



“I am a wild beast”:  
Patricia Rozema’s  
Forward Fanny

ALISON SHEA

Alison Shea is currently a Research Associate at the Dalhousie Health Law Institute, Halifax, Nova Scotia. She completed an MA in English literature on the role of silence in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*.

IN AN INTERVIEW WITH PATTY-LYNNE HERLEVI, filmmaker Patricia Rozema explains how she “couldn’t figure out why [Jane Austen] would write a character [Fanny Price] that was so annoying because she was capable of writing completely fascinating, articulate and interesting protagonists.” She then explains, “the main character in the novel is not a fully drawn character and what we do get from her is that she is sort of quivering and shy. And she doesn’t speak very often.” Both Rozema’s comments and her adaptation of *Mansfield Park* reflect an anxiety about silence and its effect on character, an anxiety in which silence is misread or misunderstood to mean dullness, weakness, and a lack of intelligence and critical engagement with society. Rozema’s solution is to transform the character of Fanny into a confident, witty pseudo-Jane Austen because, for Rozema, boldness and wit are signifiers of worth and intelligence. In this paper, I will argue that Rozema’s film version of *Mansfield Park* is weakened both by her misreading of the relationship between silence and character and by her failure in the film to modify sufficiently aspects of the novel’s plot and characters that ultimately validate the qualities Rozema scorns: quiet reflection and self-examination as the pre-requisites for good judgment and judicious speech.

Hampered by preconceptions that view silence as a mark of frailty and dullness, Rozema considers Fanny to be an undeveloped character. Consequently, Rozema transforms her into a more outspoken and energetic heroine

and replaces Fanny's inner drama with a plot replete with overt and sensational action. Rozema cannot see that Fanny's quiet contemplation is both active and articulate. Rather, the pathway to individual success is to follow Rozema and Mary Crawford's advice in the film and "distinguish yourself with language and wit" (Rozema 74). The new Fanny, a self-styled "wild beast," is meant to be confident, witty and talkative in the manner of an Emma Woodhouse or Elizabeth Bennet and thus more appealing to modern tastes and expectations (Rozema 32). Episodes such as the staging of the play *Lovers' Vows* therefore have little purpose and seem out of place in the film, as this forward Fanny is difficult to reconcile with scenes that stress the strengths of observation and quiet reflection.

In the novel, Fanny overcomes pressure to marry Henry Crawford and prevails through her determined silence in the end, as others come to see the strengths of not only her silence but also her enhanced judgment, principled conduct, and just consideration for others. However, Austen's Fanny Price does not actively correct or admonish the patriarchal status quo quite to Rozema's satisfaction, and a new feminist Fanny is needed—a Fanny who names her horse Mrs. Shakespeare and takes wild rides in the pounding rain. Thus, in the film, Fanny's empowerment is born not from confidence gained through keen observation and good judgment—Austen's virtues, acquired and fostered through quiet reflection. Rozema's heroine has confidence aplenty. Her source of empowerment, rather, appears to be a newly discovered sense of sexual energy and awareness that emerges during the ball, after which her bodices become lower and her powers of flirtation greater.

The vivacity of Rozema's confident and articulate Fanny renders Mary Crawford's role in the plot confusing. In the novel, Edmund is captivated by Mary's "lively mind" (64) and manners, and the shine of her superficial nature works to obscure Fanny's worth. However, in the film, Fanny has a mind even livelier than Mary's, and the source of Edmund's attraction to Mary is limited to her aggressively sensual nature. Edmund's behavior toward Fanny, his habitual complimenting, makes it hard to believe that he seriously wants to wed Mary. Even Mary knows Edmund is really in love with Fanny and tells him so at the ball (Rozema 79). Rozema does not take up the challenge of making her audience see Mary as a true threat, as who could be more attractive than her pseudo-Jane-Austenized Fanny? When Sir Thomas tells Edmund that Mary is "witty and bright," Edmund naturally assumes his father is describing Fanny (Rozema 65). In the film, Mary's witty selfishness is downplayed to the extent that her excuse in the novel for not

returning Fanny's horse becomes an expression of her desire for Fanny's company: "Selfishness must always be forgiven you know, because there is no hope of a cure" (Austen 68; Rozema 72). But even if in the film Mary's purpose is to educate Fanny about sexuality, perhaps Maria is the more successful teacher: it is after Fanny discovers Maria and Henry in bed that Fanny and Edmund almost kiss (Rozema 131). In Austen's novel, Mary comes to represent a sort of lost potential, while in Rozema's film, Mary is a character whose purpose in the plot is lost.

Another of Rozema's innovations intended to make Fanny appear more articulate and active is to transform her into an author. As Claudia Johnson explains in her introduction to the film's script, this new Fanny "retreats to her room not to struggle with feelings of injury . . . but to engage in the sweetest revenge of all, writing well" (6). Rozema's Fanny does not struggle, as she has little attachment to those around her. Instead of spending her private moments reading and reflecting, she pens Austen's juvenilia. Composed in her early- to mid-teens, Austen's juvenilia most often take the form of satire mocking the conventions of sentimental fiction. In these stories, the primary tenet of sentimental fiction—that one's feelings, rather than rational thought, are the best guides to moral behavior—is cleverly ridiculed. Austen's characters are led by their desires to absurd extremes of selfishness, violence, and anarchy, like Eliza following her lover to Paris only to be imprisoned for debt and "partially eaten by her two sons" (Rozema 28). Rozema seems to misread this anarchic spirit by assuming that in the juvenilia Austen is acting out her own desire for the liberation of feeling from the confines of society. Rozema has Fanny repeatedly telling herself and her younger sister Susan to "Run mad as often as you choose; but do not faint" (Rozema 80, 120), so that Austen's parodic language, a caution against trusting solely to one's emotions, becomes for Rozema a motto for freedom of expression.

Rozema's Edmund is impressed by Fanny's "wild constructions" (32). Yet they do not meet the standards for fiction, derived from *Northanger Abbey*, that Edmund echoes in the film, when he defines good drama as displaying "the greatest powers of the mind . . . , the most thorough knowledge of human nature . . . in the best chosen language" (Rozema 47-48). In the film, Fanny's stories do not develop. At twenty-one, Austen's age when writing *First Impressions*, the early version of *Pride and Prejudice*, Rozema's Fanny continues to satirize sentimental fiction (Rozema 30, 40, 84) and to exude "talents for the light and lively" (Austen 81), talents that define Mary's weakness in the novel.

Claudia Johnson claims that “by weaving in Austen’s uproarious early writings, Rozema transforms Fanny into a version of the Austenian narrator we love. In the process, she captures the novels’ funniness . . .” (‘Run Mad’ 16). But Rozema’s Fanny possesses only the exaggerated humor of farce evident in Austen’s early writings, while we love Austen’s narrator because her wit is informed by an element of truth and that “thorough knowledge of human nature.” It would be possible, without resorting to Austen’s juvenilia, to have Fanny write letters that retain some of the narrator’s ironic bite (as Rozema does in scene 74). In her Introduction to the screenplay, Johnson argues that “Rozema’s *Mansfield Park* is about getting free, about the liberating rewards of patience and intelligence we see in Fanny, but also about the expansive, uplifting, and liberating clarity Austen’s own art gives us” (9). By focusing on Austen’s childhood writings and adopting something of what Carol Shields calls their “unnuanced . . . world of black and white” (33), Rozema creates a heavy-handed film that traces only a shadow of the mature Austen’s clarifying and liberating examination of human nature in *Mansfield Park*.

Given the lengths to which Rozema goes to distinguish her Fanny through language and wit, it is not surprising that she fails to recognize how silence can act as a language of deep emotion, understanding and a mark of a thoughtful nature. In Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, Edmund and Fanny can share silence together easily and show mutual affection through unspoken acts, such as Edmund’s gift of the chain before the ball. In contrast, the Crawfords are accustomed to using displays of worldly wit as means to impress, and because of his constant barrage of conventional compliments and praise, Henry Crawford fails to convince Fanny of his sincerity. Rozema, however, alters the dynamics of silence between the main characters with less than ideal results. In the film, the relationship between Fanny and Edmund loses its integrity, as the bond no longer reflects their silent understanding of each other. Edmund becomes a flattering, fawning fellow who showers Fanny with compliments. Henry Crawford, by contrast, becomes exceedingly sympathetic and suitable for Fanny. Rozema’s adaptation incorporates several moments of unspoken communication and silent sympathy shared between Henry and Fanny.

In her DVD commentary for scene 96 (in which “*Fanny says good-bye to Mrs. Shakespeare*” before leaving for Portsmouth while Edmund watches [93]), Rozema claims that much of the suspense in *Mansfield Park* comes from speculating on what Edmund is feeling. In the novel, there is indeed genuine uncertainty as to whether Edmund will ever see Fanny’s superiority over

Mary. The novel's Edmund playfully asks Fanny, "when did you or any body ever get a compliment from me?" (197). Even Mary Crawford admires how "he talked no nonsense, he paid no compliments, his opinions were unbending, his attentions tranquil and simple" (65). In the film, on the other hand, it is clear early on that he is thinking of Fanny romantically, as in that clumsy exchange between Sir Thomas and Edmund. Rozema's Edmund not only knows Fanny is wonderful, he uses the most conventional and sentimental language to constantly tell her so even while he is supposedly attracted to Mary. For example, immediately after leaving Mary in one scene, Edmund tells Fanny, "Oh, Fanny, would that more women were like you. I love you beyond all power of words to express" (Rozema 76). It is Edmund rather than Henry Crawford who demands the first dance with Fanny, and instead of turning to Fanny during the ball because he longs for "the luxury of silence" (Austen 278), he flirts and praises her again: "Fanny, your entire person is entirely agreeable" (Rozema 77). At the conclusion of the film, Edmund gushes in the language of Harlequin romance to explain to Fanny how his love is more than brotherly: "I have loved you all my life. . . . As a man loves a woman, as a hero loves a heroine. As I have never loved anyone in my entire life" (Rozema 143). Jane Austen, of course, prefers to leave the dialogue between her lovers to the reader's imagination as such narrative silence most keenly expresses the depths of their joy and intimacy. Where Edmund and Fanny are concerned, Rozema does not seem to want to trust much emotion to silence.

By contrast, Rozema seems very comfortable scripting an inordinate number of moments of silent understanding between Fanny and Henry Crawford. For instance, the camera swirls around Fanny as she dances with Crawford in silent pleasure at the ball. Fanny laughs, smiles, almost touches his face and puts her head back in delight at the thrill, and it is no wonder that, having watched her behavior at the ball, Sir Thomas is confused at Fanny's refusal of Crawford (Rozema 78-79, 87). After the ball, Henry stands beneath Fanny's window, bows in the dark, and they share a "long grave look" that denotes attraction (Rozema 80). Later, Henry sends a fireworks display to Fanny in Portsmouth that includes the releasing of doves from a cage, a symbolic action that suggests an intimate and sympathetic understanding of Fanny's desire for freedom.

Instead of being wrapped up, as Austen's Henry is, in his own egotism and his certainty that Fanny must love him, Rozema's Henry is far more observant and knows Fanny loves Edmund. While visiting her in

Portsmouth, Henry kindly tells Fanny of Edmund and Mary's intention to marry, and they walk along the water in silence afterwards. When Fanny receives a letter from Edmund expressing that Mary is the only woman he could ever marry, Henry stands quietly by her until she turns and allows him to hold her in silent sympathy (Rozema 112). Soon afterwards, back at Fanny's house, they share another moment of silent understanding as they both sensitively handle a potentially awkward situation, smiling together at Henry's disgusting meal and his quiet wiping of old food from his fork (Rozema 113). Whereas in Austen's rendering, Henry is too self-absorbed to notice how conscious Fanny is of his attentions to Maria and Julia, Rozema's Henry admits to Fanny that his attentions to Maria were insincere (Rozema 110). He possesses a self-knowledge and awareness he lacks in the novel. These moments of silent empathy and attentiveness make Henry seem more sensitive, mature and better suited for Fanny than Edmund.

As a consequence of this improvement in Henry's character, Rozema's decision to incorporate Jane Austen's own change of heart about her brief engagement (to Harris Bigg-Wither) compromises Fanny's integrity and makes her seem responsible for Crawford's return to Maria. The novel's narration suggests that Fanny would have accepted Henry after Edmund and Mary's marriage if his improvement had continued but that his resolve is weak without the grace of Fanny's company. He cannot resist temptation. In the film, while Henry has improved immensely, Fanny appears to be the unprincipled one as it is *her* character and judgment that waver, not his. And he justly berates Fanny after her change of heart the next day: "Doubt *me*? And *your* behavior this day is that of someone trustworthy? You are the standard of trust?" (Rozema 117). After Henry's affair with Maria has been exposed, Fanny tells Mary that "your brother is an actor, a charming inscrutable actor, through and through" (Rozema 135). Although his adulterous affair with a married woman after Fanny rejects him can be condemned, Henry was genuine in his affections for Fanny and was not bound to her after *she* rejected him. In her DVD commentary, Rozema asserts that Fanny has an infallible internal guide because she knows whom she loves and is not swayed by superficial appearances or the persuasion of others. Yet Rozema's Fanny's initial acceptance of Henry argues that she *was* swayed. Because Rozema engages the language of silence to establish such a strong bond between Fanny and Henry, and because she makes Henry so aware both of his faults and of the capacity of silence to express emotion and tenderness, once Fanny comes to reject Henry, Rozema can no longer preserve the idea that Fanny is

the “standard of trust” and good judgment. By clumsily tampering with Austen’s plot and its silent cues, Rozema compromises her personal vision of Fanny and dilutes Austen’s fine dynamics of character.

In conclusion, Rozema’s adaptation falls short of being what Claudia Johnson calls either “an audaciously perceptive cinematic evocation of Austen’s unblinking, yet forgiving vision” or “an accomplishment of dazzling imagination in its own right” (“Run Mad” 17). That it is audacious is certain; that it is perceptive is arguable. Austen’s plot and her delineation of character together make the argument for good judgment fostered through quiet reflection and observation, a principle that cannot be convincingly reconciled with Rozema’s desire to champion mere boldness and wit. Rozema’s innovations only succeed in creating a somewhat immature and callous Fanny. Austen’s *Mansfield Park* is a complex study of how notions of class and gender inhibit speech, and it offers a vision of a society taught by its heroine to value the rewards of silent reflection—good judgment and judicious speech. Perhaps a novel better suited to Rozema’s agenda would have been *Jane Eyre*, with its individualistic protagonist who is angry, bold and outspoken about the restrictions of a society that she finally rejects. By failing either to recognize Austen’s intent or to sufficiently modify the novel’s plot and characters to suit her own postmodern concerns, Rozema exposes the incompleteness of her vision and her inability to recognize her own silent biases.

#### WORKS CITED

- Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park*. Ed. R. W. Chapman. 3rd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1934.
- Herlevi, Patty-Lynne. “*Mansfield Park*: A Conversation with Patricia Rozema.” 11 February 2000. *Nitrate Online—Movie Reviews and More*. 8 Sept 2003. <<http://www.nitrateonline.com/2000/fmansfield.html>>. 1
- Johnson, Claudia L. Introduction. *Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park: A Screenplay*. By Patricia Rozema. New York: Talk Miramax, 2000.
- . “Run mad, but do not faint.” Rev. of *Mansfield Park*, by Patricia Rozema. *Times Literary Supplement* 31 Dec. 1999: 16.
- Mansfield Park*. Writer and Director Patricia Rozema. Perf. Frances O’Connor, Johnny Lee Miller, Alessandro Nivola. DVD. Miramax, 1999.
- Rozema, Patricia. *Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park: A Screenplay*. New York: Talk Miramax, 2000.
- Shields, Carol. *Jane Austen*. London: Viking, 2001.