

# Lovers' Vows - The Biography Of A Play

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When reading *Mansfield Park* this time around, I found myself becoming curious about what the play, "Lovers' Vows," was about that it caused such consternation among several of the characters in the story, so I started researching it on-line, and found, not only that it was a real play, but it also had quite an interesting history.

I'd like to start this off by giving a synopsis of the play for any of you, like me, who didn't have a clue what it was about. There is a lot of information on-line about this play, including the complete script – just key in "Lovers' Vows," and you'll come up with a whole trove of information.

Unlike us, the readers of Miss Austen's time would have been familiar with this play. The version of the play used in *Mansfield Park* is set in Germany, and was edited and rewritten by Elizabeth Inchbald.

## **The Synopsis**

A young soldier, Frederick, is coming home to retrieve his birth certificate in order to find a job. He finds his mother, Agatha, has just been thrown out of her lodgings because she can no longer pay for them, and, being sick, is begging on the road. She explains that he has no birth certificate because he's illegitimate, the result of her having premarital relations with Baron Wildenhaim, who had promised to marry her, and then didn't. Frederick takes her to a nearby cottage, where the kindly cottagers agree to look after her while he tries to get some money.

He goes out to beg for money, unknowingly comes across the Baron, and attempts to rob him. He is, instead, taken prisoner to the Baron's Castle, which the Baron has just returned to after a long absence, his wife having died. He is there with his daughter, Amelia; her tutor, the clergyman, Anhalt; and a suitor of Amelia's, Count Cassel. The Baron is just determining that Count Cassel is unsuitable to marry his daughter, through the discoveries of a rhyming butler, and wants her to consult with Anhalt to get her mind straight. Her mind, however, is already straight set on marrying Anhalt, and she tells him, in no uncertain terms, and he raises objections because of their class differences. She says she'll take care of it with her father. They see Frederick being dragged into the castle as they're speaking, and take an interest in him when they find he's risked his life for his mother. Amelia brings him food in his cell, and Anhalt counsels him to plead with the Baron for his life, and takes him to him.

Frederick confronts the Baron in a private meeting, revealing himself to be his son. The Baron sends Anhalt to help Agatha. He explains to Agatha how the Baron was wounded in battle, and had to marry the woman who nursed him back to health because of his family's demands, but he has been searching for her ever since. Anhalt has her brought to the castle. Frederick, meanwhile, demands total restitution of his mother to her rightful place, not just to be taken care of for the rest of her life. Anhalt backs this up, saying the Baron's conscience can only be absolved by following through on his honorable pledge to marry her, and absolve her of her perceived sins. He agrees, so he marries Agatha, acknowledges his son, Amelia marries Anhalt, and everybody lives happily ever after!

### **Some History . . . .**

This play was thought to be *risqué* at the time, and was very popular. It originated in Germany, and was written by a gentleman named August von Kotzebue in 1780, originally titled *Das Kind der Liebe*, literally "Love Child," or "Natural Son," as it is often translated. Kotzebue was born May 3, 1761 in Weimar, Saxony, in Germany, and died March 23, 1819 in Mannheim, Baden, Germany. He graduated university as a lawyer, and became active in government service, mostly in matters between Germany and Russia. His first wife was the daughter of a Russian lieutenant general, and he held political offices in both Russia and Germany. He appears to have had a literary bent from the start, and it's not clear whether he thought of himself as working in government service, or being a writer. He was quite prolific, generating many literary works, articles, publications, over 200 plays, and fathering eighteen children.

He was one of the most popular writers of his time, though many of his critics saw his work as immoral. No less than 53 books were published in England between 1789 and 1805 that translated, parodied, or critiqued his work. Jane Moody has stated that "Producing Kotzebue, both for the closet and the stage, was a fast-moving and highly competitive cultural business in late eighteenth-century England." *Lovers' Vows* was first performed at Covent Garden on October 11, 1798, and ran for forty-two nights, making it Covent Garden's most successful venture of that season. It went on to be performed in Bristol, Newcastle, Bath and elsewhere. Jane Austen saw the Kotzebue play, *The Birthday*, at Bath in 1799. Beethoven wrote several pieces of music for his plays – the "Turkish March," originally written as part of the incidental music for *The Ruins of Athens*, has since become well known.

Kotzebue's plays did generate controversy – he was accused of "violations of all the rules of propriety and decorum," and there was concern for their political tenor. He was politically conservative and cosmopolitan in outlook, and spoke out against the anti-Semitism of student nationalists. He freely published his political views, becoming detested by the nationalist liberals in Germany. One of them, Karl Ludwig Sand, a theology student, in March, 1819, assassinated him in his home, soon after he had moved to Mannheim, thus ending his prolific career.

## **Translations**

*Lovers' Vows* is one of at least four adaptations of *Das Kind der Liebe*, all published between 1798 and 1800 - Elizabeth Inchbald's version is the only one to have been performed. There appears to have been a certain degree of snarkiness among the various authors, in relation to each other. I'm not familiar at all with German social mores or sensibilities in Jane Austen's time, so I don't know if German sensibilities were so radically different from the British, or if the plays were also problematical in Germany, or if it was a combination of both of these, but this play produced problems in being adapted for the British stage. I understand that all of the adaptations, other than Inchbald's, were more literal in following the German writing. Ms. Inchbald herself states that she was more interested in creating a version suitable to English sensibilities rather than slavishly following a direct German translation, and my understanding is that she did a major rewriting of the play, toning down the language and the political slant. I would guess she did something right, since her's was the only version to be produced in England.

It's not too difficult to see where this play would be problematical to a British audience of the time – sex outside of wedlock, the generation of an illegitimate child, an outspoken young woman, and then cross-class marriages - all very heady stuff for this time in Great Britain! Some people had a problem with Agatha's apparently being rewarded at the end of the play (although they didn't have a problem with the Baron's NOT being punished!), but, it was pointed out that she wasn't being rewarded as much as being restored to where she was when the Baron first proposed to her, which was the only reason the transgression took place at all.

## **Mansfield Park Production**

Mansfield Park Cast:

Frederick . . . . . Mr. Crawford  
 Anhalt . . . . . Edmund Bertram  
 Baron Wildenhaim . . . . . Mr. Yates  
 Count Cassel . . . . . Mr. Rushworth  
 Verdun (Butler) . . . . . Tom Bertram  
 Agatha . . . . . Maria Bertram  
 Amelia . . . . . Miss Crawford  
 Cottager . . . . . Mrs. Grant

In addition to these general cultural problems, for the Mansfield inhabitants there was also the general belief that “proper” ladies did not perform on stage, plus many physical and verbal intimacies in the play itself that were considered unsuitable for a proper English lady to engage in – Agatha and Frederick share in many physical and verbal intimacies. Amelia is shockingly forward for an English lady of the time, in declaring her love for Anhalt – she makes Lizzy Bennet, by comparison, look like a wuss! And, the inhabitants of Mansfield Park manipulated the roles to suit their own purposes: Maria wanted to be Agatha, who was physically intimate with her son, Frederick, for the very reason that Frederick was played by Mr. Crawford, so they could be physically intimate with each other; Yates, as the Baron, wanted Julia to play his daughter; Julia, however, being stung by Mr. Crawford’s rejection of her, opts out of the play entirely. Edmund and Miss Crawford used their respective parts of Anhalt and Amelia so they could whisper sweet nothings in each other’s ears and promote their relationship. A large part of the problem, with the possible exception of Henry Crawford, is that these people are not seasoned actors, and have trouble distinguishing between the feelings they are supposed to be acting, and their own personal feelings, so their actions lead to fallout for the rest of the novel: Maria expects Henry to declare himself to her because of their intimacy, and when he doesn’t, she ends up hating, despising, and ignoring him, which incites him to overcome those feelings, and, ultimately, seduce her. Edmund and Mary are on-again, off-again for the rest of the novel, with her slowly coming ‘round to accepting Edmund and his profession. Fannie wants nothing to do with Henry Crawford after seeing his behavior, initially flirting with both her cousins, and then with Maria at the rehearsals. This incites him to overcome her feelings, and he gets trapped in his own ploy, and falls for her, and then annoys the hell out of her for the rest of the novel, or, at least until he seduces Maria, anyway.

This play’s themes also follow many of the themes of the novel: Family influences on who to marry – the Baron is pressured into a marriage when he had already committed to someone else, and at Mansfield Park, both Fanny’s being pressured to marry Henry, and Maria not being pressured to forego her marriage when it was clear she had little feeling for Mr. Rushworth. Inter-generational conflict plays into it here, also, as Maria was willing to enter into a loveless marriage simply to escape the control of her father, who can be compared to Baron Wildenheim’s more loving concern for his daughter’s feelings to ensure she would be happy in a marriage. Cross-class marriage plays a big part, with both the Baron and his daughter marrying beneath them, as Edmund will end up doing with Fanny. There are additional subtleties relating to the roles the participants chose for themselves.

I actually enjoyed reading the play – I could see where it would be a very entertaining stage production with many humorous parts. In spite of its racy topic – premarital sex – I found it to have a very moral tone – it takes the high road for accepting responsibility for one’s actions. Anhalt, as the tutor/clergyman, is the moral compass of the play, and is thorough and incisive in getting to the bottom of correcting, and setting right, past

behaviors. I recommend a reading of this play as a very worthwhile endeavor, not only for a better understanding of Mansfield Park, but for the enjoyment of it, itself.

## **Credits**

<http://www.austen.com/mans/vows/>

Wikipedia Contributors – “Lovers’ Vows”

Wikipedia Contributors – “August von Kotzebue”

Persuasions On-Line, v.27, No. 1 (Winter 2006), “*It is about Lovers’ Vows*”:

*Kotzebue, Inchbald, and the players of Mansfield Park,*

by Susan Allen Ford

<http://www.fullbooks.com/Lover-s-Vows.html>