

Cheering for crawford



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If ever Jane Austen set out to depict the moralistic chasm between Regency society and pre-Victorian propriety, she did so with *Mansfield Park*. To accomplish this, her characters are divided among these diverging ideologies. The majority succumb to their unscrupulous fancies while the few but faithful are governed by their sense of duty. This distinction is as acute as it is unwanted, for the plot revolves around characters labouring to convert one another. Henry Crawford, a wealthy, congenial gentleman, makes this pastime his principal entertainment. As to his methodology, where theatricals end and reality begins is hardly distinguishable. Because Crawford is an outstanding actor with magnificent charisma, it is difficult to discern his sincerity and put off his charms. Austen uses Crawford's person to demonstrate that authenticity determines where conviction is felt and principle is honoured. As such, he embodies one of Austen's greater challenges to her readers, who are left with a moral predicament of whether this very amiable actor should be cheered for or chastised. Henry Crawford is somewhat of an anomaly as a dashing rogue, for the first description of his mien is that he was "not handsome, but had air and countenance; manners both lively and pleasant." (35). He is further described by his sister Mary as the "most horrible flirt that can be imagined," (36) and has a flock of admirers who are "dying" to marry him. For all of their efforts to "reason, coax or trick him into marrying" (36), however, he cannot be persuaded to abandon his freedom as a bachelor. As we are told, "to anything like a permanence of abode, or limitation of society, Henry Crawford had, unluckily, a great dislike." (35). This is a very critical piece of information in establishing his character because it shows that he will evade the bonds of matrimony as long as his youthful autonomy is sufficiently amusing. That is,

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the moment he finds himself unable to woo a woman, who needs to be of strong moral character if she is able to resist him, is the time he is most likely to think himself in love. He is a conquistador of challenges, not honest courtships, and as such he has not enough compassion to feel any conviction for his actions. Aside from this vibrant independence, Crawford's next greatest character trait is determination. Whatever he sets his sights on must be achieved at all costs, which is where his skill as a performer becomes his most valuable asset. He exercises this talent with the commitment of a mother to her beloved child and the alacrity of a playful puppy. He also takes great care to spend his time rewardingly, so that he will never lack the gentleman's "wholesome alloy of labour" (204). "Recreation and indulgence" are fine, but as he says of himself "...I do not like to eat the bread of idleness." (204). Equally true, he despises drinking the wine of deferment, for he is not at Mansfield Park for a week before he sets out to enamour the Miss Bertrams. The height of his pursuit pinnacles when he is assured that both of their hearts are held in his hands, and we see that his dedication wanes as soon as his vanity has been satiated. Thus, his attentions are shallow and selfish, and not at all as they seem to his hopeful admirers. It is in his early acquaintance with the Bertram family that Crawford's acting debut is made. Even though he is disinclined to matrimony, his affable façade gives the appearance of wanting to engage the ladies' most permanent affections. His actual intentions are made perfectly clear from the narrative, that "He did not want them to die of love; but with sense and temper which ought to have made him judge and feel better, he allowed himself great latitude on such points." (37). Austen here begins her illustration of the propriety in exercising conviction. The reader

knows that Crawford has enough good judgement, but his moral failure is an inability to consider exercising it as his duty. His pretensions as a performer jeopardize his integrity because he assumes them to be inconsequential, and perhaps even shared, by others. To him, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." With this mentality, he bears no concern for the sincere feelings of others, who can but watch him waltz through Mansfield Park as the greatest tempter since the serpent of Eden. Crawford's real duplicity as an actor comes into even better focus with the Sotherton episode. The Bertrams and the Crawfords set out to view Mr. Rushworth's large estate at Sotherton. By this time Maria Bertram is all but formally engaged to marry Mr. Rushworth, a bumbling, boring gentleman. It is Crawford who engages her affections, however, and he is quite cognizant of his influence. Despite the indecency of his behaviour, he continues to lure Maria even while in the chapel, where he takes the intimate privilege of whispering, "I do not like to see Miss Bertram so near the altar." (79) His romantic innuendo is reinforced by the "look of meaning" that follows his speech. (79) Later on, he persuades her to continue their promenade alone by squeezing past a locked gate. As improper as it is, the inducement is too great for Maria when he sardonically remarks, "And for the world you would not get out without the key and without Mr. Rushworth's authority and protection, or I think you might with little difficulty pass round the edge of the gate, here, with my assistance; I think it might be done, if you really wished to be more at large, and could allow yourself to think it not prohibited." (88). Were this casual speech directed towards a sister or a friend, there would be no implications to consider. What Austen wants her audience to read into, however, is the underlying promotion of indecorum. As

Ian Littlewood says of this event (and also of acting in general), its propriety “ is concerned with what they mean here, to this group of characters in this particular context...[it] represent[s] an attempt to bypass the permissible limits of expression, to find a way of doing what you ought not to do or what you ought not to say.” That Crawford instigates this misconduct as an unaffected suitor is evidence of his good performance. Moreover, it demonstrates how his initial designs for the acquaintance, where the Miss Bertrams would no more than like him, gives way to his own shallow principles and indelicacy. The theatre interlude at Mansfield Park also amplifies Crawford’s theatricality. Having lived in London and been exposed to more such entertainment, he really has the best concept of good stage presence. He is also the most remarkable actor in the private troupe. He is deficient in capacity to act both as a lover and as another character, however, and Julia Bertram perceives his pretentiousness. Realizing that he is exposed to her as a fraudulent suitor, he endeavours to restore their coquetry “ by the usual attack of gallantry and compliment.” (143). When his half-hearted attempts fail he gives up altogether, for he was “ too busy with his play to have time for more than one flirtation” (143). The more Julia understands how he operates, the more she realizes that his attentions were awarded at the expense of her own. This reversal of courtship roles reflects its inauthenticity. As it is, she learns too late how he is merely acting to have a proper esteem for her and her expectations. Although displeased to lose one admirer, Crawford capitalizes on his opportunity to entertain himself with Maria’s hero worship. Their dalliance is most overtly shown through the course of their rehearsals for the play. The more he and his “ indefatigable” partner practice, the more he indulges his liveliness with a lust for theatrical

intrigue. Maria's acting, on the other hand, is a manifestation of her true feelings for him. The poor girl is too much in love to realize that, for all of Crawford's "looks of devotion" and "pressing her hand to his heart" (154), he sought no more than the gratification of his own selfish vanity. Austen's ironic situation of role-playing, where Crawford is a blackguard and Maria is a fallen woman, is also significant in light of foreshadowing. The fact that she uses Sir Thomas, who is a symbol of decorum, to cast a dark cloud upon the theatre is evidence that she believes propriety should triumph misconduct, as when Maria and Crawford are ultimately punished. Crawford's most brilliant performance comes by his attempted seduction of Fanny Price, the novel's timid but resolved heroine. When he returns to Mansfield Park and finds Maria and Julia absent, his attentions turn towards Fanny as the object of his amusement. His conceit is so flattering, in fact, that he believes he can make Fanny fall in love with him in a mere fortnight. As he dramatically confides in his sister, "I cannot be satisfied without Fanny Price, without making a small hole in Fanny Price's heart." (204). By his sister's diagnosis, Fanny's real attraction is her not caring about him, of which he laments, "I never was so long in company with a girl in my life - trying to entertain her - and succeed so ill! Never met with a girl who looked so grave on me! I must try to get the better of this." (206). To Crawford's dismay his efforts are ineffective; to his credit he believes Fanny to be more worth pursuing than any other woman he has known. Thus, he tenaciously persists, and soon there is less of a distinction between the excellent theatricals of a talented actor and the sincere infatuation of a maturing admirer. Even the reader can acknowledge that he seems a changed man. Fanny, however, has an infallible moral barometer that detects the insincerity of Crawford's

professed devotion. As we are told, “ It was impossible for [Fanny] to be insensible of Mr. Crawford’s change of manners. She had long seen it. He evidently tried to please her – he was gallant – he was attentive – he was something like what he had been to her cousins: he wanted, she supposed, to cheat her of her tranquillity as he had cheated them...” (234). Fanny’s suppositions prove true when Crawford runs off with Mrs. Rushworth. Even more shocking is when he refuses to marry her after the scandal, and Mrs. Rushworth is cast out of her husband’s house and her reputation is stamped with a scarlet letter. Austen’s sentence for Crawford permanently condemns him to belong to the cruel race of Regency actors like himself. Ironically, then, for all of his forward thinking he becomes the starling who cannot escape. The question yet remains, however, if Crawford’s character is always acting throughout the whole of the novel or if, for a brief respite in the midst of his obsession with Fanny, he did inadvertently fall in love. It is a popular contention of critics that she could have been his saving grace had she but accepted his hand. Indeed, it is worth considering that her soul of discretion could refine his heart for pleasure. This prospect is appealing, for every reader likes to see the reform of a wayward man, particularly if it is a testament of the power of love. In the end, seems more plausible that Crawford simply made a choice to walk the wide and winding road where his acting was more appreciated. All of this lends to the conclusion that Austen finds theatricality a dangerous influence on those without sound principles. The world of drama may be entertaining, like Crawford, but society is not made to function upon immodest lover’s vows. Crawford perhaps deserves a standing ovation for his consistency in presentation, but it seems that Austen would not recommend cheering for Crawford as a whole.