

# Picturing Women's Health

*Edited by Francesca Scott,  
Kate Scarth and  
Ji Won Chung*

Number 4

# PICTURING WOMEN'S HEALTH

EDITED BY

Francesca Scott, Kate Scarth and Ji Won Chung



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## PICTURING WOMEN'S HEALTH

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# INTRODUCTION: PICTURING WOMEN'S HEALTH

Francesca Scott, Kate Scarth and Ji Won Chung

If a Google images search is any reliable indicator, there are many ways to picture women's health in 2014. A search brings back smiling faces – women, but also men and children of different ages and races from various time periods. These people are in civvies, national costume and medical uniforms; they are sometimes by themselves, other times embracing another person or in some instances surrounded by children or professionals. Women lift weights, exercise and participate in charity runs. Some images show models or drawings of the inside of the human body – the reproductive system or blood cells. Ill health or disease is often implied: in one image, women hold up bras, presumably symbolizing healthy breasts either pre- or post-breast cancer. *Women's Health* magazine, created in 2005 to counterbalance the emphasis on men's bodies in *Men's Health* magazine (founded in 1987), makes several appearances, super buff female bodies gracing its covers. Sometimes there are no people in these images, just food, nature scenes, or graphs, charts or maps pointing to some issue relating to women's health and well-being. The names of clinics also appear, as do cheques representing money made to support them.

These varied images provide a useful introduction to our approach to picturing women's health; this collection broaches many ways of thinking about women's health that move beyond simple or typical notions of 'representing'. A picture can be a 'visual representation', encompassing the graphs, charts and maps referenced above.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, picturing also evokes 'a representation as a work of art', pointing to processes of creation and consumption.<sup>2</sup> In the essays that follow, authors interrogate these methods of picturing female health by considering the artist/creator, the pictured subject, the audience and the explicit aims of the representation; our contributors ask questions such as: what discourses/ideologies/perspectives are implicit/explicit in the work (of art)? What power dynamics are revealed/inherent in such representations? Meanwhile, a picture can also be a 'concrete representation or illustration of an abstract idea or quality; a symbol, type, or figure' or a 'person or thing seen as the embodiment

of some quality'.<sup>3</sup> In this way, a smiling face, lush greenery or particular types of food (a fruit smoothie, a pile of grains) represent, illustrate and/or embody (women's) health. Google images provide us with many types of female bodies and ideas about female health (buff, professional, diseased) pictured via various discourses (medical, fitness entertainment, philanthropy). Such variety has long existed: in the nineteenth century, asylum picture, novels and medical journals give us prostitutes, anorexics, angels of the house – bodies that conform, that subvert dominant social structures, bodies that are diseased, that are healthy. Finally, this collection as a whole aims to fulfil another meaning of 'picture': the essays strive to create 'an intellectual model or framework of understanding', to reflect 'a state of affairs', namely that of women's health in the long nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

With this approach to picturing, we work alongside other scholars of medical humanities who draw attention to processes of representing, imagining and picturing. For example, Ludmilla Jordanova, in her influential study of gender in biomedical sciences, *Sexual Visions* (1989), states that '[t]he goal of a rich cultural history must be to extend the understanding we derive from social history in order to come to terms with the power of images',<sup>5</sup> while Janis Caldwell analyses nineteenth-century medical and literary texts from a hermeneutic stance in order to 'find ... interpretations that the text's formal properties and cultural embeddedness seem to converge upon'.<sup>6</sup> We specifically take John Wiltshire's framework for analysing health and the body in *Jane Austen and the Body: 'The Picture of Health'* and extend his focus on an early nineteenth-century novelist to a range of genres and documents across the century.<sup>7</sup> Wiltshire's subtitle is drawn from *Emma*, specifically Mrs Weston's appraisal of Emma Woodhouse's health (and beauty) to Mr Knightley:

'oh! 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. One hears sometimes of a child being "the picture of health"; now, Emma always gives me the idea of being the complete picture of grown-up health. She is loveliness itself. Mr Knightley, is not she?'<sup>8</sup>

At least two senses of 'picture' can be applied here. Mrs Weston verbally draws a picture of just how healthy Emma is by invoking her physical features and mannerisms – her height, size, air, head, glance – and, as Wiltshire notes, Mrs Weston's words position Emma as an embodiment of health, in other words, she *is* health.<sup>9</sup> Mrs Weston, as Emma's long-time governess and friend, is of course biased here and Mr Knightley, beginning perhaps to realize his true (romantic) feelings for Emma, is an audience willingly held captive to a recitation of her physical virtues. Emma's health is underwritten by her secure socio-economic status which is contrasted, for example, with the ill health of the poor cottagers to whom she delivers

broth or even with the less well-off Harriet Smith who suffers from a sore throat and a rotten tooth over the course of the novel. '[H]andsome, clever, and rich', Emma is also largely extracted from larger health debates that are touched on in the novel.<sup>10</sup> While her nervous father and sister debate the relative health merits of the increasingly popular seaside resort towns, Emma only visits the shore for romantic reasons (her honeymoon) rather than for health purposes. Another Austenian 'picture of health' is an even more highly privileged woman – Lady Bertram in *Mansfield Park*: at one point she, 'sunk back in one corner of the sofa, the picture of health, wealth, ease, and tranquillity, was just falling into a gentle doze, while Fanny was getting through the few difficulties of her work for her'.<sup>11</sup> Here Austen paints another picture of what health might look like: a dozing, wealthy lady on a sofa. Lady Bertram embodies health and ease, while her busy niece Fanny is often ill and always at work, emphasizing the power imbalance due to their varying socio-economic statuses and ages. Meanwhile, as Lady Bertram dozes, she fails to act as either mother or regent of Mansfield Park in her husband's absence; during her nap, her children plan the theatrical which their father would stridently oppose as it enables them to act out their illicit romantic and sexual impulses. Lady Bertram's embodiment of health is therefore far from a straightforwardly positive proposition, positioning her as it does as a particular 'type' – namely, a lady of fashion – having every material advantage without putting that wealth or social position to any good purpose. Wider social contexts and various aspects of women's lives are thus bound up with notions of health – broader implications that the essays that follow all consider.

### Women's Health in the Period 1770–1910

This complex notion of women's health is evident in, and fully informed by, a wider discourse that included medical treatises, political pamphlets, textbooks and education. One of the participants in this, and perhaps one of the first to fully articulate the relationship between women's health and the wider context of female life, was Mary Wollstonecraft. While the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* has frequently been reduced to a few pointed remarks about female education, it is as much about exercising the body as it is about exercising female reason and intellect, all with the aim of producing a strong, well-rounded, healthy woman: 'I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength, both of mind and body'.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the mind and body are bound together throughout the *Rights of Woman*; rarely does one follow without the other. Wollstonecraft criticizes an education system that sacrifices 'strength of body and mind' to 'libertine notions of beauty', and lambasts an outdated notion of female excellence that makes women proud of delicacy, and 'cramps the activity of the mind'.<sup>13</sup> In

her view, 'strength of mind has, in most cases, been accompanied by superior strength of body',<sup>14</sup> and to deny the 'pure animal spirits' that make 'both mind and body shoot out', is to 'contract the faculties and spoil the temper'.<sup>15</sup>

Bodily strength is also tied to sexual character. As Miriam Brody has noted, Wollstonecraft's woman of fashion 'is unable to be virtuous because her body is weak', "strength of body and mind" are required in the virtuous work of regulating a family, educating children, certainly for the extraordinary work of public writing'.<sup>16</sup> According to Adriana Craciun, this has famously been used to underline Wollstonecraft's 'deep ambivalence about sexuality', but, as Craciun notes, such an interpretation threatens to conflate corporeality with sexuality, when in fact Wollstonecraft offered women much more 'on the subject of the body than warnings about the need to suppress it'.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, if anything, the female body in Wollstonecraft's system is energetic and full of life, her feet are 'eloquent', and her body has acquired 'full vigour',<sup>18</sup> while the way in which girls are 'restrained and cowed', subject to 'wearisome confinement' is sharply criticized.<sup>19</sup> Only by 'bounding, as nature directs', in 'attitudes so conducive to health',<sup>20</sup> can the female body reach its potential, 'preserving health' and 'promoting beauty'.<sup>21</sup>

With this, Wollstonecraft had taken up a thread that her friend and predecessor, Catherine Macaulay, had begun two years previously. In her *Letters on Education with Observations on Religions and Metaphysical Subjects* (1790), Macaulay had also explored the connection between the female body and mind, and had further advocated the Spartan education system as a suitable model for women:

That the mental powers are affected by an union with corporal weakness; that it commonly gives a taint to the morals; and that conduct uniformly virtuous must be the joint issue of a good head and sound constitution. Bodily strength was the chief object of Spartan discipline. Their cares on this subject began with the birth of their offspring; and instead of entailing feebleness on their women for the sake of augmenting their personal beauty, they endeavoured to improve their natural strength, in order to render them proper nurses for the race of heroes.<sup>22</sup>

Female bodily strength was at the heart of this model, and Macaulay saw the feats of the Spartan women – as warriors – as intrinsic to their ability to bear and nurse healthy children. More than this, she also saw that women had through such exercise the opportunity to escape suppression, and even, ostensibly, their sex and gender: Spartan women were, of course, renowned for their lesbian relationships, a detail of which Macaulay, as an historian, was undoubtedly aware.

The entry of Macaulay and Wollstonecraft into this debate, at such a crucial time in the history of women's health, was no coincidence. The preceding forty or fifty years had seen extraordinary advances in the study of anatomy, particularly in the study of female anatomy, and both writers were almost certainly responding to this. The field was benefiting from increased secularism, and a thirst for



detail and accuracy; to see things as they really were, rather than idealized or imagined. That is not to underestimate the influence of the early modern period, however. The period preceding the one outlined in this collection has been recognized as one of extraordinary scientific advancement, of revolution even, and this certainly extends to the field of female medicine and health. Indeed, one might even argue that literature from the early modern period is saturated with references to various aspects of women's health, even at a time when the workings of the female body – and in particular the female reproductive system – were still a relative unknown. The reasons for this were economical; when we talk about women's health, we are often talking about their reproductive health – an emphasis that this collection strives to complicate – and in the early modern period this meant their ability to bear children, and as many as possible, for the benefit of the state. Their ability to conceive quickly, carry healthy babies to full term and then give birth so that they could begin the whole process again was prized, and it made the control of this process all the more important. The effects of this can be observed in the number of midwifery manuals written by women, who can be seen referencing an often unnamed, external threat to their field of work – a new approach – that brought with it the trappings of industry and mechanics: the professionalization of the study of women's reproductive health. Midwives such as Jane Sharp, writing in her *The Midwives Book, Or the Whole Art of Midwifery Discovered* (1671), defended the encroachment, noting that 'women are as fruitful, and as safe and well delivered, if not more fruitful, and better commonly in childbed' than those who are attended by 'Men of Learning'.<sup>23</sup> 'It is not hard words that perform the work', she says, 'words are just the shell'.<sup>24</sup>

By the eighteenth century, at the point at which Wollstonecraft and Macaulay were writing, this tension had intensified, brought about by recent discoveries in anatomy, most famously seen in the work of John and William Hunter, *Anatomia uteri humani gravidi tabulis illustrate* (1774). The engravings by Jan van Rymdyk from this piece demonstrate an entirely new way of picturing the female body, one that was stripped, literally in the sense that the anatomists removed anything from the frame that was not of interest to the study (including limbs, skin and even hair), and figuratively by deliberately avoiding religious allegory or symbolism. The emphasis was on hard, clinical evidence. It revealed a number of important details about the placenta and maternal blood flow, as well as embryological phases, but the focus, at least in terms of where the eye is drawn in these engravings, is very much on the female genitalia and, in particular, the sectioned clitoris. As Jordanova has argued, there is in this, perhaps, an implicit violence,<sup>25</sup> and certainly something that seeks to divide and conquer the female body.

The significance of such anatomical discoveries has already been extensively interrogated in a number of critical theories, from Thomas Laqueur's one-sex and two-sex theory, to the response of Katharine Park and Robert Nye.<sup>26</sup> The effect