

## OPERATIVE AND INOPERATIVE COMMUNITIES IN JANE AUSTEN'S *MANSFIELD PARK* (1814)

### COMUNIDADES OPERATIVAS Y COMUNIDADES INOPERATIVAS EN LA NOVELA DE JANE AUSTEN, *MANSFIELD PARK* (1814)

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**Abstract:** The present article analyzes the bipolar perception of community in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) drawing on the communitarian model theorized by the French thinkers Jean-Luc Nancy (1983), Maurice Blanchot (1983) and Jacques Derrida (2006). Although Austen was obviously unaware of the postmodern theoretical implications stemming from the communal dimension of her novels, I argue that the institution of *Mansfield Park* functions as a self-enclosed and inbreeding community which is grounded on operative traits—birth, origin, filiation and generation—and which, therefore, does not have a potential for otherness. And yet, there are some flirtatious intimations of inoperativeness in *Mansfield Park* that unwork the traditional model of community: the community of lovers that Henry and Maria form, which disrupts all the other operative communities in *Mansfield Park*; and the theatricals, which—through the characters' anomalous speech acts—unleash the sexual tension that fluctuates between them.

**Keywords:** *Mansfield Park*; Jean-Luc Nancy; Jacques Derrida; operative community; inoperative community.

**Resumen:** El presente artículo analiza la percepción bipolar de comunidad en la novela de Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (1814), partiendo del modelo comunitario teorizado por los pensadores franceses, Jean-Luc Nancy (1983), Maurice Blanchot (1983) y Jacques Derrida (2006). Aunque Austen no era obviamente consciente de las implicaciones teóricas postmodernas que surgen de la dimensión comunitaria de sus novelas, argumento que la institución de Mansfield Park funciona como una comunidad cerrada y endogámica basada en cualidades operativas —nacimiento, origen, filiación y generación— y que, por tanto, no tiene potencial para la otredad. Sin embargo, hay algunas intimaciones tácitas de inoperatividad en *Mansfield Park* que perturban el modelo de comunidad tradicional: la comunidad de amantes que Henry y Maria forman, que trastorna al resto de comunidades operativas en *Mansfield Park*; y la obra de teatro, que —a través de los actos de habla anómalos de los personajes— desata la tensión sexual que fluctúa entre ellos.

**Palabras Clave:** *Mansfield Park*; Jean-Luc Nancy; Maurice Blanchot; Jacques Derrida; comunidad operativa; comunidad inoperativa.

### Community: Theoretical Premises

The term “community” has generated a productive debate. In *The Conflagration of Community* (2011), J. Hillis Miller offers an elucidation of Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of *inoperative community* and Maurice Blanchot’s related concept of *unavowable community*, which, in his own words, constitute “an alternative model of community” (13). These alternative models of community challenge “the commonsensical idea of human togetherness that most people have in mind, explicitly or implicitly, when they speak of community” (13). This community that most of us take for granted is created by a group living and working together. They have made the community through time. Besides, this community is the result of their collective and cooperative work and the product of a social contract they have, explicitly or implicitly, signed. The commonly accepted model of community, which Nancy calls “operative”, presupposes pre-existing, self-enclosed subjectivities who have joined other subjectivities for the common good.

For Nancy, myth and community are necessarily interrelated: “Myth arises only from a community and for it: they engender one another, infinitely and immediately” (*The Inoperative Community* 50). Myth is then a system of meaning which explains our

reality and it guaranties foundation and continuation of community: "at the same time as each one of its revelations, it also reveals the community to itself and founds it" (50). In this sense, foundational myths are essential to operative communities. An operative community is then a community which weaves "a superior, immortal, transmortal life between subjects" by operating "the transfiguration of its dead into some substance or subject", be it homeland, native soil, nation, the family or mystical body (14-15). To put this simply, death is transfigured into a significant substance that provides it with an essentialist immanence. Therefore, the communal intimacy around some of these substances mentioned by Nancy is at the heart of the community of Mansfield Park.

Nancy's operative community is indeed a sophisticated version of Ferdinand Tönnies's concept of *Gemeinschaft*, a social group in which human relationships are conceived as having "real organic life" (Tönnies 17). According to Jiménez Heffernan, *Gemeinschaft* is a kind of small-scale, social organization "that stems from the natural will, instinct and memory of the individual self, is rooted in a familiar place whose central categories are home, village, town, neighborhood, and friendship, depends on domestic economy, and relies not on contracts but on custom" (16). *Gemeinschaft* is therefore informed by organic life. This organicism is present in the communal immanence of the operative communities in *Mansfield Park*, which are "articulated through an organic logic of fusal incorporation predicated upon exclusion" (Jiménez Heffernan 31). The organic bonds that take place between the inhabitants of Mansfield Park revolve around the foundational myths of home, family and marriage. The theme of the house as a communitarian symbol which is immanent and spiritually invested can be addressed from the perspective of Gaston Bachelard in his groundbreaking study *The Poetics of Space*. Here, Bachelard speaks of a "protected intimacy" which is "physically inscribed in us"; [i]t is "a group of organic habits" that makes us believe in a pre-established idea of home (8-14). The idea of home symbolizes the foundations upon which the community of Mansfield Park is based. For this reason, I will sometimes use the term "organic community" to refer to the operative community of Mansfield Park.

In his alternative model to the operative community, Nancy sees persons not as subjectivities but as "singularities", and each singularity possesses a secret otherness which cannot be communicated to any other singularity. In addition, each singularity is fundamentally characterized by its finitude or mortality. Community is then defined by the proximity of death: "Each singularity is exposed, at its limit, to a limitless or abyssal outside that it shares with the other singularities, from the beginning, by way of their common mortality" (Miller, *Literature as Conduct* 91). Thus, as we cannot experience death in our own deaths, since death cannot be "experienced", we experience it in

the death of another, the death of a relative, a friend or a neighbor (Miller, *Literature as Conduct* 91). An inoperative community occurs then when different subjects become exposed to their mutual alterity through death. Only through this exposure can the subject transcend immanence and foster a genuine community: "Communication is the constitutive fact of an exposition to the outside that defines singularity. In its being, as its very being, singularity is exposed to the outside" (Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* 29). Therefore, the exposition of finitude is the basis of an inoperative community.

This model unworks the previous, operative one; it is a negation in itself, "the community of those who have no community" (Blanchot 24) or, in Derrida's words, "a community without community" (Caputo 106). Hence, instead of individuals with self-enclosed subjectivities, Nancy puts singularities that are originally *partagés*, shared, open to an abyssal outside. However, he clarifies that, in order to overcome total immanence, the inoperative community needs a relation between its members beyond "individualism", what Nancy calls *clinamen*, a concept that he takes from Lucretius and which means "an inclination or an inclining from one toward the other, of one by the other, or from one to the other" (Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* 3-4)<sup>1</sup>. The aim of this community is not a spiritual fusion or a transcendental communion but rather "being-together", "being-in-common". This community is also unavowable, in the double sense that Blanchot means in *La communauté inavouable* [*The Unavowable Community*]. It is unavowable because it cannot be publicly affirmed: it remains secret. Besides, the speech acts performed by such community are not ratified by public laws and institutions since they threaten the operative community (Miller, *Literature as Conduct* 93). The unavowable community is therefore revealed in the interruption of foundational myths, since the impossibility of avowal hinders both speech and narrative (Nancy, *The Inoperative* 58).

Nancy and Blanchot also theorize the community of lovers as a community with a highly disruptive potential. Blanchot considers the community of lovers as "an antisocial society or association" (33), which has as its ultimate goal "the destruction of society" (48). However, while Nancy proposes the possibility of real communication beyond language; a corporeal and sexual fusion which suggests the existence of a temporary, inoperative community, Blanchot questions the possibility of communication between lovers, since it will be thwarted by the existence of a communal secret. This secret remains totally unavowable and therefore unlikely to be exposed. As a result, this community can never occur in "an institutionally sanctioned way" (Miller, *Literature as Conduct* 141).

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1 The English translation gives *La Communauté désœuvrée* as *The Inoperative Community*. However, J. Hillis Miller prefers to use the term "unworked community" since it stresses the procedure by means of which some forces have *actively* operated to disrupt community (*The Conflagration* 5).

Thus, it remains “unavowed and unavowable” (141). Besides, the community of lovers is characterized by the lovers’ eagerness to participate in otherness through exposure of inner selfhood to the outside.

The present article aims to examine the different communitarian spaces in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*. The analytical potential of the notion of community is extremely relevant not only because novels reproduce pre-existing models of community, but because they construct and put forward models of community which do not exist yet. Thus, novels can be seen as textual constructions of alternative communities. This theoretical approach has been mostly applied to modern and postmodern literary works, which have at their center individuals naturally isolated and unable to form effective communal relationships. However, it is seldom applied to pre-Victorian and Victorian novels, which mainly focus “not on one individual life story but on a whole community” (Miller, *Literature as Conduct* 89)<sup>2</sup>. According to Lukács, in realistic literature, the “individual existence” of characters “cannot be distinguished from their social and historical environment. Their human significance, their specific individuality cannot be separated from the context in which they were created” (19). Thus, whereas in modernism, the individual is solitary and unable to fit into a community, in realism the individual is connected to his social and historical background.

Recent criticism on Jane Austen and *Mansfield Park* (see Hudson (1992), Cleere (1995), Lott (2006), Folsom (2013), Trepanier (2014), O’Malley (2018), García (2020), among others) has paid attention to the role that the family, the (endogamous) marriages, social mobility, sibling connections and the subversive potential of the theatricals play in the novel. In fact, most critical work on *Mansfield Park* “has depended upon the primacy of the nuclear family and the metaphorical power of nuclear family terminology to account for Fanny Price’s rise to power” (Cleere 113). Nevertheless, no critic has attempted such a systematic analysis of the different representations of community in *Mansfield Park*. In Ruth G. García’s own words, *Mansfield Park* “both subverts and sustains traditional social structures” (328). This article is indeed an attempt to show how

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2 J. Hillis Miller was the first critic who applied theories on community to modernist and postmodernist fiction. In *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James* (2005), he analyzes some of Henry James’s novels from a communitarian perspective. In *The Conflagration of Community: Fiction Before and After Auschwitz* (2011), he expands this analytical incursion into a selection of modernist and postmodernist novels. More recently, in *Communities in Fiction* (2015), Miller reads in detail six novels in the light of theories of communities. Following closely the analytical model articulated by Miller, Paula Martín-Salván et al. edited the study *Community in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (2013), where they systematically explore the strategies of working and unworking of communities in twentieth-century fiction. After that, Gerardo Rodríguez-Salas et al. edited the book *New Perspectives on Community and the Modernist Subject: Finite, Singular, Exposed* (2018), which shows how many modernist narratives are built on the tension between operative and inoperative communities. This study is followed by the volume *Secrecy and Community in 21st-Century Fiction* (2021), edited by María J. López and Pilar Villar-Argáiz, which is the culmination of this analytical model applied to fiction.

*Mansfield Park* both “sustains” and “subverts” organic and operative communities. My contention is that the distinction drawn by Nancy and Blanchot between operative and inoperative communities may prove useful to show that the temporary and disruptive communities that take place in the novel represent, however indirectly or evasively, a movement away from organic and operative forms of community.

My chief contribution, in this light, is to postulate a postmodern reading of *Mansfield Park*. At first glance, Austen’s novels never attempt to question traditional, operative communities, and the unworked community of lovers theorized by both Nancy and Blanchot—which detaches from the general operative community—is never fully achieved in her fiction. In this sense, the community of Mansfield Park functions as a traditional community sustained by genealogy, matrimony and patrimony and which fosters a sense of “original belonging” (Bachelard 8). And yet, a deepest look will show that there is in fact a potential disruptive force in *Mansfield Park*. Critics like Nancy Armstrong have already observed this unsettling energy in Austen’s novels: “if [they] represent the perfect synthesis of desiring individual and self-governing citizen, they also mark the moment when that synthesis crumbled under the threat of social rebellion” (6). Therefore, in this article I will show that there are two flirtatious intimations where Austen tried to unwork the commonsense model of operative community and that she puts forward alternative, non-essentialist communitarian forms in *Mansfield Park*: (a) the (unworked) community of lovers that Maria and Henry form and (b) the theatricals, which are seen by the characters as an opportunity to liberate themselves from the social constraints that serious speech acts incorporate.

### **Mansfield Park as a Self-enclosing Embryo**

The institution of Mansfield Park functions as an operative and organic community which is based on what Derrida calls a “*schematic* of filiation”, which is grounded on “stock, genus or species, sex, blood, birth, nature, nation” (*The Politics of Friendship* 8). This traditional community is sustained by four important pillars: genealogy, matrimony, patrimony and the operative idea of home. All these pillars are crucial for the survival of this traditional and operative community of Mansfield Park<sup>3</sup>. I would argue that genealogy

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3 National operativeness is also quite significant in *Mansfield Park*. In fact, Sir Thomas exerts the same patriarchal control in his Antigua plantations as he does in Mansfield Park. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said asserts that more visibly than anywhere else in her fiction: “Austen here synchronizes domestic with international authority, making it plain that the values associated with such higher things as ordination, law, and propriety must be grounded firmly in actual rule over and possession of territory” (104). This colonial authority enhances the national operativeness of both England and the institution of Mansfield.

and blood are indeed highly relevant in the community of Mansfield as they preserve and perpetuate the traditional community and “the glorification of the earth, of blood or even of race” (Blanchot 46).

The arrival of Fanny Price to Mansfield Park suggests a disruptive force within this organic community, calling into question the stability and immutability of genealogy. She has an unsafe political position when she arrives at Mansfield Park since she does not fit within the communities of the house: the society between parents and children, between brothers and sisters, and between masters and servants. In Tess O'Toole's own words, “Fanny Price is the paradigmatic adoptee of the British nineteenth-century novel” (55). Fanny is admitted in Mansfield Park because she is somehow part of the family: “Is not she a sister's child?” (Austen 6) asks Mrs. Norris rhetorically to convince Sir Thomas of adopting her. This appeal to consanguinity is annulled by Sir Thomas' reassurance that “they cannot be equals. Their rank, fortune, rights, and expectations, will always be different”. (Austen 9). Consequently, albeit they share the same blood, due to her low social status, Fanny is devalued by the family, especially by the Miss Bertrams and by Mrs. Norris. She is then “an outsider who is inside, or the insider forced to live on the borders, viewing the goings on in the centre of Mansfield Park from a perspective that is always marginal” (Murphy 95). Mansfield Park stands then as a powerful symbol of class superiority and social exclusion. However, Fanny gradually finds her place as a daughter of the family and she eventually replaces Maria and Julia as “the daughter that [Sir Thomas] wanted” (Austen 371) and Edmund's “only sister” (Austen 444), reinstating genealogy and reinforcing the inbreeding community of Mansfield. This self-enclosing community is expanded through the adoption of Fanny's sister, Susan, who replaces Fanny's place at Mansfield. Thus, everything remains, again, in the family.

The institution of marriage is also central to the operative community of Mansfield Park (Miller, *The Conflagration* 127). As with all of Austen's heroines, the main interest of all the (single) female characters in *Mansfield Park* is to secure their future with a prosperous husband with high prospects of inheritance since women could not inherit their fathers' patrimony in nineteenth-century English society. Valerie Sanders argues that Austen's novels divide into those where marriage partners are found within a pre-existing social circle, where interlopers are discredited or expelled, and those where eligible partners (usually men) need to be introduced from the outside to invigorate the limited social scene (83). *Mansfield Park* belongs to the former group. Thus, Maria Bertram considers “her evident duty” to marry their neighbor—the foolish and wealthy Mr. Rushworth—in order to connect the Mansfield and Sotherton estates (Austen 31). Mary Crawford—an interloper character within Mansfield Park—has the presentiment that she

“should” like the eldest son, Tom Bertram, who would be the heir of Mansfield Park and of all of Sir Thomas’ property. However, Mary’s interests change and she sets her eyes on the second son, Edmund Bertram. When Tom is about to die due to his debauched salutary habits, Mary exposes her “natural”, “philanthropic”, and “virtuous” wishes that Tom would die so that “Sir Edmund” would inherit all the Bertram property (Austen 341). Marriage and property, as we have seen, are vital to obtain the renewal of the organic community, as they guarantee its continuation in the offspring born of the couple as well as the consolidation of patrimony.

Characters also form bonds through spatial belonging to Mansfield Park, in terms of what Gaston Bachelard calls “original belonging” or a “protected intimacy” that “is physically inscribed in us, [i]t is a group of organic habits” that make us believe in a pre-established idea of home, which is connected with organicist nationalist transfiguration (8, 14). Thus, despite her initial enthusiasm about going to Portsmouth, Fanny ends up rejecting her original home and clinging to Mansfield as her genuine *home*:

When she had been coming to Portsmouth, she had loved to call it her home, had been fond of saying that she was going home; the word had been very dear to her; and so it still was; but it must be applied to Mansfield. *That* was now the home. Portsmouth was Portsmouth; Mansfield was home (Austen 338; emphasis in the original).

Fanny’s search for a homeland verged dangerously into communitarian organicism, especially Ferdinand Tönnies’s concept of *Gemeinschaft*, which expresses a sense of a utopian, pastoral community based on kinship or fellowship (xvii). Her immanence-inclined individualism prevents her from entering Blanchot’s negative community where such links are not so important. In addition, the denouement of all the love triangles in the novel—which leads to Fanny and Edmund’s endogamous marriage and their subsequent inheritance of Mansfield Parsonage—suggests the community’s constant renewal from generation to generation as well as ensures that the ancient stock is transmitted uncontaminated with a closed system of inbreeding (Palmer 227). This renewal gives it a kind of collective immortality since “the living together of individuals in a community tends to project a hypothetical sempiternal ‘community consciousness’ or ‘collective consciousness’” (Miller, *The Conflagration* 14). In this “collective consciousness”, death tends to be suppressed and almost forgotten.

Consequently, Mansfield Park constitutes a self-enclosed and inbreeding community which does not have a potential for otherness and the coexistence of difference. Indeed, it is presented as an organic community where nostalgic origins have been transfigured into a quasi-mystical body. This enclosed community follows the pattern discussed by Tönnies, where a community of blood develops into a community of place



and this, in turn, into a quasi-spiritual community, in this case the idealization of Mansfield as a self-enclosing embryo (27). This attachment to blood, marriage, (home)land and hence to property, is seen as a hindrance in the construction of new relationships based on friendship and hospitality.

### **Homophilial Friendships and Endogamous Marriages**

The self-enclosure and inbreeding nature of Mansfield Park is emblemized in the community that Fanny, her brother William and Edmund form. In this novel, Austen examines the relationship between courtship and brother-sister affinity and the willingness to make new connections (Sanders 84). A strong fraternization is at the core of Fanny's relationship with both her brother William and with her cousin Edmund. Like the institution of Mansfield, this community is grounded on stock, blood and birth. Thus, when describing the close relationship between William and Fanny, Austen makes a highly sentimental eulogy of fraternization and states that “[c]hildren of the same family, the same blood, with the same first associations and habits, have some means of enjoyment in their power, which no subsequent connections can supply” (Austen 183). Similarly, Fanny and Edmund's relationship is also depicted in fraternal terms: “[...] and whether it might not be a possible, an hopeful undertaking to persuade her that her warm and *sisterly* regard for him would be foundation enough for wedded love” (Austen 369, emphasis added). The predominant image is the substance of blood. This sibling intimacy suggests communal fusion. An operative communitarian drive is the predominant note in Fanny's relationship with both his brother William and his cousin Edmund.

Drawing on Derrida, the kinship (*suggéneia*) between Fanny and William—and between Fanny and Edmund—produces a constant, homophilial friendship because it is based on *homogeneity*, on *hemophilia*, on a solid and fixed affinity (*bébaion*) which stems from birth, that is, from native community. As this kinship is real (and not just spoken), this syngenealogy assures the strength of their social bond in life (Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 929) but it prevents them from experiencing “laceration”, that is, from exposing themselves to the other that makes them singularities and it gives in to communitarian delusions—family and homeland<sup>4</sup>. Jane Austen outlines here an ideology of organicism and homogeneity since she perpetuates a genealogical schema which is endowed with operative traits: filiation, birth, origin, generation, the familiarity of the family and the proximity of the neighbor (Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 105). Conceived to protect

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4 Nancy mentions Bataille's “laceration” as an example of exposure: “the entire ‘inside’ of the singular being is exposed to the ‘outside’” (30).

us from death, these traits ultimately distort and complicate reality through “myth-making”. This ideology of homogeneity involves a movement inwards, which is precisely the novel’s primary vehicle for reconfiguring families. Thus, the Crawfords—with their corrupted and subversive urban morality—are expelled from Mansfield, whereas Fanny’s sister, Susan, is called to replace her place, becoming, then, a “stationary niece” (Austen 371). The family circle is drawn firmly inwards (Coleman 302). Thus, Edmund’s fraternal embrace at the end of the novel: “My Fanny—my only sister—my only comfort now” (Austen 349) is quickly shadowed by the conjugal embrace. In *Mansfield Park*, in-family marriages serve to preserve the home “and consolidate the family residing in it” (Hudson, *Jane Austen and William Shakespeare* 210).

Accordingly, everything remains *in* the family at Mansfield Park since the marriage between Edmund and Fanny has achieved the restoration of the institution of Mansfield. Fanny, then, has won the rights to become a member of the family now that Sir Thomas thinks of her as “the daughter that he wanted” (Austen 371). Once the shadow of Mary Crawford has vanished, a potential threat to this syngenealogy—albeit not to rank and social status—this native community can be perpetuated. Mansfield Park is then configured on the experience of *belonging* and sharing of blood, family, religion, ethnicity, homeland, nation, country, state, love, friendship and even humanity (Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 80). The outcome is a discourse of abnegation and possession which exposes an immanent ontological position and which leaves no room for alterity.

### **The Community of Lovers: An Antisocial Community**

Many critics (Butler 1976, Tanner 1986, Byrne 2002, O’ Quinn 2009) have identified the theatricals as the most accomplished and illuminating part of *Mansfield Park*. The whole passage is full of innuendoes, sexual tension and a dangerous game of roles. All this takes form in the rehearsals of the play, since the play itself is never performed. *Lovers’ Vows*, the play which the characters choose to perform, has various evocative parallels between the characters in the novel and the roles they take. Thus, Tom is the play’s producer whereas Mrs. Norris supervises the physical damage caused on Sir Thomas’ property. Mr. Rushworth plays the role of Count Cassel, a silly and rejected suitor. Mr. Yates plays Baron Wildenhaim, a man whose past triggers the action of the play. Mary Crawford plays the liberal Amelia. Edmund plays a clergyman highly unsuccessful in love whereas Maria plays Agatha, a fallen woman. Fanny, on her part, becomes a kind of surrogate conscience about what is right and what inappropriate (Said 104); and the figure of order par excellence and the supporter of family and rank, Sir Thomas,

represents a grotesque reversal of himself. Thus, when Sir Thomas comes back from Antigua, he meets Mr. Yates ludicrously playing the role of Baron Wildenhaim: “the dignified baronet meets the ‘Baron’ whose play-function is to abandon his dignity and to legitimize his mistress” (Butler 235). According to Stabler, Sir Thomas treats *Lovers’ Vows* like a proscribed text since he burned “all that met his eye” (Austen 149). What is interesting is that Sir Thomas does not object to the play itself, but to what it unveils about the most hidden desires of the actors (Stabler 22).

I want to argue that the rehearsals of *Lovers’ Vows* become the first intimation of an inoperative community in the novel. In fact, never are the characters presented more objectively than in their acts of interpretation and we readers must interpret the revealing taking of roles in the play. Our position as readers or audience can be equated to Fanny’s passive position, who is undoubtedly the best “reader” of the many implications that are involved in the play. Indeed, Fanny’s function is that of the reader’s delegate. Like Fanny Assingham in Henry James’ *The Golden Bowl*, Fanny Price epitomizes in a hyperbolic way the subtle hermeneutic acts of working out, on the grounds of the evidence presented, what Austen hopes her readers will figure out (Miller, *Literature as Conduct* 255). Particularly, the scenes between Henry and Maria are the ones which contain the seed for inoperativeness. It is not surprising that critics like Craik have perceived Maria as “the stronger and more interesting character, because the most important” (104).

Certainly, Maria and Henry’s rehearsals are full of sexual innuendoes and corporeal interaction which constitute a threat to social conventions, anticipating their final elopement:

Frederick was listening with looks of devotion to Agatha’s narrative, and pressing her hand to his heart, and as soon as she could notice this, and see that, in spite of the shock of her words, he still kept his station and retained her sister’s hand, her wounded heart swelled again with injury, and looking as red as she had been white before, she turned out of the room, saying ‘I need not be afraid of appearing before him’ (Austen 137).

Indisputably, this scene suggests Maria’s tragic end and confirms Nancy’s idea that mere corporeity replaces language in the lovers’ contact. This momentary physical contact leads to the existence of an inoperative and temporal community (Nancy, *Corpus* 39). Thus, Maria and Henry’s relationship constitutes what Blanchot has called “an elective community”, that is, a community that results from an election that unites its members and without which it would not take place (46). Maria—though strongly attached to her position in society—makes an act of transgression which threatens the stability of the family on which *Mansfield Park* depends. She transgresses the marriage contract

and the family system in search of, who knows, maybe genuine love, sexual satisfaction or freedom.

Due to Sir Thomas's proscription of the play and to the threat that it posed to conventional morality and social constraints, this elective community has to remain secret, unable to be publicly avowed. Besides, society does not allow the members of this community to carry out any performative speech act, such as the matrimonial vow (Miller, *The Conflagration* 140). It is then an antisocial community or, in Bataille's words, "the community of those who do not have a community" (Blanchot 24). Although there is no evidence of genuine love between Henry and Maria—Henry's interest in Maria is merely his capricious desire to obtain what is prohibited, whereas Maria is a victim of romantic dreams who wants to escape from her tedious life as Mrs. Rushworth—they form what Blanchot calls a "community of lovers", a community that disrupts the rest of operative communities (48): "There where an episodic community takes shape between two beings who are made or who are not made for each other, a war machine is set up or, to say it more clearly, the possibility of a disaster carrying within itself, be it in infinitesimal doses, the menace of universal annihilation" (Blanchot 48).

Indeed, at the end of the novel, when Henry and Maria's elopement is revealed, both of them—but especially Maria—are expelled from society. Thus, Sir Thomas sends both Maria and Mrs. Norris to a private establishment that he buys for them in an unnamed and remote country where they have little company. For a novelist who is so accurate in her reference to English counties, Maria Rushworth's expulsion to somewhere unnamed reflects the dimension of her trespassing: she cannot even be exiled to a concrete and physical place. Her banishment from Mansfield Park is Sir Thomas' strategy to keep the external threat under control. Maria stands for the abject, a term that Julia Kristeva takes from Freud's *unheimlich* and that she defines as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4). Maria's "singularity" is then defined by her challenge to marriage.

If marriage is one of the basic institutions upon which an operative community depends, adultery is presented as a force which disrupts any community (Miller, *Literature as Conduct* 127). Therefore, the elective community that the adulterous relationship between Henry and Maria constitutes is the major threat that throws into disarray all the complex web of operative communities in Mansfield Park. Thus, Maria's marriage with Mr. Rushworth is obviously invalidated and ends in a divorce. Henry's slow but steady approach to Fanny and their potential union, which would provide a secure future to Fanny, is thrown away. Finally, Maria's elopement scares Julia and she eventually elopes with Mr. Yates. This second elopement—as opposed to Maria and Henry's elopement

and similar to that of Lydia Bennet and Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*—does not constitute such a challenge to the normative community since neither Julia nor Lydia are married women so their elopements can be redirected to marriage and, consequently, can be properly institutionalized by the operative community. In disarticulating all these operative communities, Austen is (unconsciously) exposing matrimony as an imperfect communal form. Like the family and the idea of homeland, the institution of matrimony is fundamentally associated with social values, public appearances and pecuniary interests.

The sovereignty of death that characterizes the community of lovers—a death of which one does not die, a death without power effect, or achievement (Blanchot 49)—also surrounds Maria and Henry's community. But theirs is not a physical death. It is a *social* one. They constitute “that antisocial society or association, always ready to dissolve itself, formed by *friends* or *couples*” (Blanchot 33; emphasis in the original). Thus, although Austen's characters typically do not manage to escape from their own immanence and fail to open up to a desired alterity, we find here the intimation of an alternative community that destabilizes the more operative, saturated community. Maria's rebelliousness and her insubordination to social institutions make her a proto-anarchist and an anomic character, that is, a woman who threatens the established social order. Her defiance of collectively sanctioned norms discloses the radical alterity of an “inorganic” outside. Certainly, the main subject of the novel is “the breakdown and the subsequent reform of a whole highly organized society—the society formed by those who live at Mansfield Park” (Craik 92).

### **The Theatricals as a Way of Liberation**

Pre-Victorian and Victorian novels represent and imitate existing models of community. They are “fictive replicas” of whole communities that really existed historically (Miller, *Literature as Conduct* 89). The existence of such communities both in reality and in fiction guarantee the execution of felicitous performatives. In pre-Victorian and Victorian novels, the most recurrent speech act is the marriage of marriageable young women and the transmission of property and social rank from generation to generation (Miller, *Literature as Conduct* 89). However, none of the conditions for felicitous speech acts established by J.L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) is met within an inoperative community since the members are not enclosed selves capable of taking responsibility for what they say (Miller, *Literature as Conduct* 145). Additionally, no social contract or constitution makes possible the establishment of effective laws or institutions. There is

not clear “intersubjective” communication and no social bond can confirm the sincerity of speech acts uttered by another person in an unworked community (Miller, *Literature as Conduct* 145).

In the operative community of Mansfield Park, each character attempts to conceal his or her true intentions behind a veil of apparent sincerity and each uses language, not primarily as a means of intercommunication, but as a way of forcing the other to act in the way he or she desires through language. They use language performatively, as a way of doing something with words (Miller, *Literature as Conduct* 114). It is precisely in the rehearsal of the theatricals where the characters unleash the sexual tension that fluctuates between them and which cannot be disclosed in their daily intercourse. Cunningly, Austen does not provide any direct report of the dialogues between the characters when acting. So my question is: what do the speech acts that take place in the theatricals reveal about the characters?

First of all, the title of the play that the characters choose to perform, *Lovers' Vows*, contains itself a performative speech act, a vow. But do these love vows contain some perlocutionary force? Austin distinguishes between serious uses, produced in ordinary circumstances of quotidian life, and non-serious or “parasitic” uses, which take place in literary language so that the conditions of habitual speech acts cannot be applied to them (22, 104). Writers and actors then do not use language seriously but in a figurative way and their utterances do not refer to a previous state of affairs and, consequently, they can be neither true nor false. Their utterances create themselves the situations to which they refer. Although none of the speech acts in the theatricals would meet all of Austin's criteria for a happy speech act, all of these performative utterances *are* felicitous since they make something happen. For instance, they make Maria believe that Henry is in love with her and vice versa. Maria's ensuing adultery is just the effect of these speech acts. Besides, when rehearsing *Lovers' Vows*, the characters do not break all the rules of felicitous performatives. Certainly, Mary and Edmund and Henry and Maria *do* speak *sincerely* when they declare their forbidden love to each other but—fortunately—they do not have to take responsibility for their lovers' vows. Each speech act is, therefore, anomalous, illicit, atypical. Tellingly, the danger that the figures of order—Sir Thomas, Edmund and Fanny—foresee in the theatricals is that some of the participants would see the rehearsals as an opportunity to release themselves from social constraints and from the rigid impositions that serious speech acts incorporate.

These notions refute Trilling's assertion that Jane Austen—as well as Fanny Price—objects to the performance of the play due to the insincerity involved in playing a role (133), and verifies Marilyn Butler's assertion that the opposite is the truth: *Lovers' Vows*

allows them to express and to do what otherwise would normally be entirely improper (232). The different scenes together permit physical contact between Maria and Henry and between Edmund and Mary. Besides, the dialogues are full of innuendoes which allow them to free themselves from the constraints imposed by social norms. Butler claims that in touching one another and in making love to one another on the stage these four characters are not feigning but they are rather expressing their real feelings: "The impropriety lies in the fact that they are *not* acting, but are finding an indirect means to gratify desires which are illicit, and should have been contained" (232). More recent critics have also foregrounded the theatricals' ability to unleash hidden emotions. According to Paula Byrne, the theatricals suggest "Austen's engagement with the subject of prohibited relationships and with a long-standing debate about women's autonomy in courtship" (132), and J. W. Page argues that Austen "was aware that a theatrical performance could inspire intense feelings" (218).

The liberating power of literature—and in this case of theatre—releases the characters from moral restraint. The vows that they make in the theatricals function as felicitous speech acts since they make something happen and other people are brought to act as if they believe them. According to María J. López, the response to a felicitous speech act "can only be another act, namely, the performative act of belief" (159), and Maria, Edmund and Mary Crawford *do* believe in the performative utterances that take place in the theatricals. Hence, the theatricals are permeated by speech acts that make things happen by way of their believers (López 159). These speech acts establish a fictitious social game that has real consequences (Miller, *Literature as Conduct* 281). *Mansfield Park* illustrates how the speech acts made in a play can be performatively felicitous if others believe them or act as if they believe them. In a way, the theatricals provide a reflection on the performative rhetoric of literature. *Lovers' Vows* has raised ghosts through the power of language and has made the characters believe in love vows that have no reality outside that conferred on them by the characters when they are rehearsing.

The felicitous performatives of the theatricals are of an anomalous kind since they are not based on a feasible community with effective institutions, laws, and customs, or guaranteed in their efficacy by such a community (Miller, *Literature as Conduct* 147). Therefore, the unworked communities that take place in the theatricals—Maria and Henry's, Edmund and Mary Crawford's and Julia and Mr. Yates—are unavowable in the double sense that Blanchot elucidates. First, society does not allow these communities to utter publicly, in an institutionally sanctioned way, the vows that would seal their loves. They are even forbidden to avow in public the liaisons that could be the foundation,

for them, of genuine promissory speech acts, of sincere lovers' vows (Miller, *Literature as Conduct* 141). Second, these hidden and unworked communities have to remain secret, unable to be publicly avowed and they can only occur in innuendoes, quasi-speech acts and looks. Therefore, they remain "unavowed and unavowable" (Miller, *Literature as Conduct* 141). Secrecy and silence, then, surround everything which is connected with the theatricals.

Tellingly, Sir Thomas believes that by destroying every remnant of it, he can also destroy what the play has unleashed. This secrecy around the theatricals has also to do with the destructive exposure of young unmarried women, like Maria or Mary, to premature sexual knowledge that may prevent conventional men from proposing marriage to them, and this is patent in Edmund's and Fanny's protests at the play actually chosen:

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 (Austen 137).

This something "so unfit to be expressed by any woman of modesty" refers to the experience of something uncanny but nevertheless familiar, something, using Freud's terms, *unheimlich* (Miller, *Literature as Conduct* 11). The mystery lies in the impossibility of reporting these very dialogues. The narrator seldom gives an instance of what the dialogues in *Lovers' Vows* say; they are uncanny because they are almost never transcribed.

At the heart of every unavowable community there is always some implicit knowledge, a certain unsaid: "The unavowable in community is also a sovereignty that cannot but posit itself and impose itself in silence, in the unsaid" (Derrida, *Rogues* 100). As Foucault observes, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the discovery of the fact of desire hidden within the individual provoked a wide process of verbalization that efficiently displaced an eroticism that had been located on the surface of the body. The discourse of sexuality replaced this primary and natural desire (30-1). Possibly, this verbalization of eroticism in Kotzebue's play is what alarms Edmund and Fanny and what prevents Austen from transcribing it. As Camille Paglia puts it, no matter the culture, sex has always been surrounded with taboo since it is the point of interaction between man and nature, where morality falls to primitive impulses (3). Thus, the sexual taboo and eroticism Fanny, Edmund and Sir Thomas have detected in *Lovers' Vows* is so unbearable that every revelation of it leads to repression.

The theatricals illustrate Judith Butler's notion of gender and identity as essentially imitative, learning to perform a role, to parody, and to adopt a mask: "Gender reality is



performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (527). Henry Crawford embraces this impersonation in this revealing passage:

I could be fool enough at this moment to undertake any character that ever was written, from Shylock or Richard III down to the singing hero of a farce in his scarlet coat and cocked hat. I feel as if I could be anything or everything; as if I could rant and storm, or sigh or cut capers, in any tragedy or comedy in the English language (Austen 97).

The actors have performed their correspondent roles in *Lovers' Vows* so many times that they cannot distinguish between reality and performance. In the theatricals, the characters seem to operate "across the boundary site where a self constructs self as a voice or performance" and yet they retain a "comic cynicism" towards that construction of identity (Morris 154), as we can see in Henry Crawford's defense of impersonation. Therefore, in *Mansfield Park*, identity is foregrounded as a carnival process of masking and acting. The restricting societal conventions of early nineteenth-century England make the characters artificial and prevent them from truly opening up to each other since their identity is an artificial construction which cannot find a natural essence. Thus, when they dare to trespass the limits in the theatricals, they are sternly chastised. The play functions then, in spite of Sir Thomas' exorcism, as ineffaceable testimony to the characters' hidden passions.

## Conclusion

The community of Mansfield Park is based on blood, genus, birth, nation and the idea of home(land). It is a utopian and mystified community, a cultural chimera that stems from the ideological dissemination of human society and whose discursive articulation is grounded on the idea of the *collective* and the failure to recognize partition and finitude. Like all operative communities, it is prescriptive, as it imposes firm communitarian models based on various ideological tropes. One of these tropes is the idea of filiation since stock, sex, genealogy, blood and home help to preserve and to perpetuate the traditional community of Mansfield. This fraternalist kinship and homogeneity is extrapolated to the relationship that Fanny shares with both her siblings, William and Susan, and with her cousin Edmund, and it serves for the inbreeding of the community, which is sustained by four important pillars: genealogy, matrimony, patrimony and the idea of home.

And yet, despite the self-enclosure of the traditional community of Mansfield, there are some passages in the novel which contain a palpably deconstructive drive and which are not explored and assimilated by most of the characters. This prefiguration

of inoperative communities takes place through the theatricals, which are full of sexual innuendoes and corporeal interaction and which result in Henry and Maria's elopement. This adulterous couple transgresses the marriage contract, one of the main pillars of the operative community of Mansfield, and constitutes what Blanchot calls "an elective community" since it is not based on contracts or sanctioned by institutions and, moreover, it throws into disarray all the complex webs of operative communities in the novel. This elective community remains secret, unable to be publicly avowed and it turns Maria into an anomic character who dares to threaten the established social order.

The speech acts performed in the theatricals establish a fictitious social game with real consequences. The participants are victims of society's restraining norms which prevent them from being truly natural and spontaneous so they use the theatricals as an opportunity to release themselves from societal restrictive rules. The ironic turn of *Mansfield Park* lies in the fact that it is precisely when they are taking another persona that the characters are more sincere, whereas when they are interacting in society they wear a (social) mask. The play serves to give voice to the characters' true selves and their hidden passions as well as to prove Judith Butler's notion of identity as essentially imitative and performative.

Thus, although Austen was obviously unaware of this bipolar conception of community—this mere statement is an anachronism—her portrayal of communitarian models is not completely pessimistic. *Mansfield Park* suggests a potential, temporary relational bond in unprejudiced corporeity by means of the theatricals as well as a way of unveiling the characters' genuine passions and feelings. The inoperative community of lovers that Henry and Maria form manages to unravel the intricate web of operative communities in the novel and, therefore, to break with the general organic community system. I hope to have shown that there is a latent eroticism manifested in the interaction between the characters when they act, an eroticism that threatens the stability of the family on which the operative society so strongly depends.

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