

# Fanny Dashwood Finally Has Her Say



It's about time!

Actress Harriet Walter, starring on Broadway in the title role in Schiller's "Mary Stuart," dazzled a JASNA-NY lunchtime audience on July 10, 2009 with an amazingly Austen-faithful "back story" that she created in preparation for her role as Fanny (Mrs. John) Dashwood in the 1995 film adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility*. Director Ang Lee, unfamiliar with Austen's novels, had asked all the lead actors in the film to answer a set of questions that delved considerably deeper into each character than the screenplay by Emma Thompson. By turns sympathetic and hilarious, Ms. Walter's account of Fanny Ferrars' childhood and young adulthood before she married John Dashwood enchanted her audience. She has graciously permitted us to reproduce the back-story for members who could not attend the noontime program, and it is reprinted below. Enjoy her wit, inventiveness and Austen scholarship, but realize that having Ms. Walter *read* it aloud was a treat that those present will never forget.

**NOTE:** The screenplay Ms. Walter had to work with omitted all reference to Harry Dashwood, Fanny and John's little son.

## The "Story" of Fanny Dashwood (nee Ferrars)

### Part I – Her history before the story takes place:

Fanny Dashwood (nee Ferrars) was born in 1763 at Ransbury in the county of Wiltshire.

Her father, Colonel Sowberry Ferrars, retired from the army, was a county MP and country squire. Late in life, he took an interest in tea-brokering, a pastime involving relatively little effort and quite reasonable profits. These, together with money from his quite considerable inherited estates, meant that on his death in 1785 he left a tidy fortune in the trust of his widow. Fanny (or Frances, as her father always called her) was the older sister of two boys and resented the fact that the Ferrars fortune would largely devolve on her eldest - and as she believed - most feckless brother, Edward. Indeed, Fanny seems to have sprung from the womb with a sense of grievance. A frequent cry from her lips as a child was "It is not fair!"

## **Education**

Fanny was tutored from the age of six to fourteen years by a governess of Flemish origin, Miss Hildegard de Witte, who gave her a respectable grounding in Greek, Latin, classical literature, the antiquities, geography, and mathematics, as well as French, Italian, the Scriptures, and botany. For poetry and music Fanny had little aptitude, but mathematics satisfied her thirst to measure things and “get things right.”

Miss de Witte (an artistic soul herself) was discouraged by Fanny's lack of imagination and relieved when Edward became of the age to join her schoolroom. To be entrusted with the education, albeit the early years thereof, of a young gentleman, heir to lands and a modest fortune, was a responsibility Miss de Witte felt born to. Fanny was soon left to her own devices and, deprived of the attention that was her life's blood, her intellect withered on the bud.

She decided that lessons were “dull and only for plain girls.” She would become a great beauty and marry a great man. Her family would one day boast of her and would beg to sojourn in her household.

It was at this point that Fanny's mother began to take notice of her. Edward was indeed bookish, and her younger son, Robert, was a merry and charming fellow for whose future she had no fears, but Fanny had grown taciturn. True, her natural pride lent her a haughty kind of grace, but her sullenness marred her developing looks. Mrs. Ferrars, mindful that, as in her own youth, a girl's future happiness and security lay entirely in her abilities to attract a suitable man, set about saving Fanny from the looming brink of spinsterhood.

At seventeen Fanny was handsome, if not pretty, sharp of wit, and was developing a keen interest in fashion and male company. Unfortunately, just at the moment when she was ready to be let loose on society, Colonel Ferrars fell mortally ill.

## **The major crisis or the crucible**

Mrs. Ferrars reacted badly to this. She established herself in a remote wing of the house and sighed over Colonel Ferrars's portrait and love letters, resolving only to remember him in youth and vigour. Now, having been brought up at an indifferent arm's length from her father, Fanny was suddenly forced to nurse him.

It was a long illness, during which Colonel Ferrars did not shield his daughter from the darkest aspects of his disease, nor did he show any gratitude for her presence and self-sacrifice; rather, he complained of missing his “fine boys.” The result was that any filial respect or admiration Fanny had ever had for her father soon turned to bitterness and revulsion, and his eventual death left Fanny perpetually scarred not only by this relentless exposure to her own ignobility of feeling but also by the revelation of her father's fallibility.

By now Fanny was twenty-two and fearful of “missing the boat.” Despite any resentment of her mother's neglect, Fanny understood that while Mama now held the purse strings she had better befriend her than not. She resented her brothers, who were only brought home from school to weep over their father's laid-out corpse and had been spared witnessing his hideous slow decay, and more than all, she resented that they would inherit the reward, the position, the money, while she had only the promise of a dowry to catch some man who could be satisfied to accept it in lieu of her lost youth and beauty.

## **A Missed Opportunity**

Fanny had long cherished a yearning for the young Viscount Downey, heir to the earldom of Gort, who had paid her some attentions at a supper party after a day of local hunting in the days before her father's illness. Lord Downey had called on her a few more times to take a turn round the grounds with her and had written to her afterwards of the pleasure these meetings had afforded him. This letter Fanny had kept ever since, in a little

Chinese carved box (along with a lock of hair from a favourite long-dead Pekinese), and this had sustained a four-year dream of grandeur.

On emerging from her mourning gowns, Fanny learnt of Downey's marriage to none other than Maria Turnbull, the skit! It was hard to bear. So lightweight a wife for such a man!

There was nothing for it but dutifully to go through the social motions prepared for her by her mother. She spent the London season in Hill Street with her uncle and aunt, attended balls, supper parties, concerts, and carnivals. In the country she rode to hounds, went on boating trips and picnics, and made considerable efforts to know the right people in the right places at the right times, but all the while the shadow of Downey reminded her of her rightful destiny missed. No one was good enough for her and people quickly felt it. Known for her aloofness and sharp tongue, those men that did not avoid her completely dabbled with her, tentatively testing the waters and, finding them to be piranha-infested, quickly withdrew.

Fanny was trapped between her aspirations towards the aristocracy and her desperate need to feel superior, and finally it was her natural pragmatism that won the day. With all the energy and application that her political mind could muster, she set about constructing a network of social dependants for whom her own knowledge of who was and who was not to be cultivated became invaluable to her malleable set. The fear of being cast out of Fanny Ferrars's circle was sufficient to maintain their loyalty (at least to her face), and for as long as they could furnish her with quick news of who had been seen talking with whom, with what degree of intensity, and for how long, she promised to favour them.

### **The Threat of Spinsterhood**

One winter, when Fanny surveyed her circle, she was hit with a horrid fear. Over the years she had honed and developed her considerable matchmaking skills, from which her set had benefited. But what of her own future?  
...

True, there was yet John Dashwood, an erstwhile suitor who had not yet completely vanished from her side. Was there not something to be made out of his dogged constancy? His manner had never suggested the ardour she inwardly demanded, but could not this diffidence mask a greater feeling?

John Dashwood had known her uncle's family for many years. There was a strong likelihood of his inheriting much from his mother, and then there was the Norland estate, which must come to John eventually, must it not? He was upright and did not yet know his own strength. With her help he might become a man to be proud of, might enter politics, the law. Thus Fanny mused: "Were I a man, what a figure might not I cut? Oh, that I had been my father's son and Edward the gentle girl. Now no man I deserve will ever see how much I deserve him, but there is John Dashwood, and rather than be left unwed, I cannot even think it!"

### **The Marriage**

The marriage took place on October 1, 1788, in the parish church of Ramsbury. It was an ornate and pompous affair, which seemed designed by Fanny brazenly to outface any sneering at its lateness in her life. Outside the church Fanny was enthusiastically set upon by a pretty though somewhat disheveled little girl who was in grave danger of irritating Fanny with her mauling and insistent cries of "I'm Marianne, I'm Marianne!" "I have not doubt of it," retorted Fanny, "and I'm needed elsewhere," and with a queenly swoop she hastened to join the more illustrious of her guests and begin to elevate her husband in their estimation. Thus abandoned, the bewildered Marianne rushed into a huddle with her sister Elinor, who, together with her mother and father, consoled her by agreeing that Fanny Ferrars, now Dashwood, was going to be a hard act to swallow.

John and Fanny took up residence in a respectable area of London, in a house which Fanny took great interest in furnishing. John, who had hitherto shown no sartorial interest, was now encouraged to find some. For a long

time in her spinster days, before she had the money and status to buy them, Fanny had studied the whereabouts of the best wares in London. Now she could process to the Exchange for her millinery, to Ludgate Hill for her silks and drapery, to Cranbourne Street for her gold and silver, and Shire Lane for perfumery. When John warned of extravagance beyond their means, she subdued her rising temper by arguing to herself that perhaps they should save for the day when ... But the day did not come.

The shame and pity of childlessness caused Fanny to divert her energies into John's career, even as his own ambitions wilted. He spent more and more time in the coffee clubs and at the races; she spent more money. Both were displeased with the other. Neither would speak about the gaping hollow in their lives, but each smelt the other's rancour.

### **Fears**

It was on hearing that John's stepmother was once more with child that our couple were brought together again. If they should have a boy! Fearsome thought! John and Fanny understood what they had to do without ever the need to discuss their ugly motives. They visited Norland twice for two long months at a time, Fanny to help supervise the girls, John to make up for much lost time with his father. As Mrs. Dashwood's time of confinement drew near, Fanny was quite distracted with anticipation. She could not concentrate on the lace she was working for the baby's gown. She ate little, but instead gazed wistfully around the dining room at the plate and silver and paintings on the walls.

On the birth of baby Margaret the relief felt by the John Dashwoods need hardly be described. They hastened back to town and resumed their social rounds with a vengeance. But somehow Joy and Ease still eluded Fanny. Some inner dissatisfaction caused her to move house twice before settling in Harley Street, where we find her in 1800.

She took to collecting pets, a caged bird, then a Persian cat. The cheerful trilling of the former was so little in tune with Fanny's mood that it was soon sentenced to expulsion below stairs, while the latter was too languid for Fanny's lively mind, and besides shed too many hairs. In one of the cleverest moves of his married life, John picked up a pedigreed Italian greyhound from a trader in rare breeds and gave it to Fanny on her thirty-fifth birthday, and from that day to this, she has not let Regina (Ria for short) out of her sight.

### **Psychology**

The reality of her unfulfilled life caused Fanny to escape more and more into self-delusion. There was much that she had grown to accept, even enjoy in John, but she couldn't keep from blaming him and his stock for their childless state. After all, did not the Ferrars side of the family produce lusty males in profusion? Their sexual life had never been thrilling, and Fanny found sex, for the most part, a messy and ridiculous business. All this made her sympathize at last with her mother's revulsion towards her husband's bodily functions.

She noticed with admiration and some inspiration how old Mrs. Ferrars had taken to her dowager status like a duck to water. At the very least, Fanny would endeavour to outlive John and enjoy similar privileges and control. Years went by, during which Fanny threw herself into the social whirl, forced by her ever-growing need to belong there into spending money far beyond their means. And then, as if ordained by the Gods of Society, there came the news of Henry Dashwood's fatal riding accident. John rushed to his father's bedside - almost tipped out of the house by Fanny, who urged the utmost speed, together with a plea that John remind his dying father of Fanny's utter loyalty and daughterly devotion over the years. The rest, dear reader, you will see played out before you on the screen.

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**Part II in which I have to give more details and answer more directly the questions in Mr. Lee's questionnaire:** (This section was not read to the audience at the July 10<sup>th</sup> event.)

### **Attitude to other characters in the film**

Fanny gets her way, but as long as the Dashwood girls remain marriageable she is ill at ease. Why?

The truth is that Fanny hates herself and resents the Dashwood girls and their mother because she knows they are in essence “better” than she. They have a depth and beauty of soul, a warmth and charm of character that can elicit love - that thing that Fanny has never had any power to command ...

Of her two brothers, Robert, though the younger son, is the family's more glamorous asset. Edward in Fanny's eyes is a plodder. Yet when she sees Edward and Elinor falling for one another it tears the pit of her stomach to shreds.

Fanny believes that there are certain people who can work their way around the social rules by sheer force of their pushiness, glamour, what have you. These are qualities that she can admire and which none of the Dashwoods possesses. Lucy, on the other hand, she can read like a book. She is superficial and ambitious in a way Fanny can easily deal with, but those inward refinements that Elinor has, the earnest passions of Marianne, and the genuine benevolence of their mother are all beyond Fanny's reach.

### **Daily routine**

Rises late. Takes chocolate or China tea in bed. Reads *Daily Gazette* such as *The Ladies Magazine* or social bulletins and financial sections of *The Times*. These are all brought to her by Sarah Beasley, her personal maid, who has served Fanny since her youth at Ransbury. Sarah draws a bath for Fanny. Fanny is very serious about hygiene. In fact, she is a bit of a hypochondriac and worries constantly about diseases she might catch while out in the streets of London. Ria gets brought her bread and milk, and Fanny is dressed in a morning coat and her hair loosely dressed under a cap before descending to the breakfast room. There Hickson, the butler, and Mrs. Hickson, the housekeeper, discuss with Fanny the menu for the next day- today's menu having been decided yesterday in order to get the freshest and cheapest bargains at the early morning market. Sometimes Fanny will visit the kitchens to oversee the preparation of food. Her high standards, sharp temper, and knowledge of cuisine (culled mostly from the chefs of the great houses she has visited) terrify the kitchen staff, and as she is likely to swoop in at any time, they can never quite relax, and they look out for the chance of moving to another establishment as soon as possible.

The morning is spent writing letters, organizing the next few days' social visits, having her hair dressed, and being fitted with ever more extravagant gowns by her French dressmaker. Madam Evangeline (actually Evadney Collins from the village of Putney, but let us not tell Fanny) claims to know the very latest fashions following Mesdames Tallien and Eloffe of Paris, and she and Fanny will spend hours together studying the fashion plates from *Les Petites Couriers de Dames* or *Le Journal des Dames* and concocting an English (i.e., more substantial, less spiritual adaptation thereof).

### **Surroundings and belongings**

Her taste is on the excessive side. In all things she eschews understatement, in dress, in décor, or in public pronouncement. A modern psychologist might see this as another demonstration of her fear of disappearing from notice. By late morning Fanny is ready to appear in public. Her husband will escort her in their curricula around Hyde Park. A carriage ride in the park serves to show Fanny off to the public gaze (don't tell her but there aren't that many gazes) and catch up with John in a few bitchy observations about people they know- or, more accurately, don't know. Then on to St. James Coffee House or to the Cocoa Tree. All the while Fanny's

sharp eyes and ears take in who is where and with whom, who is about to die and who is about to wed. London's society occupies a very small area, and so the comings and goings are much easier to track.

On returning to Harley Street Fanny will sit down to peruse and answer the calling cards of the day at her escritoire, and then more consultations and audiences with fabric designers, architects, landscape gardeners, etc., until it is time for Sarah to undress her, to bath her, and dress her again in her evening finery.

Then to dinner. Fanny loves to entertain, spending just enough on other people's pleasure as will ensure her reputation as a hostess, just enough to make a significant impression, but not so much as to make any noticeable dent in her pocket or timetable.

Fanny keeps consistently late hours, greatly to everyone's inconvenience (though she can only think it is to hers!).

The meal is often a heavy one: soup, turbot, lobster, a saddle of mutton, capons, a round of spiced beef, all marinated in heavy sauces of lobster or ginger and lemon, pig meat stuffed with onions and sage ... All this is swilled down with cider or beer or sherry wine, with porter or hot punch, and then a sweet Constantia wine to accompany the Pitch Pudding, the tarts, and the cheese.

Fanny often wins at cards, which is why they are among her favourite pastimes. She is competitive, more alert than most even after a heavy meal, and when the urge to win overrides all else, as it can in her, she is not above a sly cheat, which of course she hotly denies if discovered, and argues with such an elaborate self-justification (which she comes earnestly to believe) that her opponents are soon too weary to contest it.

### **Pleasures and avoidances**

But the main stuff of Fanny's day is Gossip. It is a source of diversion from solitude, which we have already established she does not enjoy, and a potential source of control over people. Gossip takes places in the pauses from cards or filigree or needlework. Here Fanny faces another dilemma: she wishes to acquire maximum knowledge with minimum perceived effort. She wishes to appear the grand lady who is above interest in rumour and scandal, but this studied aloofness exercises her sometimes to bursting point. She usually finds things out in the end by means of a willing go-between, some impressionable and ambitious creature who will have fewer qualms about showing her interest and will keep Fanny's own curiosity secret.

Fanny also lacks a sense of humour and knows it. By that I mean that she frequently notices people laughing at something that means nothing to her, and she covers this deficiency, suggesting by her aloof gaze that she had her mind on more important things and therefore did not hear.

### **Universal needs**

Of course, Love. But Fanny has never been loved so doesn't even know she needs it. She does not know how to attract it and had therefore convinced herself of its triviality. If she cannot be loved she will be BEST, best at something: dog breeding, landscaping, and matchmaking. Or she will have the BEST. She wants to be envied. Other people's envy alone can reassure her that what she possesses has value. Other people's envy of her has a chance of numbing her own envy of people like Elinor. To be loved and valued for what is inside you. Ugh! Impossible! No. Envy ... that is the thing. That is what she craves. Huddled, whispering, head turning, Envy. Then she will have triumphed. A sad and impossible goal.

### **What does your character learn about herself?**

Will Fanny or her like ever learn? Will they ever confront the unpleasant realities of their hearts? Or in such cases are we asking too much? Would it not take superhuman courage to look into such emptiness? Could one continue to live in the dreary light of such numbing self-knowledge?