THINGS AND THEATRICALITY: JAMES AUSTEN'S QUEST FOR VIRTUOUS DRAMA

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SOME time in 1782, James Austen, aged seventeen, produced the first of at least seven Austen family theatricals at Steventon.[1] Between 1782 and January 1789 (by which time he was twenty-three), he wrote six original prologues and four original epilogues for presentation as part of these theatricals, all of which I list below in Table 1. Since this study is part of a larger project on Jane Austen's dramaturgy, Table 1 also lists the titles and dates of the original dramas written by James's youngest sister: the resulting timeline may invite us to consider how Jane Austen's ideas about what drama could or should be developed in the context of the debates that her brother's epilogues and prologues engage in. In this essay, however, I focus on James Austen's ideas, as conveyed by his prologue and epilogue to *Matilda: A Tragedy* (1782), his prologue to *The Rivals* (1784), and his prologue to *The Wonder! A Woman Keeps a Secret* (December 1787), in order to examine how Austen's views on drama and performance emerged and evolved between 1782 and 1787. These four paratexts (three of them juvenilia), taken together, illuminate Austen's puzzling early preference for eighteenth-century tragedy; they also chronicle his move from deep distrust of the material objects necessary to theatrical performance to the complete rejection of such iconoclasm as unbefitting a minister ordained in the Established Church: a rejection energised in part by the young author's growing confidence in his English masculinity.

For every play after the first one, the Austens (under James's leadership, I'm assuming) chose a comedy. For the inaugural production, however, they chose the eminently forgettable *Matilda: A Tragedy*, penned by the eminently forgettable Rev. Thomas Francklin, who begins as he means to go on, in blank verse full of archaic diction and noble sentiment:

> MATILDA. I thank thee, gentle Bertha, for thy goodness;
> If aught cou'd sooth the anguish of my soul,

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Or raise it from the horrors of despair
To hope and joy, 'twou'd be thy gen'rous friendship:
But I am sunk so deep in misery,
That comfort cannot reach me.
BERTHA. Talk not thus,
My sweet Matilda; innocence, like thine,
Must be the care of all-directing heav'n. (1.1.1–8)

And so on, through a lengthy scene of clunky exposition in ornate Gothic garb. "Talk not thus," indeed.

To be fair, the play had found success on the London stage only a few years earlier. When "performed for the first time on Saturday January the 1st, at the Theatre Royal Drury-lane" in 1775, it was "received with universal applause" ("Account" 25). According to the *Covent-Garden Magazine*, *Matilda* is "told in even, pretty numbers," and the language is "pleasing and poetical." However, the reviewer also calls the play—quite rightly—"defective in point of business, from a scarcity of characters, and a descriptive prolixity"; moreover, it is in the reviewer's opinion "barren" of invention, for "its few incidents are evidently derived from other writers," Shakespeare and Euripides specifically ("Account" 27). So why *Matilda*? Paula Byrne notes "Its long, rambling speeches and dramatic clichés of language" (4), but she also notes practical advantages to Francklin's script: "The tragedy" has "only six speaking parts" (6); furthermore, it requires no curtain, no elaborate set, few scene changes, few props. In Byrne's summation, it would have been "manageable in the dining room" (6). But that does not fully explain why the Austens chose it.

James Austen's prologue and epilogue to *Matilda* insist that, as far as he is concerned, the play's prolixity and its low production values alike are virtues to boast of. Far from a pragmatic compromise, he insists, "the tragic lyre" that *Matilda* represents offers actors something to "aspire" to ("Prologue to the *Tragedy of Matilda*" ["Prol. *Mat.*"] p. 9, ll. 34, 33). To be sure, there is a certain amount of rationalisation evident in his argument. But in his justification of *Matilda*, Austen does engage knowledgeably and thoughtfully with some of the major arguments we find recorded in the long history of debates about the nature of drama—especially those that concern theatre's potential either to instruct and ennoble its audience or to corrupt and debase it.

The arguments date back to Plato and Aristotle, and by Austen's day they had been taken up in England many times, most obviously by the Puritans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but also by such luminaries as Ben Jonson and John Dryden. Debate had erupted again with the publication in 1698 of Jeremy Collier's blistering attack on Restoration comedy, *A Short View of the Immorality, and Profaneness of the English Stage*, with such chapter titles as "The Immodesty of the Stage," "The Clergy Abused by the Stage," and "Immorality Encouraged by the Stage." Collier's

James Austen's Career		Prologues and Epilogues by James Austen (b. 13 Feb. 1765, d. 13 Dec. 1819)		Dramas by Jane Austen (b. 16 Dec. 1775, d. 18 July 1817)	
July 1779	Matriculates at St. John's College; made Fellow (Founder's Kin)				
1783	BA	1782 (after 13 Feb.)	• "Prologue to the Tragedy of Matilda" (Francklin) • "Epilogue to the Tragedy of Matilda"		
		1784	• "Prologue to The Rivals" (Sheridan) • "Epilogue to the Rivals"		
1787	Holy Orders (deacon)	Dec. 1787	• "Prologue to The Wonder" (Centlivre) • "Epilogue to The Comedy of the Wonder"	1787	"The Mystery"
		Jan. 1788	• "Prologue to The Chances" (Fletcher/ Buckingham/Garrick)		
		Mar. 1788	• "Prologue to the Tragedy of Tom Thumb" (Fielding)		
1788	MA, first curacy (Stoke Charity)	Dec. 1788	• "Prologue to a private Theatrical Exhibition at Steventon" (*High Life Below Stairs* [Townley]? followed by "The Visit" [Jane Austen]?)	Dec. 1788 or Jan. 1789	"The Visit" [dedicated to James Austen]
1789	Holy Orders (priest)	Jan. 1789	• "Epilogue to The Sultan" (Bickerstaffe)		
Jan. 1789 to Mar. 1790	Publishes *The Loiterer* (with brother Henry)				
1792	Ends fellowship at SJC; marries Anne Mathew			1792?	"Sir Charles Grandison," act 1
				1793?	"The First Act of a Comedy"
				1800?	"Grandison," acts 2 through 5

Table 1. Timeline of James Austen's prologues and epilogues in context.[2]

work may have contributed to Austen's early suspicions about comedy as a genre (not to mention his belief in the dignity of the clergy), but it is to earlier writers that we may trace Austen's anxiety about the material objects—sets, costumes, props, machinery—that spectacle depends on and that may, as well, be just too closely linked with the desiring material bodies of the men and women who perform and attend plays.

Matilda actually has a happy ending, at least as far as Matilda and her lover Edwin are concerned. Yet Francklin terms it a "tragedy," and both the *Covent-Garden Magazine* and Austen embrace the term: we might think of this less as false advertising and more as a convenient shorthand for announcing that the audience can expect heroic characters who experience heightened emotions, a plot set in a distant time or place that observes the three unities of time, place, and action, and lengthy speeches in an elevated style, composed in blank verse or rhyming couplets. Since *Matilda* ticks all these boxes, its happy ending hardly matters.[3]

But to Austen, what *Matilda* has, while important, is less important than what it does not have, namely, all the trappings and machinery of spectacle. His prologue launches into a series of lines all beginning with "No":

> When Thespis first professed the mimic art,
> Rude were his Actors, & his stage a cart;
> No scene gay painted, to the eye displayed
> The waving honours of the sylvan glade:
> No canvass Palace pleased the wondering sight,
> No rosined lightening flashed its forked light;
> No iron bowl the rolling thunder forms,
> No rattling pease proclaim the driving storms;
> No glittering falchion graced the Hero's side,
> No nodding feathers rose in tinselled pride;
> No angry Monarch vowing vengeance loud,
> Pleased with his full mouthed rant the list'ning crowd[.]
>
> ("Prol. *Mat.*" p. 8, ll. 1–12)

Austen introduces this list by stating that the actors who lack such theatrical things as a gaily painted "canvas Palace" for set; as rosin, "iron bowl," or "rattling pease" for special effects; and as "glittering falchions" or "nodding feathers" for costumes are "Rude" (that is, primitive or unsophisticated). However, he also makes it clear that such modern supplements to the originary "mimic art" (l. 1) are in his view anything but the "wise improvements" that "this happier age" supposes them to be (l. 16). The purer, if ruder, theatre of the "sylvan glade" (l. 4) is degraded, not improved, by the incorporation of things designed to appeal to and deceive the physical senses.

Naturally, this aspiring eighteenth-century scholar and poet is keen to improve on the classics, but he insists that spectacle is not the way: on this point, Austen

invokes no less an authority than Aristotle. In the best-known bit of his *Poetics,* Aristotle identifies the desired end of a good tragedy as *catharsis*, achieved when the downfall of the tragic hero elicits an audience response that is conventionally translated either as "terror and pity" or "fear and pity" (Chap. 6).[4] Compare Austen's aim, as stated towards the end of his prologue to *Matilda*:

> To fill the softened soul with *grief* sincere,
> And draw from *pity*'s eye the tender tear;
> These are the triumphs of the tragic lyre;
> To this, though far unequal we aspire ….
> (p. 10, ll. 31–34, emphasis added)

He aspires to elicit "grief" and "pity" in his audience with this "tragic" performance; in other words, Austen's aim is a genteel version of catharsis.

Also Aristotelian is Austen's method for achieving this aim, at least insofar as Aristotle was generally interpreted in the eighteenth century. In the same chapter in which we find the definition of catharsis, the *Poetics* puts spectacle[5] firmly in its place: as translator Thomas Twining has it, "The DECORATION has, also, a great effect, but, of all the parts, is most foreign to the art. For the power of Tragedy is felt without representation, and actors; and the beauty of the decorations depends more on the art of the mechanic, than on that of the Poet" (121–22).[6] Furthermore, "Terror and pity may be raised by the *decoration*—the mere *spectacle*—but they may also arise from the circumstances of the *action* itself; which is far preferable, and shows a superior Poet" (138). Publishing his translation of *The Poetics* just seven years after Austen's "Prologue to the *Tragedy of Matilda*," Twining follows Aristotle in consistently keeping the focus on the responsibility of the poet to write a script that will engage the audience: "For the fable should be so constructed, that, without the assistance of the sight, its incidents may excite horror and commiseration in those, who *hear* them only" (138). However, earlier translations and commentaries, which Austen may have encountered, shift responsibility from the poet to the audience. The 1705 translation, for instance, includes a note translated from Dacier which elaborates on Aristotle as follows: "both he that is Blind, and he that Reads the Play only, *ought to be* as much concerned as he that sees it" (*Aristotle's Art* 236–37n. 2, emphasis added), and the anonymous translator also makes a point in his preface of warning against "deluded Eyes and corrupt Imaginations" that might "mislead us" (n.p.). Since the words alone of a well-written tragedy *ought to* suffice, a taste for spectacle is evidence of delusion and corruption, whereas willingness to forego spectacle becomes the test of a right-thinking and righteous audience.[7]

Here we may also recall Ben Jonson's famous feud with his collaborator on court masques, Inigo Jones, whose own "canvass palaces," such as the one shown in Figure 1, were masterpieces of design and invention. According to Jonson, however, as

expressed in his Preface to *Hymenaei* (1606), Jones's spectacle is merely short-lived flesh, whereas his, Jonson's, words are the soul of the masque that (by being published) will live forever:

> It is a noble and just advantage, that the things subjected to *Understanding* have of those which are objected to *Sense,* that the one sorte are but momentarie, and meerely taking; the other impressing, and lasting: Else the Glory of all these *Solemnities* had perish'd like a Blaze, and gone out, in the *Beholders* eyes. So short-liv'd are the *Bodies* of all Thinges, in comparison of their *Soules.* And, though *Bodies* oft-times have the ill lucke to be sensually preferr'd, they find afterwards, the good fortune (when *Soules* live) to be utterly forgotten. (A3, original emphasis)

It is not the spectacle, now, that has passed but the book we hold in our hands that constitutes "the Glory of all these Solemnities."

Jonson recalls Aristotle, and no doubt means to do so, insofar as he privileges the poet's words over the "Thinges" that someone *not* a poet once built in order to catch "the *Beholders* eyes."[8] However, Jonson's distinction between spectacle and book in terms of the distinction between perishable body and imperishable soul belongs squarely to the age of print—and to the age of Puritans. It is this early modern tradition that James Austen draws on when, in his epilogue to *Matilda*, he suggests that those who crave spectacle are far too interested in things of the flesh. Here he mockingly accuses the "fair Ladies" (l. 5) in his audience of an ungenteel silence:

> Hallo! Good Gentlefolks! What none asleep!
> And could you really your attention keep
> To a dull tale, which passed the Lord knows when,
> Touched up too by a vulgar Parson's [i.e., Francklin's] pen?
> And you fair Ladies too, what silent all!
> Not one word spoke of Opera, Play, or Ball?
> Olympian dew, or Essence for the face,
> Of cheapening Milliners, or washing lace;
> A hen-pecked Husband, or a broken fan,
> Nor one soft whisper to the charming man!
> To say the truth, we all affronted feel,
> Such usage is nor proper nor Genteel. (p. 9, ll. 1–12)

He fears the women have been watching the play when they should have been gossiping about such commodities as "Olympian dew, … Essence for the face," lace, and fans (ll. 7–9): all the stuff of feminine vanity and extravagance. This vanity also

explains why such an audience would treat "Opera, Play, or Ball" as interchangeable (l. 6): all three events are opportunities both to *see* and to *be* a spectacle.

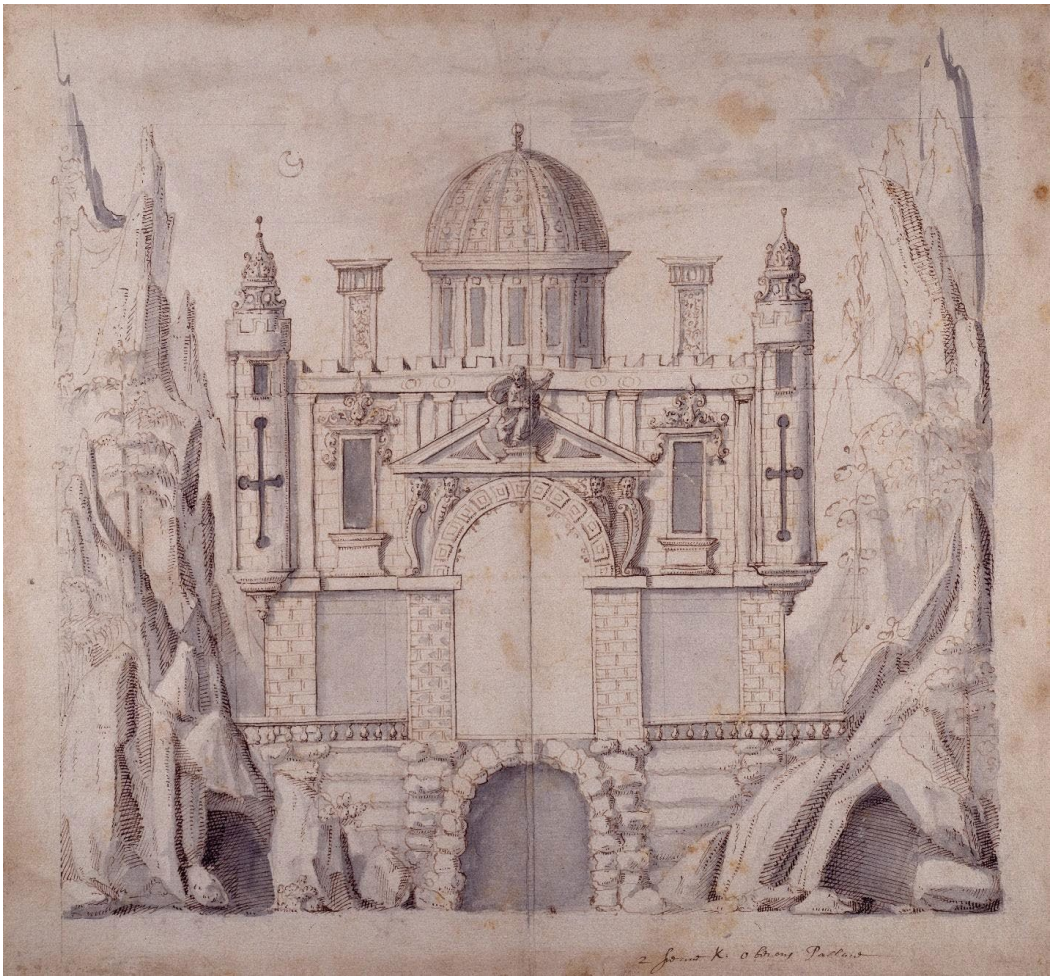

Figure 1. Oberon's Palace*, c. 1611 (pen & ink), by Inigo Jones (1573–1652). The Devonshire Collections, Chatsworth. Reproduced by permission of Chatsworth Settlement Trustees/Bridgeman Images.*

Moreover, since the desire to be looked at is an immodest one, such desiring women might also be unfaithful and domineering. Austen imagines gossip's easy evolution into flirtation, as a fair one turns from talk of her "broken fan" to offer a "soft whisper to the charming man" who is, presumably, next to her in the audience (p. 9, ll. 9–10); this enthralling target is obviously not the flirt's "hen-pecked Husband" (l. 9). Because a play like *Matilda* does not feed the taste for theatrical spectacle, it could be considered "vulgar" (ll. 4, 20) by the fashionably sensual and materialistic, but it may, suggests Austen, be appreciated by those who are not too corrupted by modern tastes to appreciate "love between a man & wife":

> Why what d'ye think your neighbours all will say?
> I fear they'll think you came to see the Play.
> Which, except love between a man & wife,
> Is really the most vulgar thing in life …. (p. 9, ll. 17–20)

In this epilogue, then, married love stands in for all things that are as virtuous as they are unfashionable, including "the Play" Austen has just presented.

Nevertheless, despite these two apologias for *Matilda* in particular and for the tragic style in general, Austen's imminent apostasy is hinted at in the prologue, which indirectly acknowledges his discomfort with Francklin's bombastic, histrionic style. As we have seen, he praises the actors of the mythical past for what they lacked:

> No angry Monarch vowing vengeance loud,
> Pleased with his full mouthed rant the list'ning crowd[.]
> T'was simple nature then they kept in view,
> Thence well earned plaudits from their audience drew[.]
> ("Prol. *Mat.*" p. 9, ll. 11–14)

Here Austen implies that Francklin's play is one of those exceptional, old-fashioned works that is able to keep "simple nature … in view" while abjuring the "full mouthed rant" (ll. 13, 12). Given the villain Morcar's lengthy, rage-fueled rants, and given more generally what that early review terms *Matilda*'s "descriptive prolixity," such a claim is surely disingenuous. We may much more readily believe that Austen dislikes such rants than that he believes *Matilda* to be free of them.[9]

Yet he has also been educated to admire the heightened language of Restoration and eighteenth-century tragedy. If *Matilda* is a failure, it may have seemed a noble one, for its author Francklin has striven mightily to live up to the difficult double imperative articulated by the Restoration playwright and critic John Dryden in his 1668 "Essay of Dramatick Poesie": to present "*A just and lively image of human nature*" (36, original emphasis), which is the aim of all drama, but, in the case of tragedy, to do so using verse (whether blank verse or rhyming couplets) and elevated language. As Dryden asserts, "a serious Play" is "the representation of Nature … wrought up to an higher pitch" (100).[10] This ideal places demands on the playwright that even Dryden found challenging, but it is one that young men like Austen were taught to respect.

A similar commitment to the kind of language "wrought up to an higher pitch" that we find in *Matilda*, and a similar failure to represent Nature, may be found in John Home's better-known 1756 tragedy *Douglas*, which features the "My name is Norval" speech that Tom Bertram in *Mansfield Park* recalls reciting from memory. I quote *Douglas*'s opening lines here for purposes of comparison with the opening lines of *Matilda*, quoted above:

> Act 1. Scene 1.
> *The Court of a Castle, surrounded with woods.*
> *Enter* Lady RANDOLPH.
>
> Ye woods and wilds, whose melancholy gloom
> Accords with my soul's sadness, and draws forth
> The voice of sorrow from my bursting heart,
> Farewel a while: I will not leave you long;
> For in your shades I deem some spirit dwells,
> Who from the chiding stream, or groaning oak,
> Still hears, and answers to MATILDA's moan.
> Oh DOUGLAS, DOUGLAS! (pp. 1–3; act 1, sc. 1)

Just as Francklin's *Matilda* will do a few years later, this play opens with a high-born woman named Matilda in an isolated setting, who expresses strong feeling with archaic diction ("Ye woods and wilds"; "I deem"), with elevated language ("whose melancholy gloom / Accords with my soul's sadness), and in blank verse.

The same may be said of Norval's style of expressing himself. His famous speech begins as follows:

> My name is NORVAL: on the Grampion hills
> My father feeds his flocks; a frugal swain,
> Whose constant cares were to increase his store,
> And keep his only son, myself, at home.
> For I had heard of battles, and I long'd
> To follow to the field some warlike lord;
> And heav'n soon granted what my sire denied.
> (pp. 13–14; act 2, sc. 1)

As Susan Allen Ford points out, the "Norval" speech was "popular throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries" (128) and was reprinted in more than one elocution text (128, 131). This fact may help explain how *Matilda*, written in a similar style, could be considered "pleasing and poetic" by a reviewer; it also points to another good reason for James Austen to consider something in such a style worth performing: he was a student. Since elocution was essential for future preachers and politicians, we can safely assume that speeches like "My name is Norval" had long been part of his education. We should also bear in mind that elocution exercises require no props, special effects, or costumes. Aristotle would surely approve.

In 1783, the year after producing *Matilda*, James Austen earned his BA. Perhaps shedding undergraduate status helped him find the confidence to turn away from elocutionary exercises and Aristotelian tragedy and turn towards the comedy that was

so much more congenial to him, to the rest of his cast, and to their audience.[11] In any case, Austen announces this turn in his prologue to the 1784 production of Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Rivals*:

> Let woe worn grief, or hoary age admire
> The loftier numbers of the tragic lyre;
> Court the soft pleasures that from pity flow;
> Seek joy in tears & luxury in Woe …. (p. 10, ll. 5–8)

Tragedy, with its "Woe" and "pity," is all very well for some, but not for him. Certain core eighteenth-century values remain: he wishes "instruction and delight" for his audiences here (p. 10, l. 12), an aim he expressed in nearly identical terms two years before, when in the prologue to *Matilda* he hoped "At once our audience to instruct & please" (p. 9, l. 29). Still, Austen is done with tragedy now. For one thing, he is unself-conscious about owning his youth and the interests appropriate to it: he begins by refusing to apologise for not being of a "hoary age," and he concludes by confidently assuring the young ladies in the audience that it will not be long until "manhood's strength has damp'd our boyish fears," and "they who liked as Boys shall Love as Men" (p. 10, ll. 24, 28).

Austen's confidence in his choice of play cannot be separated from his growing confidence in his masculinity: as he starts to shake his "boyish fears" of the flesh and blood female, he also begins to shake his fear of Jonson's theatrical "flesh." He is far less anxious now about the material objects associated with the modern stage, even if he is not quite ready to celebrate them:

> 'Tis ours, less noble, not less pleasing task,
> To draw from folly's features fashion's mask;
> To paint the scene where wit & sense unite
> To yield at once instruction & delight;
> . . . . . .
> 'Tis ours to show true virtue's image dres't
> In the light drapery of Fancy's vest …. (p. 10, ll. 9–12, 15–16)

Instead of "Olympian dew" on flesh and blood faces, his new target is "fashion's mask" on "folly's features": a safely vague metaphor that spares our blushes even as it redirects our attention from commodities like face creams and masks back to words and actions. In theatre, after all, words and actions are folly's essence. We find a similar rhetorical move in the closing couplet, which promises to show "true virtue's image dres't / In the light drapery of Fancy's vest." Wit, at least, even wit as suggestive as "light drapery," is an ornament Austen no longer fears.

By December 1787, which is when the Austens staged Susanna Centlivre's sexy comedy *The Wonder! A Woman Keeps a Secret*, James Austen appears to have decided

that "wit" is a downright Christian virtue, and that anything associated with it—including the things of the theatre—must be virtuous by association. It is no longer the history and conventions of the theatre that ground his arguments; now it is the history and traditions of England, and he speaks with the authority of one recently ordained as a deacon in the Established Church. Let others have "green & rosy" Spring, "dazzling Summer," and "ruddy Autumn" (p. 18, ll. 1–3), he declares:

> But be the social joys of Christmas mine.
> . . . . . .
> To thee [Christmas], from old, what festive joys belong!
> Thine was the Bard's Romance, & Minstrel's song.
> Nor less in later times thy solemn rites,
> When Britain's gentle Dames & peerless Knights
> In due obedience to thy annual call,
> Assembled cheerful in the Baron's hall.
> Then many a trick, & many a gambol neat,
> And many a frolic, helped the time to cheat.
> Nor yet in lov'd Eliza's golden reign
> Did Christmas ever claim its rites in vain.
> . . . . . .
> Then bearded Lords met ruff encircled Fair,
> And moved in tawdry Pageants pair by pair … (pp. 18, ll. 6, 11–20, 23–24)

He only describes the "social joys" of Christmas in this prologue (l. 6), but we are to understand them as representing all of the season's "festive joys" (l. 11), a term that encompasses both the sacred and secular.[12] The "gambol[s]," "frolic[s]," and "tawdry Pageants" of old (ll. 17, 18, 24), Austen tells us, were at once "cheerful" occasions and "solemn rites" (ll. 16, 13); in fact, each time Austen uses the word "rites" to refer to the ceremonies and traditions of Christmas, the example he gives features dancing, whether it be the "gambol neat" of the medieval "Baron's Hall" (ll. 17, 16) or the "tawdry Pageants" of "lov'd Eliza's golden reign" (ll. 24, 19). It is perhaps worth recalling in this context that the subtitle of Jonson's *Hymenaei* is "the *Solemnities* of Masque, and Barriers, Magnificently Performed on the Eleventh, and Twelfth Nights, from *Christmas*; at Court" (emphasis added). Since all Jacobean court masques concluded in a dance, we find in Jonson another playwright who associates dancing with "*Solemnities*."

James Austen's use of the term "Pageants" to describe court dances also prepares us for the prologue's closing lines, which, in part through a quibble on "rite" and "right," explicitly identify the performance Austen's audience is about to watch with the time-honoured "rites" he has just described:

> And if in the attempt we miss our aim[,]
> Indulgence by prescriptive right we claim.
> Then pass upon our faults a censure light,
> And smile upon the gambols, of this night. (p. 19, ll. 51–54)

During the Christmas season, then, "gambols" are "rites," which the actors claim as "right[s]"; and a play is as time-honoured a ceremony as any other "gambols" or "Pageants" might be.

Moreover, the celebrants have a special "prescriptive right" to comedy (l. 52), because ever since the Puritans declared that "To smile was sinful, but to laugh, damnation" (p. 19, l. 34), laughter has been an essential component of the "solemn rites" of Christmas. The Puritans "could High Treason in plum porridge spy, / And smelled plain Popery in a Christmas pie" (p. 19, ll. 35–36), but this sad state of affairs was corrected when

> At length with shame each British bosom burned,
> And Charles, & loyalty & wit returned;
> Mirth with the Monarch reassumed her reign,
> And Christmas wore her usual smile again.
> Since this, when'ere the rustic holly's seen
> To deck the window with its sober green,
> For festive joys each youthful mind prepares …. (p. 19, ll. 39–45)

Since the Puritans outlawed theatre, Christmas, the Established Church, and the monarchy more or less all at once, to show respect for one is to show respect for all, and the restoration of "Mirth" (l. 41) is part of the right-thinking Englishman's duty.[13]

Following this logic, Austen no longer needs even to mention any material objects identified specifically with playacting; instead, he points to the objects associated with other Christmas festivities: "plum porridge," "Christmas pie," and the "rustic" holly with "its sober green" (ll. 35, 36, 43, 44). These very concrete things, with their strong sensory appeal, stand in metonymically for all the things of the season, and they lend a wholesome aroma to whatever objects might be needed to give the actors' solemn mirth its outward and visible form.

In the years that spanned his late teens and early adulthood, years that saw him graduate from Oxford and be ordained as a curate in the Church of England, James Austen strove to reconcile his pleasure in wit and satire with his education's privileging of tragedy; at the same time, he strove to reconcile his love for the theatre with what Jonas Barish has termed "the antitheatrical prejudice." In his earliest attempts, he privileges word over spectacle; five years later, however, he finds in ritual and tradition a means of legitimising, even sacralising, the material stuff that a nationalist, Royalist, and Anglican theatre is made on. Aspiring to and claiming a masculinity that is closely imbricated with Anglicanism, James Austen ultimately finds

in a righteous rejection of Puritanical values the confidence to abandon elocution exercises written in imitation of Restoration tragedy in favour of modern comedy, props and all. Furthermore, he and his family—including the irrepressibly witty Jane—will continue to offer such comedies for as long as the Austen theatricals last, without, it seems, setting any "shame" alight in James's manly "British bosom" ("Prologue to The Rivals" p. 10, l. 39).

NOTES

[1] We do not know the exact date of the first theatrical production, but we know it was after 13 February 1782 (James's birthday), as the phrase "Æeta 17" is appended to the poem. See Table 1.

[2] The information in Table 1 is drawn from Byrne, Costin, Hegerty, Peterson, Sabor, and Selwyn.

[3] *Matilda*'s villain, Earl Morcar, is both male and the character in the play with the highest rank, and at the play's close he exiles himself, Oedipus-like, to a life of repentance. Francklin might therefore expect us to consider Morcar the tragic hero of the piece, despite the play's title, just as we might consider King Creon to be the tragic hero of Sophocles's *Antigone*.

[4] Thomas Twining uses the terms "terror" and "pity" in his 1789 translation, which quickly became standard (Heller 240); so does Henry James Pye in his 1788 translation. Both Twining and Pye worked from the original Greek. However, the first published English translation of 1705 (advertised on its title page as a translation of Theodore Goulston's seventeenth-century Latin translation but in fact heavily dependent on Dacier's French translation) generally (though not always) uses "compassion" rather than "pity" (*Aristotle's Art*).

[5] The term "decoration," in eighteenth-century translations of Aristotle, comprises sets, special effects, and costumes: Twining glosses "decoration" as "literally, the decoration of the *spectacle*, or *sight*" (117n).

[6] Unlike Austen, the *Covent-Garden Magazine* sees fit, in its closing sentence, to praise the "scenery" of "Mr. Loutherbourgh, particularly the tent of Morcar" ("Account" 27). However, this is the only mention of the play's "decoration" in a review that follows Aristotle in according the subject last place.

[7] For an overview of the debate about stage spectacle in the eighteenth century more broadly, see Heller.

[8] For more on Jonson's attitude towards stage spectacle, see Heller 242–43.

[9] For his sister Jane's amused take on literary rants and raves, see my "Faints, Frenzies, and Fulminations: Young Jane Austen's Mastery of the 'Frantic, Incoherent Manner.'"

[10] The definition of drama as a "*just and lively image of human nature*" is offered by Lisideius, who is one of four characters who debate dramatic poesy in Dryden's essay and not the one who represents Dryden's own views. However, the narrator records that "This definition, though Crites raised a logical objection against it, … was yet well received by the rest" (37). The subsequent justification of rhyme and heightened language in "a serious Play" is given by Dryden's representative, Neander.

[11] I can find no evidence of theatrical performances at St. John's College (SJC) during the period of James Austen's fellowship (1779–1792). (There is more evidence for earlier years in the *Records of Early English Drama* and in Costin.) However, there is one bill in the SJC archives from "Booksellers," which notes that SJC "bought 1 copy of Imposters a Comedy" for "0.1.6" and that this was "Recd. April 31789" (Bills and Receipts A-L, ACC V, B.1, G4). *The Imposters*, a modern comedy by Richard Cumberland, was first performed at the Drury Lane Theatre in January 1789. From this we can at least conclude that Austen was not entirely alone among the Fellows of SJC in his taste for modern comedy.

[12] Certain days on the liturgical calendar, including Easter and Christmas, are termed "festival days."

[13] Austen's earlier choice of *Matilda* also reflects a desire to be on the right side of history, in that Matilda must choose between her lover, Edwin, who is a loyal friend to William the Conqueror, and his brother Morcar, who has wrongly chosen to oppose the new king.

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