

Part 1

Women and the Body

Strength, Sex, and Austenian Wellness

CHAPTER 1



“I am strong enough now to walk very well”

Vigor and Femininity in Mansfield Park

Jane Austen would be amused at the irony of beginning a women’s studies analysis of her work with a focus on the female body. And yet, she wrote embodied narratives about the material world of people, places, mutton chops, and mud, in the materiality of bound print. She encourages her heroines to live in their bodies as her words live on the page because of them, and depicts a human existence in which, as in literature, physicality always points to something beyond itself. The human narrative is grounded in the mud of the material, but communicates through it the more significant realm of the unseen, the mind and spirit, the hand of its Creator. Otherwise, Austen’s women (and her readers) would be no more than mutton chops. Perhaps such considerations make more justifiable and interesting beginning our study with such questions as: If we invited Jane Austen to be guest judge at a beauty pageant today, who would be her winner? What image of the female physique would she promote? In her novels, both robust and delicate women are portrayed as beautiful. The athletic Elizabeth Bennet and Marianne Dashwood as well as the more fragile Anne Elliot and Fanny Price are all attractive in their ways, and their relative size does not determine

their feminine appeal for either the author or the characters who love them. Similarly, though Harriet Smith lacks heroine status, her charming corpulence equals Emma Woodhouse's "firm and upright figure" (*E* 39) in attractiveness: "She was a very pretty girl, and her beauty happened to be of a sort which Emma particularly admired. She was short, plump and fair, with a fine bloom, blue eyes, light hair, regular features, and a look of great sweetness" (23). Austen communicates a general appreciation for a range of body types and looks in her fiction, yet sketches them in such vague outlines as playfully to foil readers' preoccupation with appearances.¹ She eschews both the reduction of female identity to the sensual and the romanticization of feminine weakness, in favor of encouraging physical health and strength as a signifier of fully embodied, multidimensional selfhood—of woman's worth. Her heroines take a realist literary journey in which corporeality is not merely a requisite vehicle but a catalyst and mirror of figurative forward movement. Thus, Austen is not so interested in the facts themselves of the size, shape, or color of a woman's features as in how those features express her character and its progress—her personal growth curve.

Through numerous comedic epistolary references to her own enthusiasm for good food, the author affirms a woman's right to thrive in body. This message emerges unequivocally, despite the letters' subjectivity as literary constructs intended to entertain the recipients, and is enhanced by exaggeration.² Readers love Austen's oft-quoted pronouncement to her sister, Cassandra, "You know how interesting the purchase of a sponge-cake is to me" (15–17 June 1808). She similarly declares that "[g]ood apple pies are a considerable part of our domestic happiness" (17–18 October 1815), relishes "a most comfortable dinner of Soup, Fish, Bouilliee, Partridges & an apple Tart" (15–16 September 1813), and praises the merit of Chicken, Asparagus, Lobster, and "Tomatas" [*sic*].³ Austen's formal capitalization of edibles endows

them with the status of proper nouns, of friends. In a letter sent shortly before her return home, Austen tells Cassandra to have a satisfying dinner prepared for herself and their mother: “You must give us something very nice, for we are used to live well” (19 June 1799).⁴ On another occasion, she exults, “I always take care to provide such things as please my own appetite, which I consider as the chief merit in housekeeping. I have had some ragout veal, and I mean to have some haricot mutton tomorrow” (17–18 November 1798). Austen catalogs her consumption of objectionably unfeminine meats (ironically framed as rewards for her feminine “housekeeping”) and also expresses a penchant for the inessentials of desserts, drinks, and toppings that contribute little nutritional value but add significant enjoyment to one’s diet. Austen’s emphasis on her gustatory pleasure seems simultaneously a satire on the social expectation of women’s abstemiousness and a parody of the other extreme of male-identified self-indulgence, the latter of which was flaunted in the Regency court and elite men’s clubs of her day.⁵

Beneath her burlesque of gluttonous decadence, Austen advocates in her letters the same goal she conveys through the portrayal of undernourished and well-nourished heroines in fiction: a balanced lifestyle of health achieved through reasonably pleasurable consumption, exercise, fresh air, rest, and creative enterprise. She encourages women to “live well,” by contrast to the admonitory tone of such conduct-book warnings as the negative insistence on “moderation at table, and in the enjoyment of what the world calls pleasures. A young beauty, were she fair as Hebe, and elegant as the Goddess of Love herself, would soon lose these charms by a course of inordinate eating, drinking, and late hours” (*Regency* 33–34).⁶ Apparently, the ill-effects to men’s charms of gorging on animal flesh and drinking and gambling the night away are not cause for concern. While rejecting the one-sidedness and reactivity of etiquette authors’ many injunctions

to women, Austen likely agrees with the author identified as “a Lady of Distinction” that either “miserable leanness or shapeless fat” (*Regency* 37) represents an undesirable figural prototype. However, Austen also shares her society’s greater anxiety over thinness as connoting sickness and the threat of early mortality.⁷ She repeatedly voices concern over loved ones’ loss of weight or appetite while praising their increase in either (“Eliza says she is quite well, but she is thinner than when we saw her last, & not in very good looks. I suppose she has not recovered from the effects of her illness in December” [21–22 January 1801]).

In a parallel manner, Austen’s narrator bemoans the sickness of heroines Fanny Price and Anne Elliot while affirming the gusto of her most attractive heroine, hearty hiker Elizabeth Bennet, and her most commanding one, dynamo Emma Woodhouse.⁸ Emma’s spunky appeal, like Elizabeth’s, is associated with her enjoyment of wellness, as Mrs. Weston’s burst of admiration indicates: “[O]h! what a bloom of full health, and such a pretty height and size; such a firm and upright figure. There is health, not merely in her bloom, but in her air, her head, her glance. . . . Emma always gives me the idea of being the complete picture of grown-up health. She is loveliness itself” (*E* 39). Mrs. Weston implies that Emma’s beauty resides in not only her bodily strength, but her strong sense of self, her comfortableness in her own skin. Austen may not allow her heroines the freedom she exercises in letters to parade her gustatory enthusiasms, but she regrets their frailty and celebrates their vitality or restoration thereto—not for appearance’s sake, but for themselves and their ability to fulfill their narrative mission. When one compares the developmental trajectories of female characters in Austen’s novels, it becomes clear that physical condition and its unfit or fit use often function as a commentary on the merit of the characters portrayed, who fit into one of several categories or shift from one to another.

The over-exuberant women of Lydia Bennet-style “animal spirits” (*PP* 45) whose impulsive activity suggests an over-stimulated body, a dangerous sensuality, and a corresponding lack of mental and spiritual depth include *Pride and Prejudice’s* Lydia and Kitty Bennet; Eliza, her illegitimate daughter Eliza, and the pre-enlightened Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*; Isabella Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey*; *Mansfield Park’s* Aunt Norris, Maria and Julia Bertram, and Mary Crawford; Mrs. Elton in *Emma*; and the Musgrove sisters in *Persuasion*. Of these, Kitty and Julia are rescued from destruction by increased guidance, Henrietta Musgrove by re-alliance with her fiancé, and Louisa Musgrove and Marianne Dashwood by a chastening illness.⁹

On the other extreme from the overactive characters are the chronically sickly ones, such as Anne de Bourgh of *Pride and Prejudice* and Jane Fairfax of *Emma*. *Mansfield Park’s* Fanny Price and *Persuasion’s* Anne Elliot initially reflect this type, until they toughen up and push past being defined as pining victims. We do not learn much about the interior life of Jane Fairfax and especially of Anne de Bourgh, but their ill health seems to suggest mental weakness as manifest in an inability to rise above emotionally detrimental circumstances. Like the overactive characters, they are too self-interested; although we might sympathize with Jane’s and Anne’s personal challenges, their extreme introversion also proves destructive. The only likeable character in this frail group is Anne Elliot, who leaves behind the category when she becomes hardy enough to contemplate with pleasure being a sailor’s wife.

A more gratuitously irresponsible group of female characters includes the dozers and the willful convalescents. The semi-comatose characters include Lady Bertram of *Mansfield Park* and, despite her attractiveness and good nature, somewhat *Emma’s* bovine Harriet Smith.¹⁰ The hypochondriacs include Mrs. Bennet (*Pride and Prejudice*) and Mary Musgrove (*Persuasion*),

who are annoying but humorously egocentric in their endless complaints. Some characters in the more credibly sickly group, such as Jane Fairfax, may be hypochondriacs as well, in a psychosomatic enactment of their suffering; however, they do not offset their tediousness by amusing the reader.

The healthy, active women who rarely, if ever, fall ill and generally live lives of moderation, principle, and reflection include Mrs. Croft, Elinor Dashwood, Aunt Gardiner, Mrs. Weston, and, more so post-reform, Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse (and somewhat Catherine Morland). These characters do the best they can with what they have, and do not succumb to a life of superfluous hyperactivity, helpless despair, imagined or real ailments, or mind-numbing malaise. In this respect, Mrs. Smith fits the healthy category of female types, because of her mental vigor and courageous buoyancy—she chooses to live as active a life as possible in her circumstances and does not allow her diseased body to “[ruin] her spirits” (*P* 153). She refuses to define herself or to live as a sick person.¹¹ Admirable women take pride in neither strength nor weakness nor the feigning of either, but demonstrate outward-thinking and inward growth by developing relationships of integrity, gaining in self-knowledge, and turning thought into productive action. They are secure in themselves because they are—or, in Elizabeth’s and Emma’s case, determinedly become—in moral and emotional balance, as if each is in her own most natural state, neither bubbling over nor fainting away, but fully alive. Fanny Price and Anne Elliot ultimately earn membership in this vibrant group.¹²

A delicate character’s increasing weight and energy are intertwined with her improved state of mind as well as lifestyle; as she learns about herself and others, she strengthens in understanding and purpose. Austen acknowledges the tangible selves of women as a semiology of their trajectory toward their rightful place in literature and life: a place of dynamism, fulfillment,

and longevity that is epitomized by their wholesome blooming in the flesh. Underlying this paradigm is the author's "deep and instinctive sense of the body as an indispensable signifier" (McMaster, *Reading* 173). She explores the relationship between female corporal strength and womanliness as a central theme in *Mansfield Park*, offering readers an especially illuminating study in the author's prescription of women characters' and readers' pursuit of "fitness" in all senses. Fanny Price's body functions as a symbolic map of her personal and social development, and her increasing activity throughout the novel reinforces her bildungsroman. The Bertram circle's female family members and friends serve as both catalysts for and contrasts to her evolving identity, while the men attempt but fail to impede her self-fortification.¹³

Judging from Austen's epistolary emphasis on the importance of satisfying meals, she empathizes with *Mansfield Park's* heroine when her neglectful parents deprive her of a farewell breakfast at the end of her Portsmouth visit: "the breakfast table . . . was quite and completely ready as the carriage drove from the door. Fanny's last meal in her father's house was in character with her first; she was dismissed from it as hospitably as she had been welcomed" (*MP* 445). Good food connotes the loving support of family, whereas its dearth conveys the corresponding absence of familial affection. The reader hopes that from this point in the novel, Fanny will never return to the chaotic, impersonal home of her early childhood. As both Austen's letters and fiction stress, bodily nurturance and the symbolic correlative of emotional nurturance are critical contributors to a woman's well-being.

Fanny Price represents the feminine ideal of frailty in some respects, but she is not allowed to rest on this ideal. As a fringe member of the Bertram household, she relies on the chivalry of her cousin Edmund to assist her with prescribed horseback riding exercise, and her corporal weakness functions as a metaphor for her social precariousness in a divergently tyrannous household

of assertive women and passive-aggressive men. The narrator emphasizes Fanny's marginal position in the background of scenes, where she often sits and suffers from headaches. The underscoring of her delicacy reinforces her martyrdom by cruel relatives, but does not inherently ennoble her as a character. The repetition of references to Fanny's fragility becomes irritating, renders its realism suspect, and suggests her general lack of agency or impact. One may even feel the sadistic desire for Aunt Norris to slap Fanny out of her righteous torpidity and into concrete action.¹⁴ Austen gently parodies the sentimental tradition's equation of femininity with exaggerated delicacy by implying Fanny's kinship with her Aunt Bertram—a woman who ignores her dysfunctional children in favor of her dog—in extreme passivity. Then the author turns around and undercuts this typecasting by gradually unveiling Fanny's Aunt Norris-like tenacity. Like a wilting woman's ineffectuality, the energetic meddling of Aunt Norris and forceful vitality of Maria and Julia Bertram and Mary Crawford—none of whom ever becomes ill in the novel—can also produce destructive consequences. Maria sacrifices everything to passion and Julia nearly does so; this bodily excess can, at worst, degenerate into an Eliza Brandon-like abandonment to promiscuity and even death. Mary Crawford dazzles Edmund with her more circumscribed vivacity, but he eventually discovers that she is unprincipled at the core, which renders her robustness repulsive and unwomanly, an outgrowth of what Edmund describes to Fanny as “blunted delicacy and a corrupted, vitiated mind” (456). In *Mansfield Park*, as in the other novels, neither bodily weakness (Fanny and Lady Bertram) nor might (Aunt Norris and her uninhibited young affiliates), whether innate or pretended, epitomizes feminine perfection. Austen intermingles and transmutes both the naïve frailty of the virtuous sentimental heroine and the heft of the Chaucerian comic wife, to endorse a healthier median between the two.

Fanny Price's physical being functions as a powerful motif that delineates her struggles and triumphs as her maturing identity emerges among extreme female role models and patriarchal would-be saboteurs. When Fanny first appears at Mansfield Park at the age of ten, she is undersized, which underscores her other disadvantages of timidity, poor education, and social insignificance: "She was small of her age, with no glow of complexion, nor any other striking beauty; exceedingly timid and shy, and shrinking from notice; but her air, though awkward, was not vulgar, her voice was sweet, and when she spoke, her countenance was pretty" (12). Fanny's littleness is a metaphor for her unrealized potential and subtlety of character as well as affectional undernourishment. Her cousins Maria and Julia are insensitive in their self-confidence, displaying a critical detachment toward their vulnerable cousin, whose ignorance they continually expose to their governess and Aunt Norris. They communicate a smug, vulgar superiority that renders their physical development a manifestation of their self-satisfaction. They use Fanny's small stature to demarcate her inferior social status and their figurative, as literal, precedence: "Her elder cousins mortified her by reflections on her size, and abashed her by noticing her shyness; Miss Lee wondered at her ignorance, and the maid-servants sneered at her clothes" (14). Other women exploit Fanny's lesser size to elevate themselves and degrade her to the bottom-rung position on the family social ladder.¹⁵ The narrator's physiological distinctions between Fanny and her cousins are similarly revealing: "the daughters [were] decidedly handsome, and all of them well-grown and forward of their age, which produced as striking a difference between the cousins in person, as education had given to their address; and no one would have supposed the girls so nearly of an age as they really were" (13). Maria and Julia are "forward" both physically and socially; their boldness is shown to be rude, cold, and unfeminine, whereas the delicate

Fanny's "feelings were very acute, and too little understood to be properly attended to" (14). Her petite physique as a child belies her big heart and deep emotions, whereas her cousins' bodily substance belies their shallow minds. Austen is not suggesting that brawny girls are evil and slight ones are angels; rather, she presents a metaphorical commentary on the reverse development of the cousins: Fanny begins with the foundation of a strong character and grows into herself, while her cousins begin with strong selves devoid of character and never grow.

After her initial stage of alienation, Fanny plays an increasingly active role among the Bertrams. She gradually transforms from an anxious recluse on the fringe of her new family, unable to face or interact with others, to its ultimate stronghold. It is not the solicitous, oh-so-kind Edmund who most motivates Fanny to develop her familial role, but her obnoxious aunts and female cousins: "To her cousins she became occasionally an acceptable companion. . . . their pleasures and schemes were sometimes of a nature to make a third very useful, especially when that third was of an obliging, yielding temper" (17). Lady Bertram similarly recruits her niece to be her personal assistant, and "always found her very handy and quick in carrying messages, and fetching, what she wanted" (20). From Fanny's arrival at Mansfield, when Lady Bertram smiled welcomingly and was the least intimidating person at her new home, the two formed a relationship critical to Fanny's development. Her aunt's first act of kindness was to "make her sit on the sofa with herself and pug" (13). While Maria and Julia intermittently spur Fanny to action to further their entertainment, her semi-comatose aunt sticks to her with unexpected dependency. The totally passive Lady Bertram "spent her days in sitting nicely dressed on a sofa, doing some long piece of needlework, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children" (19-20). Because of and by comparison to Lady Bertram, Fanny becomes somewhat useful,

busy, and confident. Although she assists her isolated, needy aunt with a pointless task, her own role has meaning as one of affectionate supportiveness. Whether Lady Bertram's reliance on Fanny emanates from motives of selfishness or kindness, it is her only significant, positive function in the novel. She creates a safe place of belonging within the family for her niece. This relative security nurtures Fanny's ability to assert her competence; she grows into a valued contributor by regularly administering to the smiling slug on the couch.

Lady Bertram's abandonment of the London house to remain always on the country estate, "in consequence of a little ill-health, and a great deal of indolence" (20), notably coincides with Fanny's addition to the Bertram family. Lady Bertram withdraws from social life and the limited activity involved in shuttling between homes, to almost no activity at Mansfield in her quiet companionship with Fanny, to whom she transfers most of her needlework and all of the occasional fetching errands. Thus, she simultaneously becomes less present and calls forth more presence in her niece: "Lady Bertram, sunk back in one corner of the sofa . . . was just falling into a gentle doze, while Fanny was getting through the few difficulties of her work for her" (126). Lady Bertram's physical weakness suggests her lack of substance and general apathy toward existence; she is not cruel, but she is usually indifferent. Fanny, however, struggles against physical weakness and strives to contribute to the Bertrams' lives through active good. Lady Bertram chooses a life of extreme retirement and is tolerated in it because of her status; Fanny aspires to justify her dependent position through usefulness and takes small initiatives to help Lady Bertram with her "work." Her aunt's inertia manifests her inconsequentiality, whereas the more Fanny develops socially and intellectually through utility to the Bertram women as well as through the "education and manners" (276) her uncle and Edmund provide,

the more she grows physically in an outward manifestation of increasing self-realization.¹⁶

The primary way that Fanny endeavors to gain strength is through horseback riding. Edmund tells Mary Crawford, “ ‘Every sort of exercise fatigues her so soon . . . except riding’ ” (95). The differences in the two women’s motivations for and styles of riding dramatize their differences of character. Sensitive Fanny exercises moderately for wholesome self-improvement, and although she finds the activity pleasurable, her subdued method of enjoying it embodies civilized self-restraint, decorum, and sensibility. By contrast, Mary is ceaselessly active and vivacious. She loves to ride and has no wish and little self-discipline to discontinue fulfilling her desire. From the beginning of their acquaintance, it is clear to the reader that Mary possesses more vitality and less virtue than Fanny:

Miss Crawford’s enjoyment of riding was such, that she did not know how to leave off. Active and fearless, and, though rather small, strongly made, she seemed formed for a horsewoman; and to the genuine pleasure of the exercise, something was probably added in Edmund’s attendance and instructions, and something more in the conviction of very much surpassing her sex in general by her early progress, to make her unwilling to dismount. (66–67)

While waiting for her mare, Fanny watches Mary’s riding triumph from a distance, observing that after she trots in a circle with Edmund, “at *her* apparent suggestion, they rose into a canter; and to Fanny’s timid nature it was most astonishing to see how well she sat. . . . he was evidently directing her management of the bridle, he had hold of her hand; she saw it, or the imagination supplied what the eye could not reach” (67). Some scholars

identify sexual connotations in *Mansfield Park*'s horseback riding metaphor, in which the female characters' attitudes toward riding correspond to their moral firmness or lassitude.¹⁷ Mary's bold initiation of Edmund's canter with her in this scene adds codified emphasis to her seduction of him—she instigates his ride, leads him astray, coyly directs his direction of her while gesturing toward deferral to his manly prerogative of instruction. She boasts openly, “‘I am very strong. Nothing ever fatigues me, but doing what I do not like’” (68). She attracts Edmund by displaying her willful hardihood while feigning reliance on his guidance—even as she makes clear the pretense of this reliance—and by parading as witty modesty her avowal of selfishness.

Edmund is instinctively drawn to the woman who most resembles his own sisters in her self-assurance of body and mind, and who also embodies in her narcissistic self-conviction a feminine version of himself. Mary Crawford's affiliation with his sisters, centered on a kinship of athleticism, is also central to the narrative's differentiation between Fanny's character and the characters of her female associates. Mary's

strength and courage [were] fully appreciated by the Miss Bertrams; her delight in riding was like their own; . . . and they had great pleasure in praising it. ‘I was sure she would ride well,’ said Julia; ‘she has the make for it. Her figure is as neat as her brother's.’ ‘Yes,’ added Maria, ‘and her spirits are as good, and she has the same energy of character. I cannot but think that good horsemanship has a great deal to do with the mind.’ (69)

Although Maria misses the unflattering implications of this ironic remark, she speaks the truth. Mary—like Maria and Julia—exercises as an outlet for her tremendous energy and as a socially

acceptable form of exhibitionism. The body, elevated and racing on a horse, with the rider's skillful direction an unpersuasive nod to intellectual involvement, becomes an analogue to the ego. Mary resembles Maria and, to a lesser extent, Julia in expressing an exuberance that masks a shocking preference for self-interest over principle. The fact that Mary and Maria are variants on the same name, an ironic allusion to the counter-Marian sacrilege of their solely materialist values, reinforces the affinity between the characters.¹⁸ Mary's failure to convey moral outrage at Maria's affair with Henry underscores the resemblance, and suggests Mary's capacity for the same temptation. She more effectually camouflages her tendency toward moral deviance in open money-lust, however, and would never sacrifice social position for physical pleasure as Maria does and Julia might have done (although Julia marries Yates, she would have preferred Henry and attains her legitimate marital bond without paternal approval).

Mary is also smaller than the "tall and womanly" Miss Bertrams (20), as if to categorize her as not quite so morally depraved as the stouter and more self-important sisters; she does prove more good-hearted toward Fanny than Fanny's cousins, which enhances her charm for the deluded Edmund. When he finally discovers Mary's true character, he bemoans "how delightful nature had made her, and how excellent she would have been, had she fallen into good hands earlier" (459). Yet Edmund is beguiled by Mary's powerful energy for a long time before facing the truth of the ugliness beneath her "delightful" exterior. He even takes pleasure in promoting her riding at Fanny's expense for four days instead of the one for which he obtained Fanny's permission to use the mare. He pretends to consider his cousin's health while hypocritically encouraging Mary to monopolize the horse, thus inciting her to act in the oblivious pursuit of her own interests, a quality for which he later censures her. In fact, Mary seems not to have known about Fanny's medical need

for riding until after her monopoly of the mare, when Edmund chooses to mention it. She immediately chastises him: “‘How abominable in you, then, to let me engross her horse as I did all last week! I am ashamed of you and of myself, but it shall never happen again’ ” (95). Her use of the word “let” here instead of a more active verb such as “invite” or “urge” hints at a degree of moral honesty lacking in the Bertram sisters in that it suggests her implicit admission of accountability for acting on her own will—Edmund is framed as the abettor, not the instigator. Perhaps Edmund’s blind desire for Mary obscures his own self-centered rationalizations and he partially projects his own faults onto her in criticism of her character. Nonetheless, she knew from the first that she was usurping Fanny’s horse, and the narrative clearly conveys that Fanny would never behave with such selfishness, whether abetted in doing so or not.

While Edmund abandons his self-sacrificing cousin for four consecutive days, her busybody Aunt Norris makes sure Fanny gets plenty of exercise, challenging her to athletic feats of increasing difficulty and endurance. Aunt Norris’s exercise regimen for Fanny consists of stooping and cutting roses in the heat of the sun, followed by two consecutive walking trips to and from her house, and probably innumerable other unspecified tasks. Afterward, Fanny retires quietly to the sofa to nurse a headache, where Edmund finds her when he and Julia return from the last of several pleasure trips. It is a critical commonplace that Fanny’s ambiguous illness in this scene emanates from her thwarted love and desire for Edmund, a valid interpretation. John Wiltshire avers that “Fanny Price’s body here reproduces social tensions” (*Body* 19) and that “[h]ealth is intimately related to enablement and fulfillment, illness to frustration, anger and defeat” (22). Aunt Norris’s harassment, albeit unkind, forces Fanny to strive for strength and prevents her from succumbing to this physical and psychological feebleness, however. Her aunt chastises her before

Edmund: “That is a very foolish trick, Fanny, to be idling away all the evening upon a sofa. Why cannot you come and sit here, and employ yourself as *we* do? . . . You should learn to think of other people; and take my word for it, it is a shocking trick for a young person to be always lolling upon a sofa” (71). This criticism aptly applies to Lady Bertram, whose apathetic stupor is reinforced by her frequent location on sofas. The reader knows it is an absurd accusation to make of Fanny, whom even Julia defends: “I must say, ma’am, that Fanny is as little upon the sofa as any body in the house” (71). In scolding Fanny away from the sofa, however, Aunt Norris inadvertently discourages her from the passive model of femininity represented by Lady Bertram. For this vigorous woman, physical weakness constitutes a moral flaw.

Edmund interrogates his aunt about the tasks she induced Fanny to perform, demanding an explanation for Fanny’s second sojourn to her house. Aunt Norris responds, “I think nobody can justly accuse me of sparing myself upon any occasion, but really I cannot do every thing at once. And as for Fanny’s just stepping down to my house for me, it is not much above a quarter of a mile, I cannot think I was unreasonable to ask it. How often do I pace it three times a-day, early and late, ay and in all weathers too, and say nothing about it” (73). “Coach Norris” downplays the difficulty level of the athletic regimen she assigns Fanny, challenges her to make intensifying it a goal, and presents herself as an attainable model of female vigor. By contrast, although Edmund responds, “I wish Fanny had half your strength, ma’am” (73), the last thing he desires is for her to have the force of an Aunt Norris. His behavior undercuts his asserted “wish” by denying Fanny the much-needed horseback riding exercise and furthering her dependence on him. Aunt Norris provides Fanny with a diametrically opposite exemplar of womanhood to that represented by Lady Bertram. Aunt Norris is a powerhouse. As Tom remarks, “[W]hen my aunt has got a

fancy in her head, nothing can stop her' " (120). She pursues her ends until she attains them. She is a consummate opportunist and gad-about who sometimes unexpectedly speaks the truth and unintentionally promotes Fanny's interests. Her justification for pushing Fanny to exercise places the guilt of neglect firmly where it belongs—on Edmund's shoulders: " 'If Fanny would be more regular in her exercise, she would not be knocked up so soon. She has not been out on horseback now this long while, and I am persuaded, that when she does not ride, she ought to walk. If she had been riding before, I should not have asked it of her' " (73). Aunt Norris helps to empower Fanny both physically and mentally, while shaming Edmund for neglecting her. This unsympathetic character must be given some credit for simultaneously absolving herself, promoting self-serving aims, and unknowingly furthering her niece's relationship with Edmund by redirecting his attention toward her.¹⁹ It is arguably Aunt Norris's "training," abetted by Lady Bertram's passivity, that enables Fanny to gain bodily strength.

By contrast, men thwart, stifle, or mandate the cessation of Fanny's physical activity.²⁰ Not only does Edmund reduce her horseback-riding opportunities as previously described, but he also commands her to remain seated on a bench while he and Mary pursue a flirty walk alone. While the three are out strolling at the Sotherton estate, Mary engages in a kind of deterministic sports competition with Fanny for Edmund's attention and affection. She flaunts her vigor and seeks to distinguish herself as much as possible from her competitor. When Fanny requests of Edmund that " 'if it is not disagreeable to you, I should be glad to sit down for a little while' " and he takes her arm and offers Mary his other, Mary responds smugly, " 'Thank you, but I am not at all tired' " and then does take his arm (94). Edmund complains, " 'You scarcely touch me . . . You do not make me of any use' " as if to invite her to closer physical intimacy (94). Mary wishes

to touch Edmund but makes clear that she does not need his help; Edmund desires her to touch and need him, but appears to enjoy the challenge of endeavoring to tease her into dependence. Meanwhile, she continues boasting of her prowess, “‘I am really not tired, which I almost wonder at; for we must have walked at least a mile in this wood’ ” (94), violating conventions of female decorum by bragging about her stamina.²¹

It is during this conversation that Edmund reveals to Mary that horseback riding is Fanny’s only viable form of exercise. However, he then proceeds to stop Fanny from further exercise himself, masquerading as a concerned cousin to achieve a tête-à-tête with Mary. When Mary becomes restless and suggests they proceed with their walk, “Fanny said she was rested, and would have moved too, but this was not suffered. Edmund urged her remaining where she was with an earnestness which she could not resist, and she was left on the bench to think with pleasure of her cousin’s care, but with great regret that she was not stronger” (96). Ironically, at this juncture of Fanny’s development, she still might have provided Edmund with the delicate, dependent wife that would have maximized his control, but his digressive pursuit of the lively rebel-flirt delays his transfer of desire to Fanny. By the time he converts his full interest to his cousin, he is the one dependent upon her, in a reversal of the romantic and familial power structure.

Henry Crawford’s treatment of Fanny parallels Edmund’s in significant ways.²² Though without the influence of family relationship or the success of Fanny’s obedience, he likewise voices concern for her health as a mask for his endeavor to usurp control over her both physical and romantic agency:

“If . . . you find yourself growing unwell, and any difficulties arise about your returning to Mansfield . . . if you feel yourself at all less strong, or comfortable than