The frailty of Fanny Price, the heroine of *Mansfield Park*, is notorious. Because of her physical weakness, she has been considered Austen’s least likable and most incomprehensible heroine. In scholarly studies of this novel, critics have contrasted Fanny with Austen’s other heroines, often attributing her weakness to psychosomatic factors. Lionel Trilling writes that “Fanny Price is overtly virtuous and consciously virtuous” and that “Fanny’s debility becomes the more striking when we consider that no quality of the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice* is more appealing than her physical energy.”¹ John Wiltshire observes that “Fanny Price’s stressors include alienation from a (minimally) supportive family background, inferior social status, her consciousness of which is repeatedly re-enforced, and an affection which is socially impermissible. The external disconfirming experience is replicated by her internal self-criticism. These stresses are driven back into and played out in her body.”² Certainly, Fanny seems less attractive than Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, and her frailty is intimately coupled with her sense of inferiority in her

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“Your Complexion Is So Improved!”: A Diagnosis of Fanny Price’s “Dis-ease”

Akiko Takei

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wealthy adoptive family. Nonetheless, if we read her various symptoms alongside medical works of the period, the grounds for Fanny’s exceptional lack of buoyancy can be found in a recognized disease, chlorosis, which modern medicine sees as a form of iron-deficiency anemia. Like smallpox, chlorosis has been eradicated, but it was considered common in adolescent girls in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Its most easily recognizable symptom was a pale complexion, as suggested by its popular names “the virgin’s disease” and “green sickness.” *Mansfield Park* focuses on Fanny’s history from the age of sixteen to nearly nineteen, from puberty to the beginning of adulthood, the very age thought most vulnerable to this disease.

Let me begin the presentation of this tentative theory by examining a passage from volume 2, chapter 3, where Edmund Bertram reports Sir Thomas Bertram’s admiration: “Your uncle thinks you very pretty, dear Fanny ... . Your uncle never did admire you till now—and now he does. Your complexion is so improved!—and you have gained so much countenance!” This comment hints that Fanny’s complexion has been so bad as to impair her looks. In fact, her waxen complexion is repeatedly referred to in the novel, from girlhood, when she is described as having “no glow of complexion” (12), to Henry Crawford’s observation that her complexion is “less blooming than it ought to be” (409–10). The most likely contemporary diagnosis of her paleness would be chlorosis, a disease closely connected with women’s sexuality. Reading Fanny as chlorotic opens the possibility of a new perspective on not only Fanny’s character but also on Austen’s views on the awakening of women’s sexuality and the management of women’s health.

Chlorosis, popularly known as the white fever, the virgin’s disease, or the love fever, was traditionally understood to be a disease peculiar to young women, especially girls in puberty. Edward Shorter’s study shows that the Greeks observed various symptoms in young women, such as a greenish complexion, suppressed menses, and pica—a craving for inedible substances, commonly clay and soil. The Hippocratic theory was that menstruation was hampered by sexual abstinence; as a result, superfluous blood compressed the heart and diaphragm. In the worst cases, Hippocrates wrote, the patients would die, and, as a cure, he recommended marriage. In the modern period, Johann

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Lange called it “morbus virgineus,” the disease of virgins, and gave a clear description in 1554. In 1615, Jean Varandal, a professor at Montpellier, invented the term “chlorosis,” taking the Greek word chloros, green. In this, Lange and Varandal owed a great deal to Hippocrates, and the Hippocratic theory had a considerable influence on his successors.

Following Irvine Loudon, we can divide the history of chlorosis into four periods: pre-1750, chlorosis was associated with unrequited love; from 1750 to 1850, disorder in menstruation was generally regarded as its principal cause; between 1850 and 1900, earlier theories were replaced by the theory of anemia; finally, between 1900 and 1920, chlorosis virtually disappeared from public view. As Loudon suggests, eighteenth-century medical writers usually understood that chlorosis was a physiological disorder of young unmarried women arising from a weak constitution, and that the most troublesome symptom was irregular or suppressed menses. In Nosology (1800) by William Cullen, its symptoms are listed as: “Dyspepsia, or desire to eat things that are not food; paleness or discoloration of the skin; defect of blood in the veins, with òdematous swelling of the body; debility; palpitation; retention of the menses.” Robert Hooper, in Lexicon Medicum (1820), defines it as “a disease which affects young females who labour under a retention or suppression of the menses.” Alongside the theory of menstrual disorder, the Hippocratic theory of lovesickness or sexual frustration was accepted until the early nineteenth century.

To prevent menstrual disorders and to maintain health, physicians recommended a moderate amount of outdoor exercise. However, during the period, middle-class women tended to be sedentary, devoting time to needlework, music, and drawing. Fanny herself seems a slave to needlework: Lady Bertram demands that Fanny should come to help her with needlework even after she is adopted by Mrs Norris; while other young people are busy deciding the repertoire of the theatricals, Fanny is doing the difficult parts of Lady Bertram’s embroidery; Henry Crawford is infatuated with Fanny’s blushing while

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7 William Cullen, Nosology (Edinburgh, 1800), 110. Cullen was a professor of the practice of physic in the University of Edinburgh and a renowned clinician.
8 Robert Hooper, Lexicon Medicum, 4th ed. (London, 1820), 211. Hooper was a physician of the St Marylebone Infirmary in London.
doing needlework; she is seen sewing just before he starts reading aloud passages from *Henry VIII*; and after she returns to her home in Portsmouth, needlework is the main job that Fanny does for her family. While Jane Nardin argues that this indoor drudgery "had a good effect on Fanny's moral character, helping her to apply her religious principles to everyday life,"9 Fanny's domestic confinement comes at the cost of her health.

Of course, outdoor exercise was often discouraged in Austen's day. In *Letters to a Young Lady* (1789), John Bennett says that a model woman "is seldom seen in any masculine amusements: she does not practise archery."10 In contrast to many medical writers, authors of popular conduct books not only criticized women who joined in active sports but also equated a frail constitution with womanliness. The opinions of James Fordyce and John Gregory were typical: Fordyce's sermon reads, "Nature has endowed the greater part of the sex with a constitutional Softness, which, under right direction, would render them unspeakably more pleasing than any possible attraction that is purely external";11 Gregory claims, "We so naturally associate the idea of female softness and delicacy with a correspondent delicacy of constitution, that when a woman speaks of her great strength, her extraordinary appetite, her ability to bear excessive fatigue, we recoil at the description in a way she is little aware of."12 In 1776, medical writer A. Hume wrote that chlorosis was "*the natural, and even, in some degree, the necessary feebleness of the Sex.*"13 Given the strong disapproval of physical exercise for women, however, chlorosis is a product of women's enforced inactivity rather than of their natural weakness.

The main plot of *Mansfield Park* begins when Fanny's uncle and guardian Sir Thomas Bertram is absent from home on business in Antigua. Fanny is sixteen, the age of puberty. In the early nineteenth century, menarche generally occurred at the age of thirteen to fifteen. Hooper says that after the menarche, girls begin to display a better complexion, an expressive countenance, and a womanly plumpness.14

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14 Hooper, 546.
Austen describes these changes in Maria and Julia Bertram in their early teens: the Miss Bertrams “grow tall and womanly; and their father saw them becoming in person, manner, and accomplishments, every thing that could satisfy his anxiety” (20). Fanny shows no evidence of such changes before her uncle’s departure. On the contrary, to her disappointment, he says “If William does come to Mansfield, I hope you may be able to convince him that the many years which have passed since you parted, have not been spent on your side entirely without improvement—though I fear he must find his sister at sixteen in some respects too much like his sister at ten” (33). His harsh remark demonstrates that unlike her girl cousins, who have become “well-grown and forward” (13) for their age, she still seems to him to be childish. Judging from the absence of pubescent physical changes, her menses cannot be supposed to have yet begun.

By examining the key events during the absence of Sir Thomas Bertram, we can identify when Fanny’s menarche occurs. Scholarly opinions vary on the years during which the novel is set, but Brian Southam proposes a plausible chronology (events unmentioned in the novel appear in parentheses):15

1810  (July  Fanny’s sixteenth birthday)
October Sir Thomas and Tom Bertram leave for Antigua.

1811  April–May  Fanny’s pony dies and her health rapidly declines.
June?  Edmund finds a mare for Fanny.
(July  Fanny’s seventeenth birthday)
September Tom returns to England.

1812  Winter  Maria gets engaged to Rushworth.
July  Fanny’s eighteenth birthday.
Henry and Mary Crawford come to the Grants.
The suspension of Fanny’s riding.
August  The visit to Sotherton Court.
September  The amateur theatricals begin.
October  Sir Thomas Bertram returns to England.

In her sixteenth summer, Fanny’s appearance undergoes no change incident to adolescence. The following spring, her health becomes

poor. Given the eighteenth-century medical opinion that a girl’s health is often impaired after the menarche, Fanny’s menarche probably occurs between the departure of Sir Thomas Bertram and the following spring. Her puberty begins later than usual.

Fanny’s delayed entry into adolescence encompasses her problem in recognizing her sexuality, both metaphorically and medically. Ann Banfield views the eleven children of Mr and Mrs Price as the results of their imprudent marriage and as an example of “the ‘instinct of nature’ undisciplined.” According to Banfield, Fanny is denied parental love and care in her childhood because of Mr Price’s unrestrained sexual desire and its consequence, Mrs Price’s annual lying-in. Therefore, Fanny unconsciously holds sexuality and reproduction to be disagreeable. Her impression of “roughness and loudness” (389) about her father is a response to his brutal masculinity as well as his coarse manners. Her slow physical growth suggests that it takes a considerable time for her to accept her existence as a sexual being, as though she has not yet overcome her childhood trauma. She is a victim of her undisciplined parents.

This twentieth-century psychological reading of Fanny’s development, however, finds little support from the text of the novel. Her physical environment provides the reason for her retarded menarche, in accordance with an early nineteenth-century theory and textual evidence. At fifteen, Fanny is given her own room when her menarche is expected; on Mrs Norris’s order, her room is unheated year-round. Medical writers held that menarche occurred early in southern countries, late in northern countries, and the menarche of a girl whose lifestyle was luxurious occurred earlier. Given Mrs Norris’s concerns about doctoring and others’ health—for example, her treatment of the coachman’s rheumatism and her diagnosis of the little boy’s malaria—she is probably familiar with this popular belief. Years before, Mrs Norris persuaded Sir Thomas Bertram to adopt Fanny lest Tom and Edmund should fall in love with her in their adulthood. When Fanny is about to enter puberty, her sexuality becomes a real threat. Possibly deliberately, then, Mrs Norris shuts Fanny in a cold room. Wiltshire and Barbara K. Seeber point out Mrs Norris’s constant punishment of Fanny’s body. However, bearing menstruation in mind, Mrs Norris’s

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abuse of Fanny is more malevolent than Wiltshire and Seeber understand in that it not only gives Fanny physical pain but also prevents (or at least postpones) her sexual growth.

The consequences of Fanny’s living environment are obvious because the descriptions of Fanny’s appearance and health conditions neatly fit the main features of chlorosis. The most typical symptom of chlorosis is a pale or greenish complexion. In addition to the examples at the beginning of this article, there are several other references to Fanny’s pallor. After working for her aunts, her complexion is so pale that Edmund sees her disorder at a glance, and at first Henry thinks that she has “neither complexion nor countenance” (229). Just after returning from Antigua, Sir Thomas Bertram observes of Fanny that, “A fine blush having succeeded the previous paleness of her face, he was justified in his belief of her equal improvement in health and beauty” (178). He links her paleness to poor health, and her better complexion to better health. This association unmistakably points to chlorosis as her disease. Throughout the novel, her complexion is an index of her health.

The constitution of chlorotic girls is so weak that they are prone to exhaustion, and they think even a moderate amount of exercise a punishment, although they require exercise constantly. Fanny exhibits this symptom as well. After Mary Crawford joins the circle of the Bertrams, Fanny’s weakness is often contrasted with Mary’s vitality. While walking in the woods at Sotherton Court, Fanny is tired and needs to sit; on the contrary, Mary seems restless. Riding is the only exercise Fanny is able to take, but she takes it as a duty to improve her health, not for pleasure: Edmund says, “She [Mary] rides only for pleasure, you for health” (70); “Every sort of exercise fatigues her so soon, Miss Crawford, except riding” (95). Fanny is fearful of her first ride, and the sphere of her riding has “never been extensive” (80) for about six years. In contrast, Mary’s riding progresses spectacularly within a few days, and she wants to “get as far as Mansfield common” (69) after mastering only elementary techniques. After going home to Portsmouth, Fanny cannot walk without Henry’s assistance. Fanny herself admits her liability to fatigue: “I am soon tired” (250). Clearly, Fanny’s constitution and her attitude towards exercise are characteristic of chlorotic girls. Tony Tanner calls Fanny “a girl who triumphs by doing nothing,” but she can do nothing by her will for

her own good. Even her most trivial daily employments and activities are controlled by Mrs Norris and the Bertrams. At the death of her pony, Mrs Norris is unwilling to arrange an alternative, and as a result Fanny’s health declines, while Maria and Julia continue to enjoy riding. Fanny is deprived of her mare by Edmund and Mary, which will be discussed in the next section. The squabble in volume 3, chapter 1, between Sir Thomas Bertram and Mrs Norris over the route of Fanny’s walking indicates that she cannot manage even trivial affairs on her own. Fanny is not as inactive and lazy as Lady Bertram: as Julia puts it, “Fanny is as little upon the sofa as any body in the house” (71). Yet, as suggested by the suspension of her riding and by her very frequent needlework (Maria, Julia, and Mary do not do needlework), her lifestyle is sedentary and confined. Starting from her first ride, the arrangements for Fanny’s healthcare entirely depend on the decisions of others and her convenience is ignored.

At the same time that Fanny is denied access to the exercise that would improve her health, she is inevitably kept in the dark about the changes happening in her own body. Given Lady Bertram’s incompetence and Mrs Norris’s spite, there is little possibility that Fanny can have sufficient care and support from somebody reliable nearby. Physicians emphasized the responsibility of parents or guardians for the healthcare of girls in puberty. Patricia Crawford holds that, in the eighteenth century, middle-class women could discuss sex and its related matters only indirectly, never in public, and that young girls, especially, had little sexual knowledge.19 This sexual ignorance continued into the Victorian Age. Elaine Showalter points out that at the menarche, Victorian girls were often “frightened, screamed, or even went into fits.”20 As a diagnosis chlorosis seems, in part at least, a way of articulating the problem of young women’s sexual ignorance. Eighteenth-century physicians, though less often than their fifteenth- and sixteenth-century counterparts, referred to the sexual naïveté of the patients in determining chlorosis. Loudon holds that the name “green sickness” alludes to the patient’s virginal immaturity and innocence rather than her pallid skin.21

21 Loudon, 1672.
Eighteenth-century sexuality existed within complex paradigms, but even in relatively liberal circles, sexual freedom was exclusively the prerogative of men. To prevent trouble and confusion in inheritance, a wife’s chastity was essential. For girls, virginity was an invaluable asset at marriage and their premarital loss of it incurred censure and spoiled their eligibility: witness Austen’s Eliza Williams. As the century progressed, women’s spiritual dimension was overwhelmingly idealized while their sexuality was ignored. Fanny seems to be a paragon of such a prudish culture. Alice Chandler argues that Fanny’s mare and riding are the symbols of sex, and her fear and trembling at her first ride represent her naïveté. At Sotherton Court and the amateur theatricals, Fanny is isolated while others indulge in flirtations. She reads the script of *Lovers’ Vows* with “astonishment” (137) and strongly disapproves of the sexual impropriety of Agatha and Amelia. Fanny criticizes Henry’s double flirtations with Maria and Julia even after he jilts them, whereas Edmund remains unaware of Henry’s rakishness. At first, Fanny seems “prudish” to Henry (230). His compliments and gallantry, which have worked successfully on other women, are of no use on Fanny. During his courtship of her, his topics are limited to sober subjects such as religion and estate management, far from love and romance. As befits a sufferer of “the virgin’s disease,” her attitude to sex is strict and timid, and is strikingly contrasted with the vulnerable Maria and Julia, and with the bold Mary.

Yet Fanny is not as priggish as she seems. The recognition of a sexual impulse is important in understanding her growth from puberty to adulthood. Significantly, her subjection to chlorosis is relevant to the love triangle of her, Edmund, and Mary. Austen represents Fanny’s chlorosis as the disease stemming from her unrequited love for Edmund, not merely as a pathological disorder. In this diagnostic consideration, her headache in volume 1, chapter 7, is crucial because it is linked with the awakening of her love as a woman, not as a dependent cousin, for Edmund. In this event, Austen carefully weaves “the love fever,” the old-fashioned form of chlorosis, with more specifically physiological symptoms.

Obedient to Edmund’s desire to please Mary, Fanny is deprived of her mare. Bernard J. Paris and Margaret Kirkham differentiate
Edmund from Fanny’s oppressors at the Bertram household, but he is largely responsible for her poor health and emotional pain after he becomes infatuated with Mary. Chandler’s reading is suggestive because as Mary’s rides become longer, Fanny’s claim to the mare (and Edmund) diminishes and she feels “pain” and “pang” (66, 67). Her agitated mind is sympathetically described:

Edmund and Miss Crawford both on horseback, riding side by side, Dr and Mrs Grant, and Mr Crawford, with two or three grooms, standing about and looking on. A happy party it appeared to her—all interested in one object—cheerful beyond a doubt, for the sound of merriment ascended even to her. It was a sound which did not make her cheerful; she wondered that Edmund should forget her, and felt a pang. She could not turn her eyes from the meadow, she could not help watching all that passed … Edmund was close to her [Mary], he was speaking to her; 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)

In this scene, Fanny’s sisterly love for Edmund changes into a serious sexual passion. Patricia Menon comments, “As she watches, Fanny passes from child to sexually aware woman, from sulkiness to jealousy.” Fanny has to see, to hear, and to imagine the increasing intimacy between Edmund and Mary through their bodily contact, and she experiences sexual frustration in the presence of a happy pair.

Characteristically, however, Fanny represses her vexation, and she indirectly expresses her anger and dissatisfaction with Edmund: “if she were forgotten the poor mare should be remembered” (68). To Edmund and Mary, she is and has to be “extremely civil” (68). In the light of contemporary sexual standards, she cannot and must not be understood to be suffering from sexual frustration. Mary Waldron argues, “Almost every spontaneous feeling that she has conflicts with some duty which is part of her code.” Among all her feelings, Fanny has to subdue every response to her love of Edmund most stoically because she understands all too well that to love him is taboo in terms of the social code and the family hierarchy. She deems her love selfish and “excessive,” and decides to keep it to herself on account of her

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sense of “duty,” and “all the heroism of principle” (264, 265). After she becomes aware of her love for Edmund, Fanny’s suppressed sexual passion induces stress in both body and mind greater than the sense of inferiority occasioned by her marginal status in the family.

Fanny’s fear that “Edmund should forget her” (67) is well-grounded. She is left alone and cannot ride for four days while Edmund and Mary are pleasantly riding together. On a hot day, Fanny is overworked by Lady Bertram and by Mrs Norris. In the evening of that day, Edmund finds Fanny lying on a sofa:

“Fanny,” said Edmund, after looking at her attentively; “I am sure you have the headach?”
She could not deny it, but said it was not very bad.
“I can hardly believe you,” he replied; “I know your looks too well. How long have you had it?”
“Since a little before dinner. It is nothing but the heat.”
“Did you go out in the heat?” (71–72)

In scholarly analyses of this scene, Chandler and Anita G. Gorman pay attention to Fanny’s headache, but they do not refer to her extreme exhaustion and bad complexion. Pallor and muscular debility are the representative features of chlorosis. Her headache also may be a symptom of chlorosis, occurring together with paleness and fatigue.

Except in these two brief answers (one is conducted in the form of indirect speech), Fanny’s own voice is unheard in this scene. She modestly reports that her headache is “not very bad” and caused by “nothing but the heat.” Juliet McMaster ascribes Fanny’s complete silence to Mrs Norris’s habitual violation of her right to speak. Yet, without her intrusive aunt, would Fanny eloquently explain what is wrong with her? Never. Her servitude in the hot weather certainly increases her exhaustion, but her disease is chlorosis, and she wants nobody to guess why she is suffering. Without listening to her, everyone concludes that she is a victim of sunstroke. The narrator, not the taciturn heroine, explains the nature of her “heat”:

The state of her spirits had probably had its share in her indisposition; for she had been feeling neglected, and been struggling against discontent and envy for some days past. As she leant on the sofa, to which she had retreated that she might not be seen, the pain of her mind had been much beyond that in her head; and the

sudden change which Edmund’s kindness had then occasioned, made her hardly
know how to support herself. (74)

The narrator uses the general term “indisposition,” but it is evident
that Fanny’s ailment stems from her repressed love of Edmund and
her jealousy of Mary, not the hot weather or the labour beyond her
strength. Her headache is apparently cured by the wine that Edmund
offers. Wine was often used to cure chlorosis, and his kindness multi-
plies its efficacy further. To present Fanny’s sexual awakening, Austen
delicately interweaves the old-fashioned chlorosis, “the love fever,” with
ordinary sunstroke.

Following her love-related headache, at Sotherton Court and in the
amateur theatricals Fanny suffers from exhaustion and agitation in
response to the love triangle in which she finds herself. At Sotherton,
because of her frailty, Mary takes full advantage of her. But at the
amateur theatricals Fanny overcomes her physical weakness and shows
the evidence of her strong mind for the first time: she refuses to join
the theatricals in spite of the others’ pressuring her. In the chronology
given above, it is at least one and a half years since her menarche; her
menstrual cycles are supposed to be getting regular, and she is not as
weak as before. Coming home, Sir Thomas Bertram is so glad at her
growth that he esteems her more highly than before. During the two-
year absence of Sir Thomas Bertram, Fanny enters adulthood and now
appears as a lovely woman, very different from the plain girl whom he
dismissed just before his departure.

Fanny grows rapidly and remarkably, as if making up for the previous
delay. Her loveliness even arouses Henry, a Regency dandy, to think of
“making a small hole” (229) in her heart, which Jill Heydt-Stevenson
reads as suggestive of defloration.28 Henry’s interest in Fanny seems
puzzling because they have nothing in common. Claire Tomalin argues
that Fanny’s taciturnity is “one of the things that makes it hard to
believe that Henry Crawford could ever fall in love with her,” and she
questions, “Crawford is supposed to admire her character, her good-
ness, her strict moral standards, but how does he get to know her?”29

Henry is actually attracted to the imbalance of Fanny’s physical growth
and her virginal naïveté, expressed by her frequent blushes. Among
Fanny’s personal beauties, Henry is infatuated especially with her

28 Jill Heydt-Stevenson, “‘Slipping into the Ha-Ha’: Bawdy Humor and Body Politics in Jane
“YOUR COMPLEXION IS SO IMPROVED!”

blushing: “the sensibility which beautified her complexion and illuminated her countenance, was an attraction in itself” (235). Women’s blusses were thought to visualize sensibility and innocence. Fanny seems to Henry to have a “genuine feeling” and a “young, unsophisticated mind” (235) rarely found in his fashionable circle. With the addition of Henry to form a second love triangle, Fanny’s “love fever” has new dimensions: courtship and marriage, the long-held remedy for chlorosis.

For girls in puberty, sexual restraint was aimed at preserving their virginity and thereby ensuring their value in the marriage market. As soon as they reach a marriageable age, however, girls are suddenly exposed to temptation. Fordyce and Gregory contend that modesty and delicacy protect women from men’s insatiable sexual desire. But, on the contrary, women inculcated with modesty and delicacy can stir up men’s desire further, as Henry’s courtship of Fanny testifies. Her obvious dislike of him excites his sexual appetite, just as when he prefers the engaged Maria to the unengaged Julia. The narrator defines Henry’s love for Fanny as “a love ... operating on an active, sanguine spirit, of more warmth than delicacy” (326). Even after his proposal is refused, Henry does not detect the firmness of the refusal underlying her modest and gentle expression: “He knew not that he had a pre-engaged heart to attack. Of that, he had no suspicion. He considered her rather as one who had never thought on the subject enough to be in danger; who had been guarded by youth, a youth of mind as lovely as of person; whose modesty had prevented her from understanding his attentions” (326). In Henry’s impatient pursuit of Fanny, Austen presents a paradox: the women most likely to be attacked by rakes are the virtuous.

Henry’s ardent courtship is founded on the sexual double standard. He enumerates Fanny’s qualities: “such a steadiness and regularity of conduct, such a high notion of honour, and such an observance of decorum as might warrant any man in the fullest dependence on her faith and integrity,” and he concludes, “I could so wholly and absolutely confide in her ... and that is what I want” (294). As Claudia L. Johnson observes, “Henry’s dependence on Fanny’s steadiness, honor, decorum, faith, and integrity adds up to the singularly important confidence that she will be above the temptation of adultery.” Henry has

30 Fordyce, 1:95; Gregory, 5.
enjoyed numerous flirtations, including those with Maria and Julia, but he does not allow his wife to be a flirt. Henry’s logic reveals not only the selfish essence of the male-oriented double standard but also men’s fundamental anxiety about women’s sexuality.

Pressured by Henry’s courtship, Fanny is again affected by chlorosis. After his proposal, she feels his gazes “forced” (306) on her and loses all appetite. To everybody except Fanny, Henry seems highly eligible, so her refusal of him is taken as defiant and transgressive. On a family scale, she disobeys Sir Thomas Bertram’s intention to marry her off well. Moreover, in a social context, her refusal is understood as disobedience to the law of reproduction, women’s crucial social role. Medical professionals during the period stressed that being mothers and breeding children were women’s “natural” duties. Women’s refusal of sex was read as a threat to society. Showalter emphasizes this point: “women who reject sexuality and marriage ... are muted or even driven mad by social disapproval.”

Sir Thomas Bertram concludes that Fanny’s reason is “diseased” and “a little disordered,” and that “a little abstinence from the elegancies and luxuries of Mansfield Park, would bring her mind into a sober state” (369). Edmund sides with his father regarding Henry’s proposal. He persuades Fanny to prove that she is “in [her] senses” (353) by accepting Henry. Their rhetoric embodies the social system of branding “rebellious” women as “mad,” as Showalter suggests. In this picture of family pressure on Fanny, Austen clarifies an imperative to hurry women from sexual innocence into either reproduction or isolation.

Fanny’s exile to her parental home in Portsmouth is her greatest trial. The Price household is described as “the abode of noise, disorder, and impropriety” (388). It constitutes the most distressing physical environment in all Austen’s writings, with its bad air, endless noises, small rooms, dim lights, thin walls, poor meals, and careless hygiene. As soon as Fanny reaches home, she is welcomed by her younger brothers’ noises; she is “almost stunned” and at a loss “how to bear it” (382). Rooms are dirty with “a cloud of moving dust” (439). It is unsurprising that she becomes “starved, [in] both mind and body” (413). As Kathryn Sutherland writes, “What Fanny experiences at Portsmouth is a sense of dissociation whose physical signs are symptomatic of a psychological exile.”

Naturally enough, in this impoverished

32 Showalter, 63.
environment, Fanny’s chlorosis recurs. As mentioned above, regular exercise in the open air was absolutely necessary for chlorosis sufferers, but no arrangement is made for Fanny’s exercise. As in Fanny’s childhood, Mrs Price has “neither leisure nor affection to bestow on Fanny” (389), and therefore no concern about her daughter’s health. Before long, Fanny becomes too weak to take exercise regularly. Being deprived of clean air and exercise, when she sees Henry again, she is unable to walk without his support.

In addition to poor health, Fanny suffers from a poor appetite, a prominent chlorotic symptom: “She was so little equal to Rebecca’s puddings, and Rebecca’s hashes, brought to table as they all were, with such accompaniments of half-cleaned plates, and not half-cleaned knives and forks, that she was very often constrained to defer her heartiest meal, till she could send her brothers in the evening for biscuits and buns” (413). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a good appetite was deemed unwomanly.34 Studies by Joan Jacobs Brumberg and Robert P. Hudson show that Victorian girls were educated to repress their appetite and to shun meat, animal products, and strong seasoning because these foods might stir sexual desire, and that the chronic malnutrition generated in such a socio-cultural climate accounts for the rampancy of chlorosis.35 Women practised spare eating and drinking in order to be amiable to the eyes of the world, especially to their prospective suitors. Married women and those over marriageable age are exempt from such restraint. In Austen’s novels, middle-aged and elderly women heartily enjoy meals in public: in *Pride and Prejudice*, at the ill-fated assembly at Netherfield, being released from Mrs Bennet’s boasting, Lady Lucas is at length allowed “the comforts of cold ham and chicken”;36 in *Emma*, at supper at Hartfield, Mrs and Miss Bates and Mrs Goddard do not mind Mr Woodhouse’s interference at all, and they “comfortably” eat “nicer things” than gruel, which he recommends.37 But Austen’s marriageable women all eat sparingly, especially in public.

Fanny’s acquisition of the anorexic habit of restraining her appetite is seen in her dislike of her youngest sister Betsey’s “eating at table

34 Gregory, 23.
without restraint, and pulling every thing about as she chose” (407). Maggie Lane suggests that in a male-centred society Fanny cannot express anguish except by rejecting food, the only thing she can control on her own. Austen, however, presents Fanny’s starvation as a sign not only of her victimization but also of her resolution. In her parents’ home, Fanny must confront vulgarity as well as poverty. By declining the same meals as her undisciplined family, Fanny refuses to identify herself with them, and she maintains her pride at being brought up in better circumstances. Moreover, she manifests a protest against Sir Thomas Bertram, Henry, and even Edmund for their pressuring her into an unwanted marriage. Women’s poor appetite certainly typifies their passiveness in asserting their need to eat and drink. But Fanny is active in refusing to eat, just as she denies her sexuality by her own will. Yet her stoic resistance is, after all, self-destructive. Her declining health again incurs Henry’s unwelcome courtship. In her exhaustion, she is less fastidious about him than before and thinks him “much more gentle, obliging, and attentive to other people’s feelings than he had ever been at Mansfield” (406). Henry is quick to be aware of Fanny’s softened attitude, and he understands that her home is the cause of her emaciation. He reminds her of the past abuses by the Bertrams, emphasizes the benefits brought by “constant air and exercise” in the country for her health (the most popular treatment of chlorosis), and offers to help her out of “the confinement of Portsmouth” (410). Just as he tempts Maria at Sotherton Court, by proposing better circumstances than her sanctioned guardian provides, he tries to tempt Fanny. His temptation is difficult for her to refuse because his suggestion of the abuses she has experienced at the Bertrams’ hands is true, and because above all she abhors the bad air and narrowness of her home and she misses the “liberty, freshness, fragrance, and verdure” (432) of Mansfield Park. With great difficulty, she rejects him by exercising her loyalty to the Bertrams.

Fanny’s deprivation indicates how exclusively health and the means to maintain it are secured for the powerful and well-off. Likewise, a “suitable” marriage, the traditional remedy for chlorosis, is hardly available to the penniless in an acquisitive society. In the presentation of Fanny’s predicament, Austen explores the connections between money, social status, and health for women. Austen emphasizes the

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39 Trilling, 225.
continual violation of Fanny’s health by her social betters and destabilizes the cultural assumption of women’s physical weakness. Physicians recommended regular exercise and a nutritious diet to cure menstrual disorders, but the prevailing social culture equated poor health and appetite with womanliness and dictated that women followed a sedentary lifestyle and ate little. As is obvious in the course of Fanny’s distress, her immobility and anorexia signal inequality and injustice, not femininity. Her starved body and mind pose a counterargument against a social climate where women are kept away from even moderate health. Women’s vulnerability to chlorosis and their social powerlessness are inseparably linked.

Fanny never talks about her disease, which is intimately connected with her sexuality. Johnson argues that

_Mansfield Park_ adumbrates a phenomenon which has preoccupied modern feminists: the dependence of certain kinds of masculine discourse on feminine silence. Mansfield Park runs smoothly only so long as female dissent can be presumed not to exist ... But when women’s defiance of patriarchal codes can no longer be ignored, men here are utterly stymied, and their confusion gives another, quite dizzying turn to the political sublime.\(^{40}\)

This comment accounts for the instability of a male-oriented patriarchal society. The society looks firm and unshakeable, but its preservation depends on women’s capacity to reproduce. So men have to remodel women’s sexuality to suit their own needs and consign women to silence. The overemphasis on women’s “delicacy,” “modesty,” or “chastity” aims at subduing women’s sexual power; otherwise, their sexuality becomes undisciplined, and eventually threatening to men. Sir Thomas Bertram’s shock at Fanny’s refusal of Henry epitomizes how vulnerable men are to women’s sexual rebellion.

In Fanny’s oppression, Austen’s criticism of the paradigms of female sexuality in a male-oriented society is explicit. At puberty women had to control their natural sexual impulse and marry; after marriage, they were expected to reproduce. In short, although marriage was seen as the standard cure for chlorosis, it can be seen as a cure that served the need for legitimacy in a patriarchal society. Fanny’s banishment to her parental home indicates the punishment of a woman refusing to enter the reproductive cycle, women’s sole significant social role. In Fanny’s

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\(^{40}\) Johnson, 112.
“dis-ease,” Austen figures her protest against a patriarchal ideology where women’s sexuality is exploited for men’s convenience. When placed in the context of medical history, and particularly that of chlorosis, Mansfield Park, apparently the most conservative of Austen’s works, can be read as a radical feminist novel.\footnote{This article is the expanded and revised version of a paper read at the Fourth International Conference of the Institute for Feminist Theory and Research, University of Liverpool, 25 January 2003. I owe a great deal of thanks to David Hewitt, Brian Southam, and the two anonymous *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* readers for their helpful suggestions.}

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