

A Gift for Close Reading

Irony and Idyll: Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* on Screen

By Marie N. Sørnbø.

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Review by Nora Nachumi.

At this point in the world of Jane Austen studies, one has to ask: what can we learn from another book on Jane Austen and film? In the case of Marie N. Sørnbø's *Irony and Idyll*, the answer depends on what one knows already. Sørnbø's topic is irony, and her interest is in film adaptation. Focusing on *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*, she explores the ways filmmakers adapt Austen's irony to screen.

Sørnbø begins by establishing her stance regarding recent work on adaptation. For her, adaptations participate in a system of "intertextual interchange," where all depict "variations of shared stories and themes." Film adaptations of novels must also contend with the fact that the different mediums offer different "opportunities and challenges." One limitation of film versions of Austen is losing the voice of the narrator. "And in Austen much of the irony is embedded exactly here. To what extent," Sørnbø asks, "is it wanted by film-makers, and what solutions do they opt for when trying to remediate it?"

Sørnbø turns first to *Pride and Prejudice*. Austen's irony, she demonstrates, is manifested through the omniscient narrator; through the ironic perspectives of certain characters; through the use of free indirect discourse; through dialogue; through comic portraits; and through dramatic irony. All this Sørnbø demonstrates through vivid examples; this is one author with a gift for close reading.

The most important points Sørnbø makes about irony in *Pride and Prejudice* are these: first, that Elizabeth's moment of revelation is not about Darcy, but

about her limited ability to apprehend the truth about herself and others. The second is that the novel is structured so that a first-time reader makes similar errors in judgment. These are not new observations, as Sørnbø acknowledges. Sørnbø goes further, however, by asking if the strategies employed in four filmed adaptations enable similar insights.

The short answer is "no." In the 1940 MGM adaptation, Elizabeth is less rational than in the novel, and Austen's ironic treatment of marriage has been discarded in favor of an idealized, traditional, mythical past. In 1980, the impulse of the heritage film is married uneasily with the screenwriter's feminist agenda. This Elizabeth is less fallible than Austen's and the impression of "peace, harmony, stability and beauty" dominates over ironic revelation of human weaknesses. The 1995 adaptation foregrounds the protagonists' erotic attraction and makes them "more faultless and more attractive than in the novel." In the 2005 film, Elizabeth is an innocent "child of nature" in no need of reform. Mr. Bennet's negligence also is minimized in the adaptations, and the family is happier than in the novel. These differences "support the patriarchal system" that Austen's irony condemns.

Although some of these points are familiar, the density of the comparison invites an unusual degree of clarity about the material. The same is true for the second half of the book, which begins with an astute analysis of *Mansfield Park*.

"[F]eminist in its thematic interests," Austen's fourth novel, Sørnbø contends, "gives us a deeply ironic description of *Mansfield Park* as a crumbling world." The ensuing analysis not only supports Sørnbø's claims but demonstrates why others regard it as Austen's least ironic novel. We see that the narrative voice, though unobtrusive, still is ironic. We see instances of dramatic irony, of irony manifested through indirect discourse and the depiction of diverse perspectives. We don't see irony consciously used in conversation, however. None of the

characters has the independence of mind that "sees even the fashionable world with ironic distance." Mary Crawford's limited perspective verges on tragic, and

Fanny is wrong much of the time. So are unwary readers, who see in Fanny's refusal of Henry evidence of "a woman steadfast in her one and only love." As Sørnbø reminds us, Austen thinks otherwise: had Edmund wed Mary, and had Henry "persevered, and uprightly, Fanny must have been his reward—and a reward very voluntarily bestowed." Although she does not say it outright, Sørnbø raises the possibility that the greatest irony in *Mansfield Park* is that Fanny marries the wrong guy after all.

This is great stuff, an interpretation that explains why so many readers are dissatisfied with the novel. Perhaps *Mansfield Park* is not supposed to be read as a romantic comedy but as an ironic bildungsroman. None of the film adaptations suggests this possibility. However, in some ways, Patricia Rozema's 1999 adaptation, on which Sørnbø spends two thoughtful chapters, comes rather close.

Given all that has been written about Austen and film, the fact that *Irony and Idyll* occasionally echoes points made elsewhere is unsurprising. Its value lies in Sørnbø's gift for close reading, which enables new insights about the texts she considers. More can be learned about Austen, irony, and film after all.

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