



In Defense of Patricia Rozema's *Mansfield Park*

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MANSFIELD PARK IS THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL of all Jane Austen's novels, mainly because readers are unable to agree in their assessment of the novel's heroine, Fanny Price. In adapting the novel to the screen, Patricia Rozema adopts two positions that plunge her into the midst of this debate. First, as Alison Shea points out in the essay to which I am responding, she creates a heroine intended to correct the supposed inadequacies of Austen's original, whom she judges to be "annoying," "not fully drawn," and "too slight and retiring and internal" (Herlevi). Second, she proposes that *Mansfield Park* is a novel about slavery, lesbianism, and incest. Not surprisingly, then, her film version of *Mansfield Park* has generated more heated discussion than any other adaptation of an Austen novel. At one extreme, Claudia Johnson describes the film as "an audacious and perceptive cinematic evocation of Jane Austen's distinctively sharp yet forgiving vision" (10), while at the other John Wiltshire argues that "what the film represents is the marketing of a new 'Jane Austen' to a post-feminist audience now receptive to its reinvention of the novel" (135).

It would be very difficult, in my view, to defend Rozema's rather eccentric interpretation of *Mansfield Park* against the extremely effective critique offered by Ms. Shea. Some readers are undoubtedly much less sympathetic to Fanny Price than Ms. Shea but few would see her as inadequately drawn. Similarly, while a number of critics, beginning with Edward Said, have argued for the centrality of slavery to a reading of *Mansfield Park*, no one has seriously

suggested that the novel is about lesbianism or incest. Nevertheless, I do intend to champion the film version of *Mansfield Park*. I will do so, however, by approaching it as an independent work of art rather than as an adaptation of Austen's novel. My concern is not so much with what the film fails to do when viewed from the vantage point afforded by the novel as with what it actually achieves when taken on its own terms. While this approach may be anathema to committed Austen readers, I am of course simply putting myself in the situation of the average filmgoer who has at best only the vaguest memory of *Mansfield Park*.

The analysis that follows breaks into two separate but closely connected parts. First, I will try to demonstrate that, judged as an independent creation rather than as a failed experiment in cloning Austen's prototype, Rozema's Fanny Price is a satisfying character of sufficient complexity to carry the burden of the film's major themes. Second, I will argue that *Mansfield Park* succeeds brilliantly when judged by standards appropriate to a work of art made according to the conventions of the film medium.

For many of the film's reviewers and critics, Rozema's Fanny Price is most notable for her enlightened attitudes towards issues of gender, class and race. Presumably, Rozema attributes what are in effect late twentieth-century liberal humanist values to her early nineteenth-century heroine because she believes that these qualities will make her more acceptable to a modern audience than a character who fails to display any obvious disapproval of an uncle who is a sexist, a snob and a slave owner. However, there are problems with viewing Fanny entirely through the lens of political correctness. First, the type of anachronism practiced by Rozema has become a commonplace amongst feminist filmmakers. In *The Piano*, for example, Jane Campion's main character, Ada McGrath, develops into a scourge of Victorian patriarchy, sexual repression and racism. Second, the strategy of viewing the past entirely through a lens provided by modern values has the effect of flattening out the nuances both of the society under observation and the character who conducts the examination.

In order to save Fanny Price from one-dimensional cliché, and thus to preserve the credibility of my argument for the character's complexity, it is necessary to grasp how Rozema integrates her heroine's liberal humanism into a broader portrayal of a young woman's struggle against the stultifying influence of a society that first devalues her because of her humble origins and then tries to force her to conform to a patriarchal definition of the female role. The Fanny that I am proposing is far more than a mouthpiece for what would today be considered a set of quite unremarkable views. First, she is an artist

who uses her satirical writing to establish a vantage point for herself outside of or, perhaps more accurately, above the various social groups that seek to control her. Second, she is a woman who learns that the very sexuality that usually guarantees a woman's subjugation or dishonor can in fact be a source of power.

While admitting that Rozema errs in allowing her heroine to be still writing Austen's juvenilia at the age of 21, it is nevertheless my contention that Fanny's career as an artist plays an integral role in her development towards a position of personal autonomy. As a young girl she uses her writing as a means of at least mentally escaping the oppressive situations with which she is faced first in Portsmouth and then at Mansfield Park. The creation of stories that flout parental authority and mock romantic love further assist Fanny in establishing a critical distance from the oppressive power of her guardian, Sir Thomas Bertram, and her putative lover, Henry Crawford. Most important of all, the more mature creative act that we witness during the last few minutes of the film—in which Fanny, once again taking on her intermittent role as narrator, transforms the Bertrams into characters who will populate her first work of adult fiction, presumably entitled *Mansfield Park*—allows the once powerless relative to finally assume a position of dominance over her adoptive family. Thus, I would argue, Rozema's decision to stay close to the outlines of Austen's plot, and particularly her ending, is not perverse, as Alison Shea and others claim, because she makes them function very differently. Far from suddenly and implausibly accepting a group of people she has always despised, Rozema's Fanny is finally able to tolerate her former tormentors, about whom she continues to speak sardonically, only because she has found a way of making them serve her artistic ends.

Fanny's development as a sexual being is even more important in advancing her pursuit of personal freedom and power than her role as an artist. In the England depicted by Rozema (and indeed by Austen), a woman was made extremely vulnerable by her sexuality. Women who conformed to the standards of their society simply yielded autonomous libidinal impulses to the uncertain workings of the marriage market while those who chose to act on their sexual desires risked disgrace and social ostracism. Fanny, however, not only avoids both of these fates—by refusing either to marry Henry Crawford or to allow him into her bed, as Maria does—but gradually learns that, properly managed, female sexuality can be a source of considerable power. Her teacher is, ironically enough, the wicked Mary Crawford.

Edmund's haste in abandoning his tomboyish cousin for Mary Crawford constitutes Fanny's first lesson in the power and control a woman can

derive from a flirtatious style and judicious displays of cleavage and slim body contour. Although they are deeply disturbing to a young girl unversed in the polymorphous possibilities inherent within human sexual relations, the two occasions upon which Mary Crawford takes advantage of opportunities to engage Fanny in erotic interaction make a significant contribution to her education in seductive technique.

The Mansfield ball provides clear evidence of Mary's influence on Fanny. Dressed in a low-cut and close-fitting gown, Fanny for the first time makes a voluntary sexual display of her body and is more than happy to participate in what Claudia Johnson calls "the circulation of erotic interest between and among the two principle couples" (8) rather than confine her attentions to her serious love object, Edmund. Inspired by her success at the ball, Fanny responds very differently when intercepted by Henry as she climbs the stairs to her room than she did during their earlier encounter in the library. On that occasion, Henry exercised almost complete control over a stunned Fanny. Now, though, Fanny seizes the initiative, verbally rejecting his declaration of love as "nonsense" (Rozema 84) but maintaining his interest with a display of cleavage and an openly flirtatious manner. As a result, the locus of power shifts from the man to the woman.

Keeping control of a sexually charged relationship with the far more experienced Henry Crawford—whose sincerity I doubt much more than Alison Shea does—is no easy matter for Fanny. The sight of Maria, naked and exposed to shame and ridicule, is all the evidence Fanny needs of what could well have been her own fate had she let herself fall prey to Henry's undoubted charms. However, her reward for the risks that she takes is finally the love of Edmund Bertram. Beginning with the ball, and continuing on the carriage ride home from Portsmouth, when he lays his head on her exposed bosom in a gesture of unconscious erotic surrender, the newly sensual Fanny draws Edmund's attention away from Mary and towards herself. The lingering kiss that follows Edmund's eventual proposal is, therefore, not merely a sop to the romantic expectations of the film audience, as is the case with kisses between the largely asexual heroes and heroines in other Austen adaptations, but a testament to the role played by Fanny's burgeoning erotic powers in bringing their relationship to fruition.

By weaving together Fanny's political consciousness with her development as an artist and a sexually powerful woman, Rozema thus succeeds in creating a truly complex character who models the aspirations of modern women as effectively as Austen's Fanny Price does the very different ideals of women in the Regency period.

While an understanding of the complexity of Fanny Price and of the thematic threads developed through her goes some way towards explaining the success of the film *Mansfield Park*, Rozema must ultimately be judged on her ability to create a cinematic language adequate to the requirements of her subject matter. In order to advance my argument that Rozema succeeds admirably as a filmmaker, I will consider some scenes of particular relevance to the preceding character/theme analysis.

The first few minutes of Rozema's *Mansfield Park* provide a particularly good example of the importance of effective cinematic technique to a film's thematic development. Even as the titles roll, Rozema challenges her audience's perceptions with a lyrical montage of close-up tracking shots that tricks the eye into mistaking candle-lit pages of manuscript for a golden landscape of ploughed fields. The purpose of this visual sleight of hand is to construct a metaphor for the almost magical ability of the written word to create alternative realities, thereby laying the foundations for Rozema's later argument concerning the important contribution Fanny's accomplishments with the pen make to establishing a space for herself outside of and above the alien and often threatening world of Mansfield Park. The same baroque-influenced soundtrack that provides the rhythmical underpinnings of this opening montage runs through the film's final scene. Its purpose is to confirm the value of the mature artistic endeavor upon which Fanny is launching herself by suggesting that it will be characterized by a beauty, refined structure and expansive vision similar to that of Rozema's brief, *tour-de-force*, introductory shot sequence.

The only direct visual representation of *Mansfield Park's* concern with Antiguan slavery is provided by Tom's sketchbook with its stark, black-and-white representations of physical and sexual abuse. Less shocking—but perhaps more effective because of its subtlety, dissemination throughout the filmic text, and ability to broaden the slavery theme to include the situation of women—is the repeated presence of caged birds in the background of interior shots involving female characters. The extension of the bird motif to include the choreographed flight of trained doves arranged by Henry Crawford and shots of a flock of wild starlings that swoop high in the air during Fanny's final voice-over monologue points up the essential difference between the illusionary escape from the prison of patriarchy promised by Henry—I clearly disagree with Ms. Shea's interpretation of this scene—and the real liberation that Fanny achieves by cultivating her artistic and sexual powers.

Further examples of Rozema's skill in cinematic communication are provided by a comparison of the techniques used to communicate the very

different dynamics at work during two encounters between Fanny and Henry. The feelings of entrapment that Fanny experiences when confronted by the experienced sexual predator Henry Crawford in the library are subtly communicated by a close up track around the heads of the two characters. The reversal of erotic power evident throughout their later meeting on the stairs is reflected in Rozema's effective use of the height differential established by Fanny's superior position. The female domination suggested by the *mise en scène* is reinforced by a sequence of alternating shots in which Henry is consistently viewed from a high angle and Fanny from a low angle or eye level. The careful choreography of the encounter is completed when Fanny moves upward and away from Henry, leaving him to descend the stairs in a state of enchanted befuddlement.

To sum up, my argument is that Patricia Rozema is successful in *Mansfield Park* because she centers her action on a complex heroine who serves as a vehicle for important thematic threads having to do with entrapment, liberty and power, and because she is so skillful in the use of cinematic devices such as editing, *mise en scène* and soundtrack that her film possesses the kind of body and texture required to engage the audience viscerally as well as intellectually. Whether Rozema's film resembles Austen's novel is irrelevant so far as I am concerned. The two works employ very different discursive practices and have quite distinct intentions. Each accomplishes the goals it sets for itself, and that, in my view, is all that finally matters.

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