Down and Out in Lisbon and London
(1741–1748)

If Cleland’s dozen years in Bombay saw both his rapid rise in the colonialist ranks and his sometimes clandestine, sometimes contested emergence as an author, the name he had begun to make for himself was shadowed by intimations of scandal or danger. Even though he prevailed in the Lowther and Marthalina cases, he only got caught up in them in the first place out of a rather dashing and reckless disregard for his own interests; a more cautious servant of the company would have deferred to his compatriots and left the “native” merchant and slave to fend for themselves. An outlaw aura seems to have grown up around him: in a work of antiquarian and local history from 1900, Glimpses of Old Bombay and Western India, James Douglas includes a biographical sketch of our subject under the title “John Cleland, Desperado.” To some extent, of course, the bad reputation is owing to the later fame of the Woman of Pleasure, but in Douglas’s portrait Cleland comes across as a ne’er-do-well in all his pursuits. “He left Bombay,” Douglas writes, “in a destitute condition, somewhat hurriedly, and for unknown reasons connected with a quarrel he had had with members of Council there. For many years he wandered in obscurity over the cities of Europe.” None of this is quite true, yet the sense it conveys of
Cleland as a shady, combative character, an uprooted cosmopolitan, hits close to the mark.

Nevertheless, when Cleland left Bombay in late 1740, the outward signs pointed to his return in due course to resume his colonial career. His younger sister, Charlotte Louisa (or Lucy), had joined him in Bombay in the fall of 1736 and had married one of his fellow writers, George Sadleir, in June 1737. Charlotte had given birth to a son, christened John, in October 1739, and although the child died within two months (of “flux”), Charlotte and her husband remained in Bombay and could have offered a sort of domestic stability to the otherwise deracinated Cleland.3 In a letter requesting leave to return to England, Cleland expresses his intent to resume his place in Bombay at the earliest opportunity. Addressing the members of council, he writes:

Certain concerns of the utmost Importance to my private Fortune requiring my personal Attendance in England, I am obliged to request your Hon[ours’] Leave to proceed thither on the first Ship. The Share I have the Honour of having in the Hon[ourable] Company’s Business is now up, and I am in Readiness to deliver up my Charge, though I am extremely willing to give all the Assistance in my Power to the Dispatches now in Hand, and hope this Step will not deprive me of the favourable Indulgence of my Hon[ourable] Masters on a Reclamation of their Service, Which Nothing could oblige me to leave at this Juncture, but an indispensible Call Home.4

Cleland’s tone is suitably deferential, but his letter withholds more than it tells. Both the “indispensible Call” and the “concerns” bearing on his “private Fortune” are left discreetly unspecified, as one would expect in such a petition, but the words “personal,” “private,” and “home” point to family pressures, as does other evidence. Having lost her first and only child nine months before, Charlotte accompanied her brother, probably to recuperate from the double strain of childbirth and mourning; and their father’s health, poor for some years, had worsened enough in his late sixties—his sinecure as commissioner of taxes under Walpole’s patronage now in danger—that his elder son felt obligated to help sort out his family’s affairs.5 The younger son, Henry—christened thirteen months after John and, according to Pope, his father’s “Favorite Son”—was probably then living in the West Indies, endeavoring to write his own colonialist success story; but almost no traces have been found of him, and he seems to have died without returning to London, sometime before the early 1750s.6

Caught up in the worries and griefs of family life, Cleland still seems, on the basis of his letter to the council, to intend a “Reclamation” of his career,
even if the covenant he signed in 1732 was “now up,” so that he was no longer indentured to the company. Certainly he gives no sign of disaffection or of the destitution, hurry, and rancor suggested by Douglas. The council approved his request, and John and Charlotte sailed for England, probably on the *Warwick*, which left Bombay on 23 September 1740.

Nothing further, no other documentary trace, appears until eleven months later, when he reported his arrival in London to the company’s directors (26 August 1741). After that, apart from vague notes in the watch rate and poor rate account books (that is, in tax collectors’ records), the evidence of his activities or even whereabouts before 1748 is fragmentary and elusive. Until recently, nothing seemed to have survived from the period between his father’s death (September 1741) and Cleland’s imprisonment for debt (February 1748) other than unattested rumors of his “wander[ing] in obscurity,” as Douglas puts it, “over the cities of Europe.” Yet these were years that marked a radical change in his life’s direction, and the betrayals and frustrations that infuse and perhaps disfigure his later work all lead back to this period when Cleland—in the words Samuel Johnson wrote of his scapegrace friend Richard Savage—“having no Profession, became, by Necessity, an Author.” In the rest of this chapter I focus on two key episodes from a trying, tumultuous decade, each one linked to a long-lost text of Cleland’s. The first, his involvement in an abortive scheme to establish a Portuguese East India company to rival the British, signals a decisive turn away from, or against, his former masters—almost an acting out of Cowan’s charge years earlier that Cleland had “deserted his King [&] Country,” and a prefiguration of his political and cultural estrangement in later works. The second, Cleland’s volatile, even murderous relationship with a fellow would-be writer, Thomas Cannon, can only be reconstructed from the bitter aftermath of their falling out, but its effect was to force Cleland into authorship in the face of misery and shame; and while publication relieved his misery, it only augmented his shame, and for life.

### The Portuguese Scheme

Cleland must have brought the manuscript of the coauthored *Woman of Pleasure* with him when he sailed on the *Warwick*; but the Bombay Fanny Hill is a phantom, a conjectural urtext whose relation to the published text is unknowable. There is no way of knowing, either, if it had been kept a shared secret or if Carmichael and Cleland circulated it among friends or more widely still. A curt note in the minutes of a Scottish phallic gentleman’s club, the Beggar’s Benison...
and Merryland, states that at a meeting on St. Andrew’s Day, 1737, “Fanny Hill was read,” just after, or perhaps during, a spirited session at which “all frigged,” but apart from some question as to the reliability of the minutes, reconstructed from memory after the originals had been destroyed, the note itself is ambiguous. Is this “Fanny Hill” the Carmichael-Cleland text or a generic name, a common Englishing of the Latin mons veneris (hill of Venus)? If the former, how did a copy end up in Anstruther in Fife at a time when Cleland was working his way up to the position of junior merchant in Bombay? The fact that a “Robert Cleland” was listed among the Beggar’s Benison’s members in 1739 is intriguing, but the degree of his relationship, if any, to John is unknown. Whatever the case, there is nothing to suggest that Cleland imagined publishing the text or imagined authorship as a possible life.

His appearance before the company directors in August 1741, soon after his arrival in London, suggests an intention to keep the way open for a return to Bombay, but this seems to have been the last contact he had with the company, and by the next year he was engaged in a secret mission to create a rival company to serve the mercantile and imperial aims of a nation that, if not an enemy to Britain, was not exactly a friend. From 1739, Britain was at war with Portugal’s chief rival in the Americas, Spain (the curiously named “War of Jenkins’s Ear”); and the British government had proposed an Anglo-Portuguese convention that would offer British protection to Portuguese assets in exchange for trading access to Brazilian ports. Such gestures of solidarity, however, masked a deeper antagonism. As the recently appointed Portuguese ambassador to the court of George II wrote in July 1741, “The envy of our Brazil[,] so strong in British hearts . . . would eventually lead them to an attack on Portuguese America.”

The author of these words, Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo, would in later years, as the Marquês de Pombal, occupy a position in Portugal comparable to Walpole’s in Britain. As ambassador in London from 1738 to 1743, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society and sought out men of political influence and learning who could enlarge his knowledge of mercantilist economics and the practicalities of trade. One such person, with whose family he became close soon after arriving in London, was William Cleland, and it was through the father that Carvalho came to know the son. More than this, it was William Cleland’s fall from political grace, and his death just a month after Cleland’s homecoming, that turned Cleland from a loyal servant of the company and Crown to the principal actor in a plot to challenge their growing power abroad.
William Cleland, aged sixty-eight when his son returned from Bombay, had served for ten years in the army, rising to the rank of major around the time of John’s birth. When the Peace of Utrecht of 1713–1714 brought an end to the War of the Spanish Succession, in which he had seen battle, William turned from the military to the civil service, first as a commissioner of customs for Scotland and from 1723 as a commissioner of taxes in England, a post he held for eighteen years. These positions were well paid (£400 and £500 per annum, respectively) but depended on ministerial patronage and were thus vulnerable to calculations of political interest, so in the spring of 1741, when Walpole’s government needed shoring up, William Cleland’s sinecure as commissioner went to a more useful ally. To add insult to injury, he only found out by a back channel: as he wrote to the Duke of Newcastle on 22 May, late the night before, his wife had received “an Anonimous billet in a Counterfeit hand advising her that there was a resolution of takeing her husbands employment from him and a promise of it given to another.” For all the cloak-and-dagger intrigue of warnings delivered under cover of darkness, there was no countermove for William to make, and the news seems to have shattered him. As he wrote in the same letter to Newcastle, “My heart is so ffull that I am asham’d of it and I am afraid that if I said any more I should show so little manhood that you would be asham’d to espouse my cause.”

Even if John, from the evidence that reached him in Bombay, knew that his father was in trouble, the change for the worse by the time he reached London in August must have been distressing: his father had been “cruell[y] strip[ped] of [his] fortune” and was approaching his death—which, if not directly caused by his dismissal, was surely hurried on by it. Such was Carvalho’s sense, at any rate, when he undertook to explain to the powerful Cardinal da Mota the younger Cleland’s reasons for offering his help toward the establishment of a Portuguese East India company: the family had been “brought into disgrace” and William destroyed by heartbreak when his post was taken away at Walpole’s behest. In the same letter, Carvalho maintained that the British East India Company’s directors were also Walpole’s “creatures” and had provoked Cleland the younger’s “disgust”—so linking the son’s disaffection to the father’s disgrace. For all his success in Bombay, John, as the Cowan case vividly shows, held at least some of his superiors there in contempt, and Walpole’s sacrifice of his father to political expediency (never mind that his job security over the preceding twenty-seven years was also owing to political favoritism) could only have aggravated his sense of injustice. “Pricked by resentment at the injuries
he had received,” Carvalho reports, Cleland after his father’s death was ready to shift his allegiance from Britain to Portugal, and to a scheme commensurate with his ambition and sense of his own abilities.21

Carvalho held Cleland in high esteem, describing him as a “man of distinction” and, like his father, “a person . . . of honor and well-known integrity,” and he consistently presents Cleland as the “author” of the plan for a Portuguese company, the only person with the precise mix of “natural abilities” and knowledge born of “years of tireless study and curiosity” needed for the successful realization of such an ambitious undertaking.22 If Carvalho on his posting to London was initially most concerned with what he saw as “the unfair advantages the British enjoyed in Lisbon and Oporto” and the threat posed to Portuguese interests in Brazil, his friendship with Cleland kindled an interest in reviving Portugal’s fortunes in India and the East Indies, notably weakened by war with the Marathas—a war tacitly endorsed by the British East India Company, which stood to profit from the Portuguese losses.23 Carvalho’s younger brother, José Joaquim, “a brother I raised and whom I loved also as a son,” had been killed during the Maratha attack on Goa in 1740, which suggests that, as with Cleland, personal motives were bound up with his political calculations: theirs was a plan driven, in part, by displaced filial and paternal grief.24

Carvalho presented the scheme in the long letter already cited to Cardinal da Mota, the Portuguese king’s chief minister, dated 19 February 1742—just six months after Cleland’s return to London. In his letter, Carvalho introduces Cleland as the project’s author, presenting his background and qualifications but leaving him nameless (the main reason, of course, for his involvement remaining a secret for two hundred years). He then discusses the history of other European trading companies in the Indies and outlines the system of commercial education that would need to be introduced in Portugal for its merchants to be competitive with those of other nations, especially the British. In effect, during his four years in London he had been gathering commercial intelligence through conversations with merchants, as he writes in a 1741 text, the Relação dos Gravames (Report on Grievances): “In Portugal I could not have had the sources that I have here for research . . . Here we eat and drink with a merchant who is talkative after having drunk too much . . . What would be difficult in Portugal to discover directly, only requires patience to gather here.”25 In the 1742 letter, he summarizes those discoveries, building to his pièce de résistance, a mémoire, or memorandum, written in French, from Cleland to the king of Portugal, João V.26
In keeping with the secrecy of this early stage of the scheme, Cleland presents himself anonymously, as “the author of this mémoire,” or simply “the author.” Both he and Carvalho had good reason for secrecy: Carvalho because of enemies in the Portuguese court who meant to thwart (or hijack) his proposals, Cleland because his involvement verged (at least) on treason and mercantile espionage, especially as it featured what Carvalho describes as a “vast collection of manuscripts containing examples of all the British East India Company’s practices in the administration of trade in Asia.”

To use papers acquired as a result of his employment with the company in order to further the interests of the Portuguese—or as he puts it in his mémoire, “to increase His Majesty’s revenue, to strengthen His Kingdom’s Navy, to cause His colonies in the East Indies . . . to flourish”—was seriously risky, as British government policy in the area, dictated by the company, was aimed at nothing less than the expulsion of the Portuguese from the region. Cleland’s plan to found a rival company was not simply an entrepreneurial scheme but an act of defiance against his own late “Honourable Masters.”

The mémoire’s intended audience—Carvalho, the cardinal, and the king—could not have missed the challenge to British interests implicit in the author’s call for the Portuguese nation to recognize “the value and even necessity of restoring its Indian trading colonies and drawing from them all the profit and benefit which the cultivation of commerce cannot fail to produce” nor the larger, indeed global, geopolitical implications of this revival. Cleland writes that “even after the loss of many previously conquered properties and territories, there remain enough favorably situated settlements and valuable resources to form a plan of trade in the Orient which . . . will more than make up for past losses.” Portugal, he asserts, enjoys “numerous advantages” over Britain, both geographical (“its colonial settlements well positioned along the East Indian trade routes”) and cultural (“the Portuguese language, diffused throughout the East”), and these are part of a global fabric of colonial enterprise. The revival of trade in India, then, with its attendant benefits (the increase of the king’s revenue, the strengthening of the navy) will lead, “indirectly and as a result,” to the “flourish[ing]” of Portuguese colonies in Brazil. In light of Carvalho’s fears that the British aimed not only to expel the Portuguese from India but to attack them in America, what Cleland held out was the prospect of a radical reconfiguration of imperial power relations.

Apart from outlining the strategic benefits of a revitalization of the Portuguese presence in India—benefits, he argues, that make this scheme “a matter
of highest priority for the state,” to which it should “dedicate . . . all its genius and power”—Cleland sets out his qualifications for the role of chief advisor. “The author of this memorandum,” he writes,

having resided for the span of many years in the East Indies, has long been in a position to learn a great deal about the situation and interests of the Portuguese nation in India, from the many dealings and conversations he has had on this subject with the most respectable persons of that nation, both ecclesiastical and lay, as well as by his endeavors to acquire all the knowledge necessary to maintain trade in the Orient, whether between India and Europe or within the Indies.

His knowledge of the place, of trade, and of the Portuguese is knowledge gained, although he can only say so indirectly, in the service of Portugal’s enemies. What he has to offer is “the example of other nations which have well known how to profit” in India, “whose systems of administration can be instructive as examples.” This is in keeping with Carvalho’s claim, in his letter enclosing Cleland’s mémoire—that “all European nations are benefiting and prospering by means of reciprocal imitation. Each one observes carefully the actions of the others”—with one difference: rather than information gleaned from careful observation of another, Cleland offers insider knowledge at first hand. He doesn’t explain his willingness to shift allegiance to a new master but simply notes that a new system of trade “necessarily requires the advice of some person or persons of sufficient experience, particularly in Indian affairs and the practice of trade there, in order to guide and steady its first steps, which otherwise could not help but be wavering and uncertain.” For Cleland himself, the scheme would mark his elevation from a mere functionary (albeit a successful one) to a king’s counselor, the author and architect of a comprehensive system.

Cleland concludes the mémoire by offering “to travel to Portugal in order to communicate, in person and in detail, all the necessary records, written instructions and other information, in whatever manner and form are required, without setting any conditions in advance and seeking no reward other than as it pleases His Majesty.” And that is the last we hear of the scheme from Cleland directly; no other account of it in his words has come to light. But a later letter of Carvalho, written in 1748 to his cousin Marco António de Azevedo Coutinho, the Portuguese secretary of state, cuts to the story’s end. Just over a year after sending his letter and Cleland’s mémoire to Cardinal da Mota, in May 1743, Carvalho returned from his ambassadorial posting in London to Lisbon and there met Cleland, who had been received by the cardinal at home, in the company of Coutinho. It is not clear how long Cleland had been in Lisbon, but his
secret meeting with the king’s two highest ministers confirms their very strong interest in the scheme. Yet within a short time the proposal was dead. A number of different explanations have been suggested: the cardinal evidently told Cleland he “absolutely lacked the means” to support the scheme; the king’s faltering health made negotiations difficult; the secrecy of the proposals had been breached; Carvalho’s enemies at court blocked the plan. It was probably a combination of the last two of these that sealed its fate: when Carvalho’s rivals got wind of the scheme, they maneuvered to have him sent to Vienna—not because they opposed the East India plan, but in order to shut Carvalho out of its implementation. And in fact in late 1747, with Carvalho away, a new plan for a Portuguese East India company began to circulate in Lisbon, but this time without Cleland attached.

According to Carvalho, the scheme’s unraveling made for a very bad end to Cleland’s stay in Portugal. Carvalho himself had to deliver “the final disappointment, which forced him [Cleland] to leave Lisbon when he least expected it, and in quite disagreeable circumstances.” Exactly what these were is unclear, but the phrase hints at something sordid, as if the project’s failure carried some disgrace. The violence of this reversal—from secret talks at the highest levels of state to ignominious retreat—was not only, as Carvalho writes, shocking and disappointing, but seems to have had an enduring, traumatic effect. Cleland did not return to the company, or to India, where, whatever conflicts he had had with other members of the colonial establishment, he had laid the foundation for a flourishing career. If news of the secret Portuguese negotiations had got back to London, of course, he could hardly have picked up again where he had left off with the company, but there is no evidence of this; it seems more likely that the same “disgust” and “resentment” that led him to devise the Portuguese scheme in the first place barred him from asking to return to his former station. His sister Charlotte did return to her husband in Bombay, around the same time John was in Lisbon—her name is registered on the lists of European residents from October 1743—and remained there until her death in October 1747, of “dropsy.” But for John there seems to have been no more thought of going back.

Cleland and Cannon

Instead, he stayed on, or perhaps off and on, with his mother in St. James’s Place, and all that is known of the period between May 1743 and February 1748 is that he fell into debt, to the tune of some £800. Such, at any rate, was the
claim made against him by two men, Thomas Cannon and James Lane, whose charges led to Cleland’s arrest and committal to the Fleet Prison, where he spent the next twelve and a half months. There is no indication in the legal documents of how the debts were incurred or of how Cannon’s and Lane’s interests were linked. Both charged Cleland with “trespass” as well as failure to pay, but the nature of the trespass is unspecified. Lane sought payment of £20 damages (again unspecified), while Cannon sought the same in damages and repayment of the £800 Cleland allegedly owed him. Although it is notoriously tricky to establish what a particular sum of money in an earlier period would be worth today, £800 was a huge debt: almost double the very substantial salary William Cleland received as a high-level government tax official with over twenty years’ service, and nearly thirty times the annual rent of the house on St. James’s that Cleland’s mother shared with John after her husband’s death. How Cleland could have owed such a sum to Thomas Cannon, whose own father’s death in 1722 had left his mother and family in such “necessitous circumstances” that George I granted them a pension of £120 per year, is unclear. But while much of what led up to Cleland’s arrest is hopelessly murky, enough remnants survive from its aftermath to suggest that Cannon may have been, to Cleland’s rage, the most important person in his life.

Cannon, born 1720, was ten years Cleland’s junior and was, as Cleland noted in a 1749 letter, “the Son of a Dean and Grandson of a Bishop.” His father, Robert (1663–1722), though described by the controversial scientist and clergyman William Whiston as “one of the greatest Scepticks that ever was born,” had a successful career in the church, becoming a prebendary of Ely, Westminster, and Lincoln and dean of the last—perhaps in part thanks to the influence of his wife Elizabeth’s father, the bishop of Norwich and Ely, John Moore. His father’s skepticism may have dissuaded Thomas and his elder brother Charles (born 1713) from following clerical careers; in any case, they seem not to have done so, and Charles died at the Battle of Fontenoy in 1745. Thomas, by contrast, evidently pursued literary interests, and seems by that route to have come to know Cleland in the mid-1740s, when they lived, with their widowed mothers, on opposite sides of St. James’s Park.

In the wake of the Lisbon debacle, and unwilling to go back to Bombay, Cleland might have expected to assume the role of head of family. Pope wrote in 1742 that William Cleland had lived just long enough “to receive his Eldest Son with great Satisfaction,” adding, “I hear that this Son behaves himself very kindly to his Mother & is in a capacity of assisting her”—as if he had taken the father’s place, and the mother now depended on her son’s kindness.
was John who was powerless in the family home. Lucy was administrator of her husband's estate and was also well provided for by her older sister Margaret, Viscountess Allen. When Lucy Cleland in turn wrote her will in 1752, it was her sister and her niece Frances whom she named as executors, not her son: he was limited to a pension whose stringent conditions he railed against, fruitlessly, for years. As he wrote to his mother’s lawyer, Edward Dickinson, sometime later:

Birth, Education, and a certain rank defend most real gentlemen from at least mean, and dirty distresses, but my gratious parent is content! yes content! that I should fall by such hardships, as Tinkers, Taylors, or an honest Washerwoman would not think of their children enduring if they could help it: and yet She, even she herself it is, whose rank obstinacy has brought them every one upon me. Can Lady Allen join in this execrably inhuman procedure? Can this be the spirit of our Family? if so: happy the Dead of it.

Cleland’s authorial voice in his letters—often peevish, self-pitying, theatrically reiterative (“she, even she”; “content! yes content!”)—can be hectoring and unpleasant, but his tone of wounded outrage betrays a keen awareness of his own marginality and dependence, and it would be hard not to feel some sympathy for the sense of abandonment he expresses with such intensity. For whatever one thinks of the rhetorical posturing, the “hardships” by which he had fallen were not imagined: he spent twelve and a half months in the hell of the Fleet, and his family did nothing.

With no other help to sustain him, Cleland took up the “poinant and ready pen” he had been noted for in Bombay. Two of his prison writings survive: the Woman of Pleasure, which in his “leisure hours” he “altered, added to, transposed, and in short new-cast,” giving the text we know, and a handwritten note found “stuck to the outer Door” of Thomas Cannon’s chambers in New Inn. The second of these survives thanks to Cannon’s decision to submit it in support of a complaint he lodged against Cleland on 5 February 1749, taken down in an affidavit by W. Foster of Serjeants Inn (connected to the Court of King’s Bench). Cannon, accompanied to Foster’s office by his servant Hannah Simpson, who found the note, begins by saying “that he is well Acquainted with the handwriting of John Cleland now a prisoner in his Majestys prison of the Fleet at this Deponents Suit” and goes on to assert “that since the said John Cleland has been confined in the said Prison . . . this Deponent has received diverse scurrilous and libellous papers from the said Cleland greatly reflecting upon and abusing this Deponent And this Deponent’s Mother Elizabeth Cannon.”
The morning before, Hannah Simpson had seen “the paper Writing hereunto annext” on Cannon’s door and brought it in “before this Deponent was up”—although, judging by her use of an X rather than a signature on the affidavit, she would not have been able to read it. Cannon concludes by declaring that he “verily believes” the note “to be the proper handwriting of the said John Cleland[,] this Deponent having often seen him write.” Attached to the affidavit by a wax seal is the note itself:

Here lives that execrable white-faced, rotten catamite, who joined with his own mother to consummate the murder of an unfortunate gentleman who had saved his life, and whom, in return, he poisoned five times with common arsenic, which, it is probable, he will never recover the bloody effects of. Enquire for further particulars of his Mother in Delahaye Street. His name is Molly Cannon.

N.B. The next shall be on every Post in London and Westminster.

The note does indeed “greatly reflect upon and abuse” him. In seventy-five words it manages to accuse Cannon of two capital crimes: the attempted murder of “an unfortunate gentleman” who is, presumably, the note’s author, and sodomy, a crime implicit in the reference to Cannon as a “rotten catamite” and his rechristening as “Molly.” It also threatens the launch of a campaign of defamation, perhaps to pressure Cannon into dropping his charges against Cleland. For Cleland is certainly the note’s author: it is his “proper handwriting,” and it exhibits his signature rhetorical extremism. It presents a ghoulish portrait of Cannon—vampiric, riddled with corruption, oxymoronically linking the youth of the catamite to the rottenness of decaying age—and constructs a gruesome scenario of mother and son bound in a vicious compact against a virtuous “unfortunate” gentleman. Why the Cannons repaid his kind act, saving Thomas’s life, with repeated attempts to kill him, Cleland leaves unexplained, perhaps to intensify the aura of monstrosity. Certainly he means to incite feelings of horror at the crimes he alleges, and terror in Cannon at the prospect of exposure.

Cleland’s note was found on Cannon’s outer door just short of a year after he had been confined to the Fleet. If it was just the latest of a number of “scurrilous and libelous” papers, as Cannon alleges, Cleland had been on the attack for twelve months and, if anything, was ramping up the levels of violence and menace, as this was the first time Cannon had gone to the law. There is no way of knowing if there is any truth to Cleland’s allegation of a poisoning plot—certainly Elizabeth Cannon, the aging widow of the dean of Lincoln, makes for an unlikely murderess—but what stands out is the charge that they “poisoned
[him] five times with common arsenic,” which implies that he saw them regularly over an extended period, presumably as their guest at home, plied with tea and cakes. Cannon’s affidavit reinforces this suggestion of an ongoing relationship, as when he asserts that “he is well Acquainted with the handwriting of John Cleland . . . having often seen him write.” If such words as “well acquainted” and “often” suggest intimacy over time, there is more: it is Cleland’s handwriting with which Cannon is well acquainted, for he has “often seen him write.” His words imply not just friendship but friendship centered on writing—that is, literary collaboration. This, in turn, might explain the otherwise astonishing coincidence that Cannon and Cleland, within a few weeks of this note, would separately publish the only two explicit descriptions of male same-sex desire in eighteenth-century English literature: the sodomitical episode from volume 2 of the Woman of Pleasure and Cannon’s long-lost Ancient and Modern Pederasty Investigated and Exemplify’d.46

Both of these were published anonymously, and both got their respective authors into serious legal trouble when their identities were found out. Cleland’s text was published about a week after Cannon’s affidavit (appropriately enough, on St. Valentine’s Day), whereas Cannon’s was first advertised in the April 1749 issue of the Gentleman’s Magazine.47 Considering the risk he was taking in writing about “pederasty” at all, it was foolhardy of Cannon to bring Cleland’s incriminating note to the law’s attention so close to the time of his own pamphlet’s publication, but it was equally reckless for Cleland to be broadcasting accusations of sodomy when his book was being readied for sale. Both seem more intent on ruining the other’s life than on protecting their own, and it is the very excessiveness of their enmity that suggests a collaboration gone disastrously awry. When intimacy turned to hatred and Cannon had the person “who had saved his life” thrown into prison, the destitute Cleland, denied his family’s help, could finally think of nothing but to show the long-gestating Woman of Pleasure to “some whose opinion I unfortunately preferred to my own, and being made to consider it as a ressource, I published the first part.”48 This appeared on 21 November 1748, after he had spent nine months in the Fleet; three months later, the second volume came out.

How Cleland first made contact with a person from the book trade whose opinion he unfortunately preferred to his own is unrecorded, and there were some efforts to mask the publisher’s identity, but the key figure was the young and not risk-averse bookseller and author Ralph Griffiths, who dealt with Cleland either directly or via his brother Fenton.49 When Ralph Griffiths was arrested for obscenity in November 1749 (that is, a year after the first volume of
Cleland’s novel came out), he stated, when “asked whether he knows who is the Author, printer or publisher thereof,”

That some time last Winter his Brother Fenton Griffith came to him & asked his advice whether it would be safe for him to Publish the said Book; That at that Time there was only one of the said Volumes finished & the said Fenton Griffith giving the Examinant a description of the said Volume the Examinant did advise him to publish it & the Examinant believes he did publish the same at his the said Fenton Griffiths Shop in Exeter Exchange in the Strand & supplied the Booksellers with it.

The Examinant says that his Brother told him that he had the Copy of the said Work from one J. Cleeland who the Examinant believes, from what his Brother has told him, is the Author of the said Work.50

But while Ralph Griffiths’s account is confirmed by Thomas Parker, the book’s printer, it is almost certain that Ralph was the real publisher and Fenton largely a front. Fenton is not known for publishing anything else; indeed, as William Epstein notes, he “seems to have dropped from sight” almost immediately after Cleland’s novel appeared, and there is no record of any examination of him when the others involved in the work’s production were questioned.51 He may have been his brother’s agent in acquiring the text from Cleland; he certainly lent his name to the book’s title page, which identifies the publisher as “G. Fenton.” But it was Ralph who was arrested, who published (the next year, under his own name) an expurgated version of the novel he had commissioned from Cleland, and who took Cleland on as a writer for hire after his release from the Fleet in March 1749. It is probable, in fact, that Cleland’s release from prison was arranged by Ralph Griffiths, and that in taking over or paying off Cleland’s debts he engaged Cleland to work for him in a form of indentured servitude. Although Cleland was reputed to have sold Griffiths the copyright to the Woman of Pleasure for just twenty guineas, the fact that his creditors’ complaint was dismissed within three weeks of the second volume’s appearance seems to indicate Griffiths’s mediation, and in fact Griffiths testified the following year that his motive for asking Cleland to prepare an expurgated text of the Woman of Pleasure “was that Mr. Cleeland owed him a Sum of money & as Cleeland was going abroad he thought it was the only Method to get his Debt paid.”52 His youthful collaboration with Carmichael gave Cleland his ticket of leave from the Fleet, but the freedom he gained was itself a new form of dependence.

In the course of a half dozen years Cleland had fallen from a “man of distinction” whom the Portuguese ministers of state looked to for advice to a man
condemned to “the meanness of writing for a bookseller” and lamenting his “low abject condition, that of a writer for Bread.” In fact he was lucky in his bookseller: Griffiths was ambitious, energetic, a person of wide-ranging interests. Soon after Cleland’s release he started up the *Monthly Review*, which offered Cleland a venue for some thirty critical articles over the next few years, and he gave Cleland what seems like a pretty free hand to choose his other literary projects. But like such later *Monthly Review* contributors as Smollett and Goldsmith, Cleland bridled at any hint of subordination—whether to a bookseller, theatrical producer, or parent—and Griffiths, who played a key role both in the dissemination of a new literary culture in the eighteenth century and in what these writers saw as the mechanization and prostitution of authorship itself, was one focus of their resentment. Goldsmith, who wrote for the *Monthly Review* from 1757 to 1763, complained in 1761 of “that fatal revolution whereby writing is converted to a mechanic trade; and booksellers, instead of the great, become the patrons and paymasters of men of genius.” Such complaints were in fact already a cliché, as was the equation of authorship with prostitution, going back many decades and given ludicrous form in Richard Savage’s *Iscariot Hackney*, the title figure of *An Author to be Lett* (1728). To a person as jealous of his reputation as Cleland, the reduction to a cliché, the stock figure of a “distrest poet” (as in Hogarth’s engraving of 1737), would have been galling, and it was Thomas Cannon who had driven him to the step of “becoming the author of a Book I disdain to defend,” as he wrote to Stanhope, “and wish, from my Soul, buried and forgot.” His fault was not having written the book but the public misstep of “becoming [its] author”—that is, selling the text “for Bread.”

While Cleland “new-cast” the Bombay manuscript in prison and placed his future in the hands of a bookseller, Cannon made arrangements to have his own manuscript printed. In late February or early March 1749, according to the politically dissident printer John Purser, “Mr Cannon, the Author, brought him a Copy of a Pamphlet, to print, intituled, Antient & Modern Pederasty, &c.” When Purser objected to the title, “Cannon assur’d him on his Honour, that the whole Pamphlet throughout was so far from encouraging the Vice, that it was Design’d to explode the Crime and make it hateful to all Mankind; and that it was wrote in such a manner, that it could not offend the nicest Ear; and that he would justifie every Tittle it contain’d before any Court in England.” Despite his assurances, Cannon did all he could to conceal the work’s contents from the printers, even correcting his own proofs, but Purser’s assistant Hugh Morgan later told Purser he suspected it was “a bad Pamphlet,” and Purser in turn accused Cannon of having lied to him. Cannon then “made an elaborate
Display of Learning, in which he talked of Petronius, Arbiter, and Aretine, and quoted other antient Writers Greek as well as Roman,” but seeing this wasn’t working, he returned to his earlier claim, that he was “so perfectly sensible of the just and lawful Intention and Execution of his Piece that he would put his Name to it.” Purser, according to Morgan, was “in some sort pacified by what Cannon said,” but he wanted as little to do with the inflammatory pamphlet as possible, and insisted that Cannon take all the copies away as soon as he had paid for Purser’s paper and time.  

In these negotiations, Cannon presented himself as an independent scholar, a gentleman-amateur—a far cry from a writer for bread. He even left “an old Fashion’d Gold Watch” with Purser as security for payment—probably passed down from his father the dean or grandfather the bishop, a token of inherited gentility. Despite what he had told Purser, he did not “put his Name” to the text. It was published, like Cleland’s, anonymously, but unlike Cleland’s it lacked even a false publisher’s name. It’s unknown how many copies were printed or how many sold; a printer named Robert Swan bought “several,” and Cannon hired a city porter named Robert Tomlinson “to carry the said Book to several Pamphlet Shops, in order to their being sold,” but that is the last we hear of them.

The work would have vanished entirely had it not been for Cleland’s desire for revenge against Cannon for his year in prison (and for the poisonings, if they were anything other than a complete fabrication). Nine months after volume 2 of the *Woman of Pleasure*, eight months after Cleland’s release, seven months after *Ancient and Modern Pederasty* was listed for sale, Cleland was arrested again, on 8 November 1749, for obscenity. In his self-exculpatory letter to Stanhope, he offered, in addition to an account of the pressures under which he had consented to the novel’s publication, an argument against prosecution. The wisest course, he suggests, is simply to let the book fade into oblivion, to let it lie “buried and forgot.” Convinced that the move to prosecute was the work of “my Lords the Bishops,” Cleland counters that “they can take no step towards punishing the Author that will not powerfully contribute to the notoriety of the Book, and spread what they cannot wish suppresse more than I do.” Cleland supports his claim with a recent example: “It is not eight months,” he writes, since the Son of a *Dean* and Grandson of a *Bishop* was mad and wicked enough to Publish a Pamphlet evidently in defence of *Sodomy*, advertised in all the papers. This was perhaps rather overlooked than tolerated—What was the consequence? Why, it is at this instant so thoroughly forgot that few I believe know that ever such
a Pamphlet existed: Whereas, if My Lords the Bishops had been so injudicious as to stir this stench they might have indeed provoked the public indignation, but its curiosity too: and all to punish a crazy wretch, who would, I dare swear, not be unambitious of taking Vanini for his Model.  

However apt the example, Cleland’s goal was clearly to direct his readers’ attention to a work that, without his intervention, would indeed have been “thoroughly forgot.” By referring to Cannon indirectly, through his ecclesiastical lineage, Cleland takes an apparently irresistible dig at the clergy—more of whom, he says earlier, “bought [the Memoirs], in proportion, than any other distinction of men”—while also slyly fingering Cannon. He goes further, characterizing Cannon’s work as a “defence of Sodomy,” and offers the judicial murder of the freethinker and philosopher Lucilio Vanini (1585–1619)—burned at the stake, after having his tongue cut out, on charges of atheism—as an appropriate “Model” for Cannon’s punishment.

In the short term his reminder had the desired effect: two months after Cleland’s letter, the secretary of state called on the attorney general, Dudley Ryder, to prosecute Cannon, the ‘Author of a most wicked, and mischievous Book, intitled, ‘Ancient, and Modern Pederasty investigated, and exemplified.’” Cleland had successfully set in motion the machinery of legal persecution in which Cannon would be caught for the next several years. In that sense he had the last laugh, and there is no record of any further exchange between them. Yet if the tail end of their relationship was a depressing call-and-response of cruelty, defamation, and threat, it had some unintended and beneficial (to us if not to them) effects: Cannon, by hounding him over a debt, forced Cleland into professional authorship; Cleland, by informing on Cannon, ensured the preservation of his “wicked and mischievous” work in the legal archives, as the next chapter will show. Each of them, by lashing out, secured the other’s literary immortality. Hatred, too, is a form of collaboration.