader like Julia Kavanagh, for instance, was bewildered by the modernity and novelty of Miss Milner’s character and in her 1863 *Biographical Sketches* she underlined how “there is nothing heroic about her”:

“She is a new woman, a true one, a very faulty one, introduced for the first time in the world. There had been no Miss Milner before this one, no such grateful embodiment of woman’s failings held out, not to imitation or admiration, but to a surer and deeper feeling – sympathy.”<sup>8</sup>

Kavanagh’s interpretation is insightful because the literary value and the radically innovative nature of the novel did not lay, as Wollstonecraft would have it, in the defence of a rational education for women, but rather in the articulation of female desire and agency through the figure of Miss Milner, who seems to embody “the female sexuality that women writers of Inchbald’s time were busy in denying in the interests of their own respectability.”<sup>9</sup>

Her unconventional passion for her tutor, who is a clergyman and whom she loves “with all the passion of a mistress, and with all the tenderness of a wife”,<sup>10</sup> is strikingly similar to the relationship between Amelia and Anhalt in *Lovers’ Vows*. One could indeed say the comedy provides a sort of happy-ending version of the tragic story told in the novel: Amelia’s coquetry and explicit behaviour are not punished; on the contrary, she is rewarded by her father’s consent to her marriage. If *A Simple Story* offers a contrast between vice and virtue (i.e. between Miss Milner and her daughter Matilda), in *Lovers’ Vows* we find a very different pattern, as

---

<sup>8</sup> J. Kavanagh, *English Women of Letters: Biographical Sketches*, London, Hurst & Blackett, 1863, p. 80.

<sup>9</sup> J. Spencer, *Introduction*, in E. Inchbald, *A Simple Story*, edited by J. M. S. Tompkins, Introduction by J. Spencer, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. XIV.

<sup>10</sup> E. Inchbald, *A Simple Story*, cit., p. 72.

there is no disparity between transgression and obedience, no punishment of sorts. The play, in fact, stages the triumph of two female characters (Amelia and Agatha) who, in different ways, overstep the boundaries of social conventions in the name of their desire. With the adaptation of Kotzebue's play, Inchbald's writing seems to free itself from the harsh moralistic approach that shaped the 'contrast' structure of *A Simple Story*.

3. *Jane goes to the theatre: "Lovers' Vows" as a model for "Mansfield Park"*

This is a relevant aspect for an examination of the intertextual relationship that Jane Austen establishes with *Lovers' Vows* and Inchbald's work in general. Austen uses the play in *Mansfield Park* as a *mise en abyme*, a representation on a minor scale of some features of the novel itself. But her interest for the themes and characters of Inchbald's work is, as I intend to suggest, probably more extensive and likely to encompass *A Simple Story* as well as *Lovers' Vows*. The interpretation of the function of *Lovers' Vows* in *Mansfield Park* is strictly related to Austen's attitude towards the theatre, a critical issue that in the recent years has given rise to a number of innovative critical contributions. The traditional interpretation explained Sir Thomas's interruption of the play as the expression of the author's negative attitude towards theatre and drama in general.<sup>11</sup> Today, it is widely accepted that Austen was not only a frequent theatre-goer, but also that herself and most of her family were devoted readers of classic as well as contemporary plays and they often amused themselves by organizing private theatricals with the same enthusiasm shown by the

---

<sup>11</sup> See M. Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1975, pp. 230-236.

young improvised actors of *Mansfield Park*. In light of these new interpretations, the traditional reading of Mansfield's private theatricals as an utter rejection of the immorality of the play (and perhaps theatre in general) seems less likely to be correct, and the question of the reason why Austen chose *Lovers' Vows* will have to be approached from a new perspective.

First published after the first performance at Covent Garden in 1799, the play had been republished twelve times,<sup>12</sup> and had been performed at the Theatre Royal in Bath in the years between 1801 and 1805, when the Austen family was still living there. In view of their passion for contemporary sentimental comedies, it is highly possible that some members of the family, if not Jane herself, had attended one of these performances.<sup>13</sup> What is undeniable for the reader of *Mansfield Park* is that Austen had a deep familiarity with the text. It might be right arguing that

"[...] any play selected by the bored young people would have served for Austen's introduction of the theme of carnival disruption, the great house turned topsy-turvy; and for the theme of the unavoidable theatricality of adult social life, which makes up the novel's final two volumes."<sup>14</sup>

Yet, *Lovers' Vows* had a specific feature that made it particularly suitable for the purpose: the relationship between the impudent Amelia and the inhibited cleric Anhalt functioned as an ideal intertextual extension of the novel's plot. Austen "must have had the play in mind from the beginning",<sup>15</sup> because of the complex network of parallelisms and

---

<sup>12</sup> See P. Gay, *Jane Austen and the Theatre*, cit. p. 105.

<sup>13</sup> On the basis of three 1814 letters from Jane to Cassandra, Paula Byrne speculates that the writer might have taken part in a private staging of *Lovers' Vows*: see P. Byrne, *Jane Austen and the Theatre*, cit., p. 150.

<sup>14</sup> P. Gay, *Jane Austen and the Theatre*, cit. p. 107.

<sup>15</sup> A. S. Byatt and I. Sodr , "Mansfield Park", in *Imagining Characters. Six Conversations About Women Writers*, New York, Vintage Books, 1997, p. 27.

differences connecting the characters in the novel and those in the comedy. The exclamation with which John Yates greets the choice of the *play* (“It is so useful to have any thing of a model!”)<sup>16</sup> can therefore be read as an expression of the author’s satisfaction in having found the right model, which not only means a source of inspiration, but also a concise representation, on a small scale, of the novel’s narrative strategies to be placed *en abyme*, and thus mirroring and anticipating the developments of plot, themes and characters. The triangular relationship between Edmund, Mary and Fanny is of course central to the relationship between the two texts. Fanny refuses to act, and seems passively devoted to the role of reader:

“The first use she made of her solitude was to take up the volume which had been left on the table, and begin to acquaint herself with the play of which she had heard so much. Her curiosity was all awake, and she ran through it with an eagerness which was suspended only by intervals of astonishment, that it could be chosen in the present instance – that it could be proposed and accepted in a private Theatre!”<sup>17</sup>

And indeed her attentive analysis of the dramatic text makes her immediately aware of the potential dangers of the play:

“Agatha and Amelia appeared to her in their different ways so totally improper for home representation – the situation of one, and the language of the other, so unfit to be expressed by any woman of modesty, that she could hardly suppose her cousins could be aware of what they were engaging in.”<sup>18</sup>

A witness to the whole staging of *Lovers’ Vows*, but relegated to a marginal secondary role, Fanny soon realises how much everyone else is enjoying the excitement from which she is excluded:

---

<sup>16</sup> J. Austen, *Mansfield Park*, edited by J. Wiltshire, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 163 (I, 15).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 161 (I, 14).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

"She was full of jealousy and agitation. Miss Crawford came with looks of gaiety which seemed an insult, with friendly expressions towards herself which she could hardly answer calmly. Every body around her was gay and busy, prosperous and important, each had their object of interest, their part, their dress, their favourite scene, their friends and confederates, all were finding employment in consultations and comparisons, or diversion in the playful conceits they suggested. She alone was sad and insignificant; she had no share in any thing; she might go or stay, she might be in the midst of their noise, or retreat from it to the solitude of the East room, without being seen or missed. She could almost think any thing would have been preferable to this."<sup>19</sup>

The theatricals affect Fanny's psychological and emotional development much more than it would appear at first sight, as she finds herself quite changed at the end of them. Despite her aversion to it, the whole *mise en scene* gives her the possibility to engage with theatre and, through theatre, to get in touch with a hidden part of herself, thus experiencing a process of indirect sentimental and sexual education.<sup>20</sup> The most striking evidence of the morally constructive function of the theatricals is the way in which the behaviour of the apparently passive and obedient Fanny changes to conform to the model provided in the play by the "odious, little, pert, unnatural, impudent"<sup>21</sup> Amelia. As the latter refuses to marry Count Cassel (as her father warmly recommends), the former rejects Henry Crawford's marriage proposal in the second part of the novel, to the utter bewilderment of the whole Bertram family. Fanny thus implicitly takes Amelia as a role model, transposing within the 'real world' of the novel an aspect of the character that she was not able to perform within the fictional sphere of the play. It could be argued that what Fanny learns from *Lovers' Vows* is indeed what a large number of conservative reviewers identified as the most subversive and dangerous aspect of the

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 187 (I, 17).

<sup>20</sup> P. Gay, *Jane Austen and the Theatre*, cit., p. 107.

<sup>21</sup> J. Austen, *Mansfield Park*, cit., p. 160 (I, 14).

character of Amelia: the ability to resist patriarchal authority and assert her own will against social conventions.

Fanny not only gets acquainted with *Lovers' Vows* through a thorough reading of it, familiarising with the passionate love scene that her beloved cousin Edmund will rehearse with Mary Crawford, but she also directly witnesses it – being relegated to the role of defenceless and frustrated spectator of one of the most controversial love scenes of the time. “Invested, indeed with the office of judge and critic”,<sup>22</sup> Fanny is overwhelmed once again by feelings of wariness and inadequacy:

“In watching them she forgot herself; and agitated by the increasing spirit of Edmund’s manner, had once closed the page and turned away exactly as he wanted help. It was imputed to very reasonable weariness, and she was thanked and pitied; but she deserved their pity, more than she hoped they would ever surmise. At last the scene was over, and Fanny forced herself to add her praise to the compliments each was giving the other; and when again alone and able to recall the whole, she was inclined to believe their performance would, indeed, have such nature and feeling in it, as must ensure their credit, and make it a very suffering exhibition to herself.”<sup>23</sup>

The scene that Mary and Edmund are rehearsing – one that readers of the time knew far too well – is the one in which the uninhibited Amelia declares her love to her tutor Anhalt. Inchbald’s brilliant dialogue articulates a content involving plenty of radical and transgressive connotations, because it presents a heroine who, against all the norms of propriety, cunningly declares her desire and imposes her will.

It is thus certainly not by chance that, in the *cast* of Mansfield, the role of Amelia goes to Mary Crawford: the anti-heroine *par excellence*, the only one who, despite her questionable behaviour, possesses, in Wollstonecraft’s words, the “splendid, yet fallacious virtues, as flow from sensibility” and wit. If in *Lovers' Vows* Inchbald engaged with the issue of

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 199 (I, 18).

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, pp. 199-200 (I, 18).

the agency of the female subject, and her right to express desire, Jane Austen does the same in *Mansfield Park*.<sup>24</sup> The choice of *Lovers’ Vows* is in fact related to Austen’s long-standing interest for the issue of “female conduct in the courtship process”.<sup>25</sup> The prototype for this theme was of course Samuel Richardson’s *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753) whose first three volumes are devoted to the difficulties encountered by the heroine who has to decide whether to confess her love to Sir Charles or not. The theme is also explored by Inchbald-Kotzebue in *Lovers’ Vows* (where Amelia openly challenges the norms established by Richardson), and by Austen herself in *Mansfield Park*, in the triangular relationship between Edmund, Fanny, and Mary, where the two female characters embody the alternative between *propriety* and the transgressive expression of female desire. The crucial function of the intertextual parallel with the comedy is to expose this conflict as the sexual-emotional centre that is “buried” at the heart of the novel:

“It’s Mary who gets to act Amelia, and Amelia is a woman who breaks the law of silence imposed upon Fanny [...]. Amelia simply says ‘No, I love you, will you marry me?’, which a woman may not do, and which is obviously what Fanny’s deepest soul must want to say, but she can’t. [...] I think buried in the centre of *Mansfield Park* and all the events that take place is the prohibition, like a fairy-tale, but it’s also convention in society, the prohibition that Fanny wouldn’t break: she couldn’t speak to Edmund because she was a woman.”<sup>26</sup>

But this very theme is already present in *A Simple Story*, where Inchbald narrates the love story between the *coquette* Miss Milner and Dorriforth, a Catholic priest. It is therefore perfectly legitimate to wonder whether Jane Austen knew Inchbald’s novel and whether – in addition to

---

<sup>24</sup> See P. Byrne, *Jane Austen and the Theatre*, cit., p. 153.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 155. See also E. M. Butler *Mansfield Park and Kotzebue’s “Lovers’ Vows”*, in “The Modern Language Review”, XXVIII, 1933, pp. 326-337.

<sup>26</sup> A. S. Byatt and I. Sodr , *Mansfield Park*, cit., pp. 26-27.

*Lovers' Vows* and through *Lovers' Vows* – she intended to refer to a work whose stylistic affinity with her own has been noticed.<sup>27</sup> A detail that could suggest Austen's knowledge of *A Simple Story* is the fact that *Emma*'s Mr Knightley describes the news of Robert Martin's engagement with Harriet as a "simple story".<sup>28</sup> Though interesting, this observation does not provide any solid evidence, and it is fair to acknowledge that we cannot have any certainties in this respect, although it could be argued that an avid reader such as Jane Austen, with a specific inclination for novels written by women, was likely to come across a work such as *A Simple Story* that enjoyed great popularity and success. Furthermore, the similarities between the two novels are numerous. Both Miss Milner and Mary Crawford's mistakes are ascribed first of all to the lack of a proper education, as they are said to be the product of an upbringing based more on "fashionable accomplishments" than on "good principles and morals".<sup>29</sup> Another striking similarity between the two novels is the protracted absence of the two patriarchal figures – Lord Elmwood-Dorriforth and Sir Thomas Bertram – who undertake long journeys in order to look after their business, and in both cases travel to the *West Indies*. While in *A Simple Story* Lord Elmwood's absence allows Miss Milner to betray him, in *Mansfield Park* the absence of the *pater familias* permits the undisturbed *mise en scene* of *Lovers' Vows*, with all the transgressions and dangerous flirtations that the private theatrical enables. It could also be argued that the marriage between Miss Milner and Dorriforth (who renounces his vows and becomes Lord Elmwood following the unexpected death of a cousin) seems to unfold the

---

<sup>27</sup> J. Spencer, *Introduction*, cit. p. VII: "Inchbald's concise, ironic narrative style anticipates Austen".

<sup>28</sup> J. Austen, *Emma*, edited by R. Cronin and D. McMillan, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 515 (III, 18). See P. Byrne, *A Simple Story. From Inchbald to Austen*, in "Romanticism", V, 2, 1999, pp. 161-172.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 165.



potential plot that, in *Mansfield Park*, is suggested by the illness of Tom Bertram, cherished by Mary Crawford, and finally disrupted by the recovery of the heir of Mansfield.

There is, moreover, a crucial feature of *Mansfield Park* that does not find a parallel in *Lovers' Vows*, but corresponds very closely to *A Simple Story*: the contrast structure which, in both novels, outlines the binary opposition between a virtuous heroine, reserved and respectful of patriarchal authority (Matilda-Fanny), to a charming *coquette* who does not hesitate to violate the rules of feminine propriety (Miss Milner-Mary). This opposition, which in both cases results in the punishment of the rebellious heroine, is (as we have already seen) completely absent from *Lovers' Vows*, where Amelia accomplishes her designs by imposing to her father her choice of a future husband. The dialogue between Jane Austen's novel and *Lovers' Vows* highlights, among the many analogies, also an essential difference between the two texts: Fanny Price has to accept a minor role within the staging of *Lovers' Vows* because her proper role (that of the virtuous young woman who respects traditional values and norms) is in fact absent from the play. Indeed, this role rightfully belongs to a novel like *A Simple Story*, in which Matilda, the exemplary daughter of Miss Milner, obtains exactly what Fanny will achieve in *Mansfield Park*.

Including *A Simple Story* in Austen's intertextual framework encourages us to consider the possibility that she might have compared the two patterns offered by Inchbald's oeuvre and decided to reject that of *Lovers' Vows* in favour of the far more pessimistic binary structure of *A Simple Story* based on the contrast between the two heroines. On one side, we find the official protagonist, Fanny Price, probably the least loved of all Austen heroines because of her apparent lack of liveliness and wit; on the

other side, we find Mary Crawford, the anti-heroine, to whom, according to some critics, Austen lends her truest voice.<sup>30</sup> Exactly, as with Inchbald's Miss Milner, Mary solicits sympathy from readers despite her evident faults, and this sympathy risks to undermine the message conveyed by the edifying structure of the plot in which the young woman who behaves improperly and utters her desire, cannot but surrender to the dull but solidly conservative Fanny.

#### 4. *The sense of an ending*

Of course, it is perfectly possible to give a moralistic and, as it were, 'reactionary' reading to the strategy I am outlining. We could in fact think that Jane Austen might have followed Inchbald's path backwards, from the play to the novel, in order to restore and vindicate the "politically and morally conservative"<sup>31</sup> structure of the *contrast novel*, which allowed a clear distinction between vice, to be punished, and virtue, to be rewarded. Austen would thus have rejected the seductive but dangerous immorality of a work like *Lovers' Vows*, which has to be regarded as an example of "comedy in its worst form".<sup>32</sup> However, this reading seems harder to defend in the light of the new interpretations of Austen's attitude towards the theatre and recent critical readings that tend to outline a profile of the author that, if not properly subversive, is certainly much less conservative than the one widely accepted in the past.<sup>33</sup> My own suggestion that Amelia

---

<sup>30</sup> See B. Battaglia, *La zitella illetterata. Parodia e ironia nei romanzi di Jane Austen*, Napoli, Liguori, 2009, pp. 111-184.

<sup>31</sup> P. Gay, *Theatricality and the Theatricals in "Mansfield Park"*, cit., p. 126.

<sup>32</sup> J. Austen, *Mansfield Park*, cit., p. 160 (I, 14).

<sup>33</sup> See among others C. L. Johnson, *Women, Politics and the Novel*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1988; D. Nokes, *Jane Austen. A Life*, London, Fourth Estate, 1997; C. Tuite, *Romantic Austen*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002; W. H. Galperin, *The Historical Austen*, Philadelphia, University

functions as a model for *both* Fanny and Mary seems to weaken the stress in traditional interpretations on the opposition between the two heroines as well as between the novel and the play, suggesting that both relationships might involve a high degree of "symmetry" rather than mere contrast.<sup>34</sup> From this new perspective it would be possible to argue that, by making reference to the novel of a Jacobin writer whose representation of an outspoken young woman is so compelling that it contradicts the moralistic message entrusted to the structure of the book as a whole, Jane Austen is subtly suggesting to her readers the nature of the very ideological and textual strategy she is pursuing in *Mansfield Park*.

Some critics have argued that, in *Mansfield Park*, Austen articulates a double language: the language of the conventional moralistic narrator, and the language of an ironic author who denounces the partiality and unreliability of the very exemplary moral tale she pretends to tell.<sup>35</sup> In this light, we could believe that, by alluding to Inchbald's work in general, and to *A Simple Story* in particular, Jane Austen is indeed referring to a model whose message she intends to reiterate. Indeed, the happy ending of *Lovers' Vows* is rejected by Austen and denounced as misleading, but not (as the traditional interpretation would have it) because it is subversive or immoral, but rather because it is overly optimistic. Real life does not work like 'comedy'; real life is more similar to a novel like *Mansfield Park* or *A Simple Story*, where the heroines need to conform to conventions and expected standards of behaviour, as with Fanny or Matilda, or be punished

---

of Pennsylvania Press, 2003; J. Heydt-Stevenson, *Austen's Unbecoming Conjunctions. Subversive Laughter, Embodied History*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005; P. Byrne, *The Real Jane Austen. A Life in Small Things*, London, Harper Press, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> A. S. Byatt and I. Sodr , "Mansfield Park", cit., p. 19: "It's a symmetry that's also brought out by their relationship to Amelia in *Lovers' Vows*, who in a way represents both of them [Fanny and Mary]".

<sup>35</sup> See B. Battaglia, *La zitella illetterata. Parodia e ironia nei romanzi di Jane Austen*, cit., p. 114.

like Mary Crawford and Miss Milner. The conclusion of the novel is “deeply undramatic”<sup>36</sup> insofar as it contradicts the utopian outcome of the comedy: patriarchal order is restored and the subversive theatrical carnival of the “acting week”<sup>37</sup> is forgotten.<sup>38</sup> The words used by Austen to confirm that this is to be regarded as a happy ending are so ambiguous that, ironically, they might seem to suggest to her reader that this is not the case: “With so much true merit and true love, and no want of fortune or friends, the happiness of the married cousins *must appear* as secure as earthly happiness can be”.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> P. Gay, *Theatricality and the Theatricals in “Mansfield Park”*, cit., p. 128.

<sup>37</sup> J. Austen, *Mansfield Park*, cit., p. 414 (III, 5).

<sup>38</sup> See B. Battaglia, *La zitella illetterata. Parodia e ironia nei romanzi di Jane Austen*, cit., pp. 175-184.

<sup>39</sup> J. Austen, *Mansfield Park*, cit., p. 547 (III, 17). Emphasis added.

Copyright © 2017

*Parole rubate. Rivista internazionale di studi sulla citazione /  
Purloined Letters. An International Journal of Quotation Studies*