

# Jane Austen, Fanny Price and the Courage to Write

EMILY AUERBACH

University of Wisconsin, 627 Lowell Hall, Madison, WI 53703

Looking back at Jane Austen and other early women writers, Virginia Woolf marveled at their perseverance:

What genius, what integrity it must have required in face of all that criticism, in the midst of that purely patriarchal society, to hold fast to the thing as they saw it without shrinking. . . . They alone were deaf to that persistent voice, now grumbling, now patronising, now domineering, now grieved, now shocked, now angry, now avuncular, that voice which cannot let women alone, but must be at them, . . . admonishing them to keep within certain limits.<sup>1</sup>

Woolf insists in the final paragraph of *A Room of One's Own* that we must not only ignore that admonishing voice but obtain money, a room of our own, "and the freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think."

But did Austen display courage in her writing? Just how bold is a woman who labeled herself "the most unlearned and uninformed female who ever dared to be an authoress," hid her writing from visitors, refused a meeting with Mme. de Stael, and created six novels which all end with the expected formula of heroines marrying and living happily every after?<sup>2</sup>

And just look at *Mansfield Park*! Here we meet a heroine who cries frequently and tires easily; a heroine described as "exceedingly timid and shy, and shrinking from notice" with a "quiet passive manner" and a "tractable disposition"; a heroine so "sad and insignificant" that her "favourite indulgence" is "being suffered to sit silent and unattended to," dismissed as "dependent, helpless, friendless, neglected, forgotten" because of her "quiet, modest" demeanor, "gentle and retiring" manners, and "supine and yielding" nature.<sup>3</sup> Fanny Price does not even have the decency to be witty, outspoken, creative, and spirited like Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, Emily Brontë's Catherine of *Wuthering Heights*, or Louisa May Alcott's Jo March of *Little Women*!

Indeed, Fanny Price seems a far cry from these and other more spirited heroines. Consider, for example, two passages. In the first, from George Sand's 1932 novel *Indiana*, Raymon watches in astonishment as Indiana leaps on her horse:

Raymon was surprised at what seemed to take place in Indiana's heart. Her eyes and cheeks sprang to life; her dilated nostrils seemed to reveal an indefinable feeling of terror or pleasure, and suddenly, leaving his side and eagerly pressing her horse's flanks, she dashed forward . . . [with] a more than masculine courage . . . abandoning herself fearlessly to the fiery mettle of a horse she barely knew, urging it on boldly into the heart of the woods, avoiding with amazing skill the branches which, springing back sharply, struck her face, unhesitatingly crossing ditches, confidently taking risks on slippery clay soil, not worrying about breaking her slender limbs, but anxious to be the first.<sup>4</sup>

Here, in contrast, is poor Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*:

“How much I used to dread riding, what terrors it gave me to hear it talked of as likely to do me good;—(Oh! how I have trembled at my uncle’s opening his lips if horses were talked of).” (27)

As modern readers, we long to give Fanny Price iron supplements to overcome her anemic disposition, karate lessons so she can knock off Mrs. Norris and the snobbish Bertram sisters, public speaking classes so she can do something other than “speak only when she could not help it,” and self-esteem classes so she can aim for something higher than being “always a very courteous listener” who is “useful to others” (248, 164, 166).

But perhaps we need to read *Mansfield Park* in the light of an Emily Dickinson poem:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—  
 Success in Circuit lies  
 Too bright for our infirm Delight  
 The Truth’s superb surprise  
 As Lightning to the Children eased  
 With explanation kind  
 The truth must dazzle gradually  
 Or every man be blind—<sup>5</sup>

Examples of “Success in Circuit,” or the strategy of indirection, appear throughout Austen’s novels as she masks not only her identity but her messages. I am reminded of a “Hidden Pictures” game in a children’s activity book—at first, the page reveals only a charming country scene, but closer scrutiny shows subtle pictures of a boot, a knife, and other objects. Although some Austen readers discern nothing in her fiction but the surface descriptions of wedding gowns, carriage rides, and ballroom dances, others discover bold passages on marital property laws, the class system, and female education.

In *Mansfield Park*, perhaps Austen deliberately presents a shy, shrinking, silent heroine (instead of a witty Elizabeth Bennet or self-assured Emma



Emily Dickinson



George Sand

Woodhouse) in order to analyze the root cause of female dependency. Fanny Price is only ten years old, the daughter of an alcoholic and vulgar father, when she is uprooted from her home and subjected to the scorn of her relatives. Like Frankenstein's monster, who becomes a monster because others see him and treat him as monstrous, Fanny Price becomes submissive and lowly in demeanor because others grant her no independence or worth, insisting from start to finish that she "remember that she is not a *Miss Bertram*" (10) and accept the fact that she "must be the lowest and last" (221).

Yet Fanny is lucky *not* to be a Miss Bertram, for the sisters' trivial accomplishments and mindless booklearning do not constitute education or true womanhood. Maria and Julia Bertram know little besides how to flirt, make artificial flowers, speak French, and recite the kings of England, and their mother offers no guidance:

To the education of her daughters, Lady Bertram paid not the smallest attention. She had not time for such cares. She . . . 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)

As a woman Lady Bertram excels neither as an unconventional, independent thinker nor as a conventional nurturing mother; she is neither feminist nor feminine.

Although Lady Bertram pronounces Fanny "stupid" and "dull," Edmund recognizes that there is more to Fanny than meets the eye: "He knew her to be clever, to have a quick apprehension as well as good sense, and a fondness for reading, which, properly directed, must be an education in itself" (20, 22). Yet even Edmund, our hero-to-be, initially passes over Fanny and finds the livelier Mary Crawford more attractive. At first, we as readers may share Edmund's reaction. After all, Mary is "a talking pretty young woman" who is "lively and pleasant" and has "lively dark eye[s]" (42, 44, 47). Unlike Fanny, Mary does *not* tremble at the sight of horses: "Active and fearless, and, though rather small, strongly made, she seemed formed for a horsewoman . . . very much surpassing her sex in general by her early progress" (66). As the coachman notes to Fanny, Miss Crawford "did not seem to have a thought of fear. Very different from you, miss" (69).

Mary recognizes her own power, asserting, "I am very strong. Nothing ever fatigues me, but doing what I do not like" (68). Talkative, lively, musical, and witty, she shines in the same drawing-rooms where Fanny sits unnoticed. Mary's "merit in being gifted by nature with strength and courage was fully appreciated" by those around her—and by Mary herself (69). She labels herself "a woman of spirit," noting, "I was not born to sit still and do nothing" (243).

So why, then, is Mary Crawford not our Elizabeth Bennet, our Jane Eyre, our Indiana, our Jo March? Perhaps Austen intends for the charming, lively Mary to fool and thereby instruct her readers that spunk is not enough. The selfish Mrs. Norris ironically says, "You should learn to think of other people," a remark that sheds light on what is missing not only in Mrs. Norris herself but in the Bertram sisters and in the seemingly charming Mary

Crawford (71). Although it is harvest time and the farmers need their carts for transporting food, Mary can think only of her need to have her harp brought to her. "Selfishness must always be forgiven . . . because there is no hope of a cure," Mary flippantly remarks at a later time (68). Her worldliness leads her to ridicule Edmund's chosen profession as a clergyman and the act of family prayer.

Austen notes that Mary differs sharply from Fanny: "She had none of Fanny's delicacy of taste, of mind, of feeling; she saw nature, inanimate nature, with little observation" (81). In contrast, the usually silent Fanny becomes philosophic and poetic when walking amid the autumn trees. Fanny—yes, Fanny—gives sophisticated, rational, and articulate insight into human memory:

"If any one faculty of our nature may be called *more* wonderful than the rest, I do think it is memory. There seems something more speakingly incomprehensible in the powers, the failures, the inequalities of memory, than in any other of our intelligences. The memory is sometimes so retentive, so serviceable, so obedient—at others, so bewildered and so weak—and at others again, so tyrannic, so beyond controul!—We are to be sure a miracle every way—but our powers of recollecting and of forgetting, do seem peculiarly past finding out." (208-09)

Such mature discourse is lost on Mary, who shows herself "untouched and inattentive." Fanny explains, "You will think me rhapsodizing; but when I am out of doors . . . I am very apt to get into this sort of wondering strain" (209).

Fanny, then, is far more than an insipid, self-deprecating nonentity. Though shy, she has enough sense of purpose to stand up to Sir Thomas, her guardian:

"Am I to understand . . . that you mean to *refuse* Mr. Crawford?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Refuse him?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Refuse Mr. Crawford! Upon what plea? For what reason?"

"I—I cannot like him, Sir, well enough to marry him."

"This is very strange!" said Sir Thomas. . . . "Here is a young man wishing to pay his addresses to you, with everything to recommend him; not merely situation in life, fortune, and character. . . . I am half inclined to think, Fanny, that you do not quite know your own feelings." (315-16)

But Fanny *does* know her own feelings, and she remains true to them. Although Sir Thomas calls Fanny "wilful and perverse" and insists that "independence of spirit . . . in young women is offensive and disgusting beyond all common offense," we treasure Fanny's rebellion, particularly because we have waited so long for it and because we recognize that it is harder for the innately timid Fanny Price to stand up to Sir Thomas than for the feistier Elizabeth Bennet to hold her ground with her mother or Lady Catherine (318).

Austen demonstrates in *Mansfield Park* that even a shy, seemingly “feminine” and yielding young woman can find within herself the necessary strength to rebel against her lot. She writes of Fanny, “Her manner was incurably gentle, and she was not aware how much it concealed the sternness of her purpose” (327). By the novel’s end, Edmund acknowledges that “timid, anxious, doubting as she was,” Fanny “was of course only too good for him,” a woman of “mental superiority” (471). Even a retiring violet, a bashful childlike dependent, can come of age. In *Mansfield Park* Austen celebrates a quiet kind of courage that may go unnoticed.

Jane Austen’s own quiet kind of courage made her a fighter who could say, along with Emily Dickinson, “I took my Power in my Hand—/ And went against the World—” (J. 540). Although two decades after Austen’s death England’s poet laureate would still insist that “Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life and it ought not to be,” Austen had held fast to her own style and her own way by telling all the truth but telling it slant.<sup>6</sup> Austen indeed made literature the business of her life, finding the freedom and the courage to write exactly what she thought.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929), pp. 129-30. The subsequent reference to this work is from p. 198.
- <sup>2</sup> Jane Austen, Letter to James Clarke, Dec. 11, 1815, in *Jane Austen: Selected Letters, 1796-1817*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955; rpt. 1985), p. 185.
- <sup>3</sup> Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd. ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), pp. 12, 15, 18, 129, 223, 229, 297, 366, 395. All subsequent references to *Mansfield Park* are incorporated in the text.
- <sup>4</sup> George Sand, *Indiana* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994; trans. Sylvia Raphael), p. 113. A fuller discussion of Sand and other European and American women with the courage to write can be found in my article in the December 1995 issue of *Wisconsin Academy Review* and in a series of written guides and cassettes prepared for Wisconsin Public Radio.
- <sup>5</sup> Emily Dickinson, Poem J.#1129, from *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951), pp. 506-07; used by permission of the publishers and the Trustees of Amherst College.
- <sup>6</sup> Robert Southey, Letter to Charlotte Brontë, March 1837; reprinted in Winifred Gerin, *Charlotte Brontë* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 110.