Fanny Hill in Bombay

Gladfelder, Hal

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On 27 May 1781, when Cleland was seventy years old and living “in the Savoy,” off the Strand near Somerset House, he was paid a visit by the lawyer and antiquary Josiah Beckwith. Beckwith had read Cleland’s treatises on etymology and the origins of language and wanted to discuss some points with “the learned and ingenious Author.” Cleland seems to have told him that he had had a government pension of £200 taken away “on Account of his Publications,” and Beckwith, noting Cleland’s “sarcastical” treatment of “Monarchical Government” in his writing, comments that “it is no Wonder, in this Age, that he lost his Place or Pension . . . or that he should pass under the Censure of being a Sodomite, as he now does, and in Consequence thereof Persons of Character decline visiting him.”

Beckwith’s note, written on the end paper of a volume of Cleland’s linguistic tracts now in the Cambridge University Library, comes as a revelation, for it seems to preserve a “knowledge” that is ordinarily lost: the intimate knowledge transmitted in gossip, rumor, whispered asides. The “truth” of gossip may not always be true, but it gives access to what is thought to be hidden, and of all such secrets, the secret of prohibited sexual desires or acts—even if the secret is a lie, but especially when it confirms
what we already suspect—is the most thrilling. Cleland a sodomite! How could such a revelation not profoundly affect our sense of his position in eighteenth-century culture, or not lead us to read his texts in a different light?

Beckwith’s note certainly marks Cleland as an outcast: the author as pariah. But its final sentence is at the very least ambiguous. At first glance it seems simply to mean “it’s no wonder people think he’s a sodomite,” as if there were something in Cleland’s appearance or conduct that fit Beckwith’s preconceived notion of what a sodomite is like. But in context, the sodomite remark is subsidiary to Beckwith’s larger point, which pertains to Cleland’s contrarian political stance, his “sarcastical” derision of the monarchy. The “no Wonder” Beckwith expresses applies to the contention that “in this Age” such political unorthodoxy can lead to a loss of place, or the strategic circulation of socially damaging rumors. Far from in any straightforward sense “outing” Cleland, Beckwith’s note might instead offer an instance of the ways in which the accusation of sodomy could be deployed as a device to discredit other forms of marginality, as if political and sexual deviation were akin.

In practice, of course, they often are. It is no accident that when he needed a printer for his pamphlet on pederasty, Thomas Cannon approached the accused seditionary John Purser, for Purser had handled dangerous texts, had battled the censors, and might relish (or at least not fear) such a moral provocation. Under the law, seditious, blasphemous, and obscene libel were types of a single crime, all held to be threats to “the peace of the king,” as Attorney General Sir Philip Yorke contended in the trial of the bookseller Edmund Curll in 1728. Moral crimes (sodomy, obscenity) are political crimes, Yorke argued, “for government is no more than public order which is morality.” For that reason, sodomy, the most egregious of all crimes against not only morality but also nature, could stand in figurally for a host of other offenses, from antimonarchism to atheism (of which Cleland also was accused, according to Beckwith), which means that “the Censure of being a Sodomite” might not reflect the intimate or hidden truth of the subject in question but rather act as a kind of libelous shorthand, a way of discrediting or silencing a contrarian voice.

Yet in Cleland’s case, this “Censure” was not just politically expedient or figural but closely bound up with the course of his authorial career. The rumors of sodomy that bedeviled him for much of his life—starting, perhaps, with Cowan’s allusion in Bombay to unspecified “Principles & Practices” that made the young Cleland “unworthy of even my Horsewhip,” and persisting to Cleland’s dying years, as the Beckwith anecdote clearly shows—point to something real. Not that, as things stand, the biographical question of Cleland’s sexual
practices or desires can definitely be answered: lacking a journal of Boswellian candor, one can only make likely inferences from a range of frequently tendentious, ambiguous, multiply voiced texts, his own as well as others. But what I argue in this chapter, in juxtaposed readings of Cleland’s and Cannon’s forever-conjoined first books—Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure and Ancient and Modern Pederasty Investigated and Exemplify’d—is that the texts themselves are sodomitical in precisely the ways that the dominant antisodomite discourses of the period warned readers to beware. They are unnatural, in that they question settled notions of what “nature” is; disruptive, in that they challenge fixed categories of identity; preposterous, in that they elicit and embody “impossible,” absurd desires. Both authors thus explode the moralistic lexicon of antisodomite and anti-molly writing, though they both make canny use of its rhetorical conventions, masking their lubricious and playful depictions as evidence gathered in order to condemn what Cannon calls “the Detested Love.”

Such masking, however, was not actually all that effective, to judge from the harassment and threats of prosecution both authors suffered. If both aimed to disguise their “inflaming” or impassioned accounts of same-sex desire as stringent denunciations, the texts were immediately understood as fanning the very fires they pretended to put out. In that respect, the censorial readings of eighteenth-century moralists are more persuasive than those of some of the Woman of Pleasure’s more recent critics, who argue that the novel represses or condemns the sodomitical or otherwise deviant desires that Fanny narrates.

As for Cannon, the suppression of Ancient and Modern Pederasty has meant that no one, it seems, even saw it between 1750 and 2007. But Cleland’s text, too, was dismembered and suppressed for almost as long, something its recent familiarity tends to make us forget. Despite its clandestine, underground circulation, the Woman of Pleasure was only legally cleared for publication in New York State in 1963, in the rest of the United States in 1966, and (tacitly) in the United Kingdom in 1970. The sodomitical episode I discuss in this chapter was largely unavailable until the publication of the Oxford and Penguin texts, edited by Peter Sabor and Peter Wagner, respectively, in 1985; before then, the scene, if cited at all, was attributed to the little-known sodomitical bookseller Samuel Drybutter (so little known, in fact, that because of his curious name, he was thought by some scholars to be an invented figure). Both Cleland and Cannon, in the midst of their legal travails, expressed the wish that their sodomitical texts might be “buried in Oblivion,” and their wishes were very nearly granted.
Detestable Practices

Virtually every moral commentator on the supposed growth of sodomy in the early to mid-eighteenth century justifies the campaign against it on the basis of the danger it poses to Britain: it is a crime not just against nature but nation. Sodomy may be suited to the unnatural inhabitants of other nations, but it has, or should have, no purchase in Britain. Yet it flourishes, having been “translated,” in the words of one author, “from the Sadomitical [sic] Original, or from the Turkish and Italian Copies into English.” In another text, the figure of transplantation is used in place of translation:

Since that most detestable and unnatural Sin of Sodomy, which but rarely appears in our Histories, and that among Monsters and Prodigies, has been of late transplanted from the hotter Climates to our more temperate Country, and has dared to shew its hideous Face among a People that formerly had it in the utmost Abhorrence; it is now become the indispensable Duty of the Magistrate to attack this horrible Monster in Morality, by a vigorous Exertion of those good Laws, that have justly made that vile Sin a Capital Crime.

But if sodomy is not only unnatural but naturally un-English—if it has always been held in the “utmost Abhorrence” in Britain—what can account for this modern infestation?

Whether transplanted or translated, sodomy is represented in all the anti-sodomite texts as a form of contagion, a plague whose primary mode of transmission is not bodily but cultural. It comes from the East, from Sodom itself by way of Turkey and, almost always, Italy. In some texts it comes uninvited, an insidious and contaminating vice; in others, more commonly, it comes as the bad effect of cross-cultural emulation. This model is implicit in the notion of translation either from an ancient original or “from the Turkish and Italian Copies into English,” and is fully elaborated in the 1749 Reasons for the Growth of Sodomy:

But of all the Customs Effeminacy has produc’d, none more hateful, predominant, and pernicious, than that of the Mens Kissing each other. This Fashion was brought over from Italy, (the Mother and Nurse of Sodomy); where the Master is oftner Intriguing with his Page, than a fair Lady. And not only in that Country, but in France, which copies from them, the Contagion is diversify’d, and the Ladies (in the Nunneries) are criminally amorous of each other, in a Method too gross for Expression.
Kissing is not only repellent in itself (the pamphlet’s author equates it with “slavering” and “slopping”) but is “the first Inlet to the detestable Sin of Sodomy” and thus a vehicle for the corruption of youth. If the custom were abolished, “the Sons of Sodom would lose many Proselytes, in being baffled out of one of their principal Advances; for under Pretence of extraordinary Friendship, they intice unwary Youth from this first Step, to more detestable Practices, taking many Times the Advantage of their Necessities, to decoy them to their Ruin.” As with the broader “translation” of sodomy from the Middle East to Turkey to Italy to England, the mode of transmission within England is emulation: the neophyte imitates the customs he sees and insensibly falls into more “detestable Practices.”

The fashion of men kissing one another, compared to the “more manly, more friendly, and more decent” custom of shaking hands, is a predatory form of initiation or schooling in vice, and the schoolboy often appears in antisodomite texts as a figure of moral vulnerability. Sometimes the threat was from dissolute schoolmasters or tutors: the future attorney general Dudley Ryder, who would later be assigned the prosecution of both Cannon and Cleland, wrote in 1716 that “it is dangerous sending a young man that is beautiful to Oxford.” In other cases the threat came from men who loitered in the vicinity of schools, as in the 1760 trial of Richard Branson, found guilty of attempted sodomy against a “poor scholar” at God’s Gift College in Dulwich. In his summation to the court, the council for the Crown “demonstrated the fatal Consequence of this wicked Attempt”: had Branson “prevailed with this Lad, now Sixteen Years old, to commit this horrid and most detestable Crime, he would have infected all the others; and, as in Course of Years they grew big enough, they would leave the College to go into the World and spread this cursed Poison, while those left behind would be training the Children to the same vitious Practices.” Sodomitical inclination is infectious and irresistible once it gains a foothold; it passes from schoolboy to schoolboy and friend to friend or older to younger, but while transmission involves bodily intimacy, the inclination itself is imitative rather than rooted in bodily anomaly. There’s nothing about this crew of schoolboys that marks them as specially susceptible; the presumption is that, once exposed, every schoolboy is a sodomite.

The notion of universal susceptibility coexists uneasily with an essentializing discourse that configured the sodomite as not only perverse but of a different species or race—from the use of such phrases as “the Sons of Sodom” to the notion of sodomy as a transplant “from the hotter Climates to our more temperate Country.” This unstable mix of tendencies to read sodomy as alien
to or, contrarily, latent in our nature is a notable feature of English eighteenth-century antisodomite writings, whose very incoherence only adds to the anxiety aroused by a propensity both far-reaching and outwardly undetectable.

Cannon’s “Curst Pederasts”

In the text of his indictment of John Purser, printer of Cannon’s *Ancient and Modern Pederasty Investigated and Exemplify’d*, Attorney General Dudley Ryder deploys the full range of antisodomite rhetoric to convey the danger Cannon’s writing poses to the nation—in particular, to the nation’s (male) youth. Purser, he thunders, “being a Person of a Wicked and Depraved Mind and Disposition,” printed the work in order to “Debauch Poison and Infect the Minds of all the Youth of this Kingdom and to Raise Excite and Create in the Minds of all the said Youth most Shocking and Abominable Ideas and Sentiments beneath the Dignity of Humane Nature” (39). As Ryder explains, the mere act of reading such a work not only instills novel and illicit desires in readers’ minds but also inspires them to emulation: it brings them “into a State of Wickedness Lewdness and Brutality and more Especially into the Love and Practice of that unnatural detestable and odious crime of Sodomy” (39–40). As in the case of the Dulwich schoolboys cited above, sodomitical desire is characterized as imitative, infectious, and irresistible: the reader experiences an apparently uncontrollable arousal or excitement and is impelled to enact the perverse desires unleashed by the text, ineluctably drawn into “the Love and Practice” of what Cannon’s work represents. Ryder’s argument, tellingly, is as incoherent as those of other antisodomite screeds, for while it represents all of Cannon’s potential readers as helplessly susceptible to the text’s seductive power, it also describes the “Ideas and Sentiments” that reading “Raise[s] Excite[s] and Create[s]” as “beneath the Dignity of”—contrary to—“Humane Nature,” which the text thus seems able to counteract.

When Ryder presented his case before the Court of King’s Bench in Trinity term (June–July) 1751, the author in question had been out of the country for over a year—“stung,” according to a later statement by his mother, “with the utmost remorse of Conscience at the heinousness of his guilt, and not daring to throw himself upon the Justice of his offended Country, whilst the Memory of his Crime was yet recent.” Once the secretary of state, alerted by Cleland’s jailhouse letter, ordered Ryder to begin legal proceedings against Cannon and his printer in January 1750, Cannon wisely took flight, probably after destroying any copies he had of the work, and remained abroad for three years. The only
copies of the pamphlet known to have survived are two that Newcastle sent to Ryder with the order to prosecute; these would have been needed in order to copy the offending passages into the indictment itself, consistent with the practice in other obscenity cases of the period. These copies may have been kept with the indictment and other documents in the case for a time but at some point were lost, so all of Cannon’s text that does survive does so in the form Ryder’s clerk or clerks transcribed it in the indictment of Purser, whose trial went ahead in 1751 after Ryder decided not to wait any longer for Cannon’s reappearance. The text as presented in the indictment probably comprises the bulk of the original pamphlet, and given its evidentiary role, the transcription would need to have been reliable, although we are necessarily at some remove from the text Cannon saw through the press.

After summarizing the gist of the charge against Purser, for printing Cannon’s “Wicked Lewd Nasty Filthy Bawdy Impious and Obscene Libel” (40), the indictment then gives the first of several excerpts from the original. Cannon frames the text—rather slyly, considering his family’s connections to the church—by contrasting the Christian present to the pagan past: “Among the many Unspeakable Benefits which redound to the World from the Christian Religion, no one makes a more conspicuous Figure than the Demolition of Pederasty. That celebrated Passion, Seal’d by Sensualists, espoused by Philosophers, enshrin’d by Kings, is now exploded with one Accord and Disown’d by the meanest Beggar” (40). The opposition seems orthodox enough, but a certain teasing ambiguity is apparent from the start. Why, for example, are the benefits of Christianity “Unspeakable”? That word seems to allude to the stock description of sodomy as a crime “not to be named among Christians,” as if to invert the relationship between the crime and the religion that condemns it. “Pederasty” itself is almost always conjoined with terms of admiration: in this sentence Cannon calls it a “celebrated Passion” and links it favorably to philosophers and kings, whereas only “the meanest Beggar” disowns it. Even if he claims that it has been “exploded with one Accord,” the sentence nevertheless sets the beggar and those others into separate camps, associating the first with terms of violent destruction (“demolition,” “exploded”) and the second with terms of cultivation and civility (“celebrated,” “espoused,” “enshrin’d”).

Developing this contrast between ancient and modern, Cannon writes that now, “since Fashion discountenances, Law punishes, God forbids, the Detested Love, we may sure discuss it with Freedom, and the most philosophical Exactness . . . free from any Apprehension of exciting in any Breast so preposterous, and Severe-treated an Inclination” (40). In claiming this, he disavows the pos-
ibility that delineating perverse desires might also excite them. Yet when he proceeds to inquire “what Charm then held so many Sages and Emperors, clear Heads and hale Hearts” among the ancients, he slips into a lascivious reverie on the male form that in its sensual extravagance betrays his own arousal as it seeks to arouse the reader:

Inform me, what was that which like a chrysal expanded Lake drew all Mankind to bathe entranc’d in Joys, too mighty every one for our poor Utterance? . . . Was it the Perfection of a gradually lessening Shape? or, you in turn demand, was it the Firmness, yet Delicacy of Masculine Limbs? Hush; the Beauty-engrossing Sex will over-hear us. In Time, was it the more equally close Pressure, a certain Part afforded? (40)

Cannon builds on his initial association of “the Detested Love” with philosophers and kings by affiliating it here with “Sages and Emperors, clear Heads and hale Hearts,” but now there is no one in the antisodomite camp; instead, “all Mankind . . . bathe[s] entranc’d” in unutterable “Joys,” in contrast with which the Christian “Demolition” looks decidedly unalluring. As he will do repeatedly in later passages, Cannon praises male bodies at the expense of female, mocking the latter as “the Beauty-engrossing Sex,” which is represented here as spying on the “us” of his all-male audience. So rhapsodically is the male form described that it is other-sex desire that begins to look perverse and unaccountable.

In the first part of his pamphlet, then, while Cannon makes use of a well-worn authorial gambit—moralistically framing his text as a denunciation of the practices and pleasures he goes on to “investigate” and “exemplify”—his voluptruous language and ironic asides give the game away, so that phrases such as “Detested Love” or “abominable Practice” become themselves objects of ironic deflation. When he writes, “With wond’rous Boast curst Pederasts advance, that Boy-love ever was the top Refinement of most enlighten’d Ages; or, never in Supreme Degree prevail’d where liberal Knowledge had not fix’d his Seat, and banish’d crampsoul Prejudice” (40), the single word “curst” is rhetorically overbalanced by the pederasts’ language of enlightenment, setting “liberal Knowledge” against the “crampsoul Prejudice” that pronounces curses in the first place. Despite the obligatory execrations, there is no mistaking where the author’s sympathies lie: with “polish’d Greece” and “all-subduing Rome” and the “proud Streams of Learning, Taste, and Pederasty” (41) that flowed from one to the other.

Cannon’s rather perfunctory moral posturing is also belied by his editorial
choices. By beginning his anthology of ancient texts with Lucian’s “most witty” dialogues on Ganymede, he signals his real aim of amusing the reader: the two dialogues are “so extremely entertaining, I make no Doubt, they will be with Pleasure accepted” (41). This is why he adapts his sources so freely: “I paraphrase, or, use ancient Writers only as a Basis: If you like what you meet with, is it not enough?” (41). Instead of following through on his earlier claim to examine “the Detested Love” with “philosophical exactness,” he admits here that he aims only at pleasure. An earlier translator of Lucian, Thomas Heywood, prefaced his 1637 version of the Ganymede story with the statement that “Jove’s Masculine love this Fable reprehends.”17 Cannon, by contrast, leaves the moralizing to Jupiter’s jealous wife and luxuriates in the “Masculine love” Jupiter expresses to his shepherd boy. “It shall be my seeking to fire you with fervid Kisses,” he tells Ganymede, “to glue to you my pressing Limbs; to mix, and make one common Essence with you. Mercury, pledge him Immortality in a Cup of Nectar, that invigorated he may meet the nervous Joy. Now and but now, I find myself in Heaven” (43). Moral judgment is beside the point; instead, Cannon lingers over the refined sensuality of Lucian’s scenario, the deliquescence or fluidity of desiring bodies.

After the second of the Lucianic dialogues, the transcription of Cannon’s text is broken into by a drab legal refrain that serves to join one excerpt to the next in the indictment: “And in another part thereof according to the tenour following (to wit),” here followed by a passage that reads like a bawdy snippet from a medical advice column on whether or not it’s acceptable for a man to “mingle” with a pregnant woman. (The answer is no, and the implication is that since this would be a waste in reproductive terms, he might just as well scatter his seed elsewhere.) After this, the refrain, and then an extended passage from Petronius’s *Satyricon*. These shifts in register exemplify the interpretive problems posed by the document as a whole. It is impossible to know how the various fragments quoted in the indictment might have been arranged in the original or how much is missing or, on another level, what principle of selection led to the incorporation of some parts but not others. The effect of a chaotic miscellany is surely more pronounced than it would have been in the original pamphlet, but in any form, it must have been a hodgepodge, with passages from Lucian and Petronius next to one-liners about the Duchess of Cleveland and the Duke of Orleans’s confessor, veering in style from erotic rhapsody to scholarly essay to dirty joke. The three chief narrative sequences—Lucian’s Ganymede, Petronius’s story of Eumolpus and the insatiable boy, and the London-set narrative of Amorio and Hyacinth—are separated by bits of gossip, a report by Lucian of
a philosophical debate on same-sex desire, misogynistic commentaries about Lucian, possibly by Cannon himself, and sniggering schoolboy asides. False endings and passages transcribed twice increase the effect of randomness, and when the legal formulas are repeated toward the end of the document, it is as if the scribe thought he had finished, only to be told to tack on another fragment. But if the text is formally incoherent, so is the category of “pederasty” itself, which assumes a multiplicity of historical and aesthetic shapes over the course of Cannon’s literary meanderings.

The Jupiter-Ganymede and Eumolpus-pupil narratives embody the classic pederastic relationship between a mature male (tutor or god) and a youth whom he initiates into sexuality. The difference in age and maturity corresponds to a difference in power, a difference in sexual role (penetrator versus “pathic,” or catamite) and, at least at the outset, a difference in desire: the older is drawn to the beauty of the younger, whom he designs to ravish or seduce. But, as Cannon notes, the Eumolpus story offers a twist on the traditional pattern: “We commonly conceive the Pathic’s Part disagreeable; But Petronius, whose Experience is hardly questionable, represents him sharing in the accurst Rapture” (45). Eumolpus at first thinks of the boy as a passive object of desire, and over three nights he vows to Venus that if, while the boy sleeps, she allows Eumolpus first to kiss, then touch, then “enjoy” him, he will give the boy a series of more and more extravagant gifts. The reader, however, knows that the boy only feigns sleep. On the second night, Eumolpus relates, “the sweet Youngster hearing what I bid for the Joy, moves Insensibly towards me, afraid, I suppose, of my falling asleep in Reality: But I quickly reassure him, and slide my Hand over his delicious Body: ’till grasping Love’s Bolt, [I] spurt myself away, plunging in a Gulph of unutterable Delight” (45). The next morning, Eumolpus observes on the face of the boy “a new Soul-stealing Desire, raised by my rambling Touches, [which] makes itself felt within and diffuses over him a Strength of Lustre beyond Description” (46). Although he only recognizes it retrospectively, Eumolpus has by this point ceded the dominant desiring role to the boy, who at the story’s comic denouement so wearies his older lover that the latter threatens to tell all to the boy’s father if the boy doesn’t let him sleep.

Playing with the classic pederastic paradigm, Cannon notes the variability of desire and its objects, the way desire can multiply and migrate from one subject to another, unsettling the distinction between active and passive, subject and object, male and female. As if to emphasize this last point, Cannon includes two anecdotes of “pederastic” other-sex desire as commentaries on the Eumolpus narrative. In both, a woman appropriates for herself the role of catamite,
assuming by witty and perverse inclination the place of a subservient boy and thus making a hash of the binarisms presumed to operate in both other-sex and same-sex relations. Taking on the ostensibly passive, or “pathic,” role, she asserts her own authority, assuming the power to dictate to her male lovers the terms of their sexual interactions and to articulate for herself what counts as pleasure. The “rampant Duchess of Cleveland,” in the second anecdote, after what Cannon calls “a usual Bout” (that is, “normal,” nonpederastic sex), “wou’d turn her... Rump to the rapturous Spark [her lover], and say; you have pleas’d yourself; now please me” (47). In doing so, she literally embodies the characterization of sodomitical desire as “preposterous,” in that she turns the body back to front (prae/posterus) and reverses “natural” expectations of who takes pleasure where, and in what actions.

Over the course of the text, the category of pederasty opens up to accommodate a range of nonnormative, upside-down expressions of desire. But even if, in some passages, Cannon allows for a pragmatic distinction between “extraordinary” and “ordinary” desires, he uncouples this from any concomitant belief in a meaningful boundary between the unnatural and the natural. In one later passage an unidentified speaker recounts meeting “an abhorred, and too polish’d Pederast” who, “attack’d upon the Head, that his Desire was unnatural, thus wrestled in Argument; Unnatural Desire is a Contradiction in Terms; downright Nonsense. Desire is an amatory Impulse of the inmost human Parts: Are not they, however constructed, and consequently impelling, Nature?” (54). The Pederast, to be sure, is “abhorr’d,” his rhetoric “too polish’d”; Cannon is careful to observe the posture of moral denunciation. But this posture is only fitfully assumed, whereas with each new episode or anecdote the distinction between natural and unnatural becomes less secure. Rather than referring to a single, insistently hierarchical model of male-male sexual relations, pederasty in Cannon’s incoherent anthology becomes a figure for the undermining or vacuation of fixed categories and roles.

This is nowhere more vivid than in the story of Amorio and Hyacinth, which, fittingly, begins at a masquerade. In this playground of malleable and imaginary selves, the “young and blooming” Amorio is struck by lightning in the form of “a Lady,” who without much need for prompting tells Amorio her “Brief and sorrowful Adventures” (47) as a virtuous Devonshire farm girl seduced by an aristocrat and abandoned by him in London without money or friends. One day, she says, she was accosted by a “genteel Fellow” in Somerset Gardens to whom she told her tale of seduction. The fellow responded “with Transport” and prevailed on her to become his mistress, but he proved a tyrant. She has
resolved to leave him, but “Honour and Justice” require her to stay for the three weeks that remain of the “engag’d Time” for which he has paid her fifty guineas. Still, as her “fondling Tyrant is now in the Country,” her sense of honor is not so restrictive that she cannot invite “the agreeable Amorio” to supper at her chambers. Amorio finds her story “transporting,” as had her tyrant before, and inflamed, in equal parts, by “a delicious Repast, in which yet Elegance prevails over Luxury, inspiring French Wine, and the [Ladies] Face where every Moment a new Charm is quickening,” he carries her to bed, “where Incumbrances quickly off, he finds in his Clasp a Body past Imagination delicate; but of Gender masculine” (49–50).

At this point, the reader’s surprise is likely equal to Amorio’s, but for Cannon this twist is only a prelude:

Surprize invades; yet more predominates Desire; which becomes absolute, when Hyacinth (so let’s name the guilty Boy) mortify’d at the Deliberation, then speaks in a Voice, to which every Melody lends it’s [sic] Aid; My dear Amorio does not enfold a Woman; but one, who more than Woman Grasps, and Binds. Penetrating Love takes the Meaning; and the most libidinous Fire ever felt by our wondring Glower, seizes his panting Frame. He is quickly piloted into a Streight whose potent Cling draws all the Man in clammy streams away. (50)

Amorio is happy to transfer the desire he thought he felt for “a Lady” to another object. Indeed, it seems as if the highest degree of “libidinous Fire” is aroused by the surprise of Hyacinth’s sex as a sort of riddle (“who more than Woman Grasps, and Binds”). In this respect his desire runs parallel to ours as readers: similarly piqued by a surprising turn in the story, we too are drawn further in. “Penetrating Love,” which is both the phallus and the insight gained from desire, allows Amorio to “take the Meaning” of Hyacinth’s riddle, but as he enacts the “pederast” to Hyacinth’s “pathic,” Cannon’s imagery and language reverse their roles, or at any rate the erotic dynamics between them. Hyacinth takes the active verbs (“grasps,” “binds”), while Amorio’s “panting Frame” is emptied of agency, turning him into a sort of dummy. Seized by libidinous fire, “piloted” into Hyacinth’s body, “the Man” is at length drawn away “in clammy streams” by Hyacinth’s “potent Cling.” Amorio’s unmanning is integral to his rapture, and not just at this moment. He has been under Hyacinth’s control from the start, in relation both to her/his performance of the travesty role of “a Lady” and to his/her narrative authority—for it is primarily through narration that Hyacinth exerts his power over Amorio. Casting himself as the distressed heroine of a seduction narrative, Hyacinth seduces Amorio into seeing him both as a suitable
object for compassion and as a kept, and therefore sexually available, woman. Amorio is only the more uncontrollably aroused when he discovers he has been misled in the object of his amorous pursuit.

The riddle that Hyacinth presents—active or passive, desiring or desired, female or male—finds an echo in Amorio’s longing to be taken out of himself, embodied in Cannon’s strange periphrasis for sexual climax: “draws all the Man in clammy streams away.” While the idea of sexual passion as a dissolution of the self is ancient, Cannon makes it new by once again emphasizing the (even literal) fluidity of desire, which allows not just for the dissolution but for the multiplication of selves. Accordingly, the next morning, Amorio, “hugging Hyacinth, crys; Now let me towzle the dear Creature, who so perfectly imitated a Woman. And now Hyacinth says, let me clasp that charming Amorio, who wou’d touch nothing, but a Woman.” Both are now other than they were, or other than they thought they were. We might conclude that Amorio was tricked into pederasty by Hyacinth’s powers of imitation, or perhaps that other-sex desire, for him, was itself an imitation. Either way, the imitation leads to pleasure, which is precisely the danger that Cannon’s pamphlet poses. In its first appearance in the indictment, the Hyacinth-Amorio story ends, charmingly enough, with: “They love away an Hour or two; then rise and recruit with a long Breakfast” (50). But when the later part of the story is repeated some lines later, this is followed by the words “The Lady’s Story is the Subject of much Laughter” and then by the two youths preparing to go out “to Billiards” (56). This curious little coda suggests that the whole “Adventure” (47), not just Hyacinth’s imitation of a lady, has been a piece of playacting, that they have chosen together to put on this comedy whose effect is to refresh desire. This is never spelled out, but their laughter might be read as a sign of their complicity in devising this amorous playlet, and their pleasure in trying on fictional selves. Their story is “pederastic” not according to the classical model, which their actions seem to parody, but by virtue of its confounding of both sexual and narrative conventions—not only that of pederast and pathic, but those of virtue in distress, the country girl corrupted, and the unfaithful mistress. Pederasty, for Cannon, is just this unfixing of sexual and narrative roles in the pursuit of pleasure—primarily, although not exclusively, between men.

In the absence of more information on Cannon and his milieu, it is impossible to know if he had a particular audience in mind, a coterie of known or imagined readers. The pamphlet does read, however, like a gossipy and in some sense group enterprise. Cannon introduces one passage as “an Anecdote, I have heard”; avers that Amorio himself, now an “antiquated Beau . . . who at
this day creeps about St. James’s” (47) told him his story; and writes that he encountered the too-polished Pederast who derided the notion of unnatural desire “in a Company where I happen’d” (54) and where others were arguing the point. None of this may be true, but it evokes a subcultural milieu in which certain stories and texts might be passed from hand to hand as shared jokes, vehicles of seduction, or markers of affiliation.22 If Cannon and Cleland were indeed literary collaborators, they may have been in one another’s coterie or moved in overlapping circles, perhaps centered near their houses in the same district, St. James’s, where the antiquated Amorio crept about. One might even speculate, given the similar emphasis on sexual riddling and indeterminacy in Cleland’s sodomitical writing, that he was the model for Cannon’s creeping Amorio and that “antiquated” is targeted insultingly by the younger writer at the middle-aged Cleland. Neither of the two authors can have been far from one another’s private thoughts in the period when these two texts took their eventual public form.

Young Sparks Romping

However variegated and mutable Cannon’s conception of pederasty may be, everything in his text exemplifies some form of sodomitical practice: unnatural, disruptive, preposterous.23 In that sense, all the passages belong together. The sodomitical scene from Cleland’s Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure, by contrast, strikes many commentators—not least Fanny Hill herself, who narrates it—as anomalous. Of all the licentious scenes Fanny takes part in or observes over the course of her story, this is the only one for which she reserves the language of criminal law, testifying, “All this, so criminal a scene, I had the patience to see to an end, purely that I might gather more facts, and certainty against them in my full design to do their deserts instant justice” (159). It is also, as Kevin Kopelson and Lee Edelman have noted, a singularly destabilizing and disorienting moment for Fanny as narrator, the one scene where she literally loses the plot, for it ends, famously, with Fanny knocked unconscious and so unable to narrate the youths’ escape from her punitive clutches.24 Fanny herself, as Cameron McFarlane has observed, wraps up her report by dismissing the scene as extraneous: “here washing my hands of them, I replunge into the stream of my history” (160).25 Yet as these and other critics have argued, while the episode is in many ways incongruous, striking for all the ways it departs from the portrayals of other-sex desire that dominate the text, its very incongruity throws into relief what Donald Mengay has called its “structural and thematic centrality.”26
Although Fanny presents it as the great exception, the scene in effect sodomizes everything that has come before, transforming normality into its deviant other.

Fanny crosses paths with the sodomites by accident: en route to visit her friend Harriet at Hampton Court, her carriage breaks down, and she is forced to wait for the next stagecoach in a public house. There, from a window, she sees two “young gentlemen, for so they seem’d” alight from a horse chaise, and when they come into the room next to hers, she idly decides to spy on them, prompted, she claims, “without any particular suspicion, or other drift, or view, to see who they were, and examine their persons and behaviour” (156–157). But if the encounter is accidental, Fanny’s curiosity is actually not idle, for she has earlier expressed her bafflement about sodomy to her matronly bawd, Mrs. Cole, asking “how it was possible for mankind to run into a taste, not only universally odious, but absurd, and impossible to gratify” (156). It is only her thirst for a solution to this puzzler that can justify the really quite laborious preparations she has to make in order to keep her eye on the youths: first scrutinizing every inch of the movable partition dividing their rooms to find a “peep-hole,” then “oblige’d to stand on a chair” to reach “a paper-patch of the same colour as the wainscot,” “piercing” this “with the point of a bodkin,” and “post[ing]” herself with her eye to the opening to keep “the light from shining through” and betraying her. Fanny, that is, is looking for sodomy, and Cleland has ensured that the reader is looking for it, too, for this is only the last in a series of scenes in which the narrative moves ever closer to a direct encounter with this odious, absurd, impossible taste.

In the first of these, Fanny, “under the dominion of unappeas’d irritations and desires” provoked by her “wanton” but impotent lover Mr. Norbert, is picked up in the street by a young sailor, “tall, manly-carriag’d, handsome of body and face” (140). Taking her to a nearby tavern, he brings out his “splitter,” which she struggles to accommodate: “I took part of it in too,” she writes, “but still things did not jee to his thorough liking,” so “he leads me to the table, and with a master-hand lays my head down on the edge of it, and with the other canting up my petticoat and shift, bares my naked posteriors to his blind, and furious guide: it forces his way between them, and I feeling pretty sensibly that it was going by the right door, and knocking desperately at the wrong one, I told him of it: ‘Pooh, says he my dear, any port in a storm?’ ” (141). Cleland evokes the familiar association of sodomy and sailors for the sake of a joke, but one of the effects of his substitution of figural language for the “plain words” of other, coarser texts is to pose riddles. Which is the “right door,” which the “wrong one”? One can
take it for granted that the answer is obvious, or that there is an answer, but the sailor’s joke calls such certainties into question. In a passage largely composed of nautical metaphors, the sailor’s remark prefigures Mrs. Cole’s observation a few pages later “that for her part, she consider’d pleasure of one sort or other, as the universal port of destination, and every wind that blew thither a good one” (144): there is no meaningful distinction to be made between one part of the body and another as long as pleasure is served. On the other hand, Fanny’s configuration of the body as a kind of house, with closed doors to be knocked at for admission, insists on a distinction between “right” and “wrong” but leaves us to guess which is which.

Meanwhile, the sailor is arranging things in a way that muddles terms that Fanny seems anxious to keep clear. At first, he bares her breasts with “keenness of gust” and starts to have sex with her face to face, but he soon finds this not “to his thorough liking,” and repositions Fanny so as to block her face and breasts from view, an occlusion emphasized by her use of the word “blind” to describe his “guide” (the blind thus leading the blind). His repositioning introduces an element of indeterminacy: Is the body of which only the naked posteriors are visible female or male? Is the door the right one or the wrong? In this ostensibly other-sex encounter, admission at the wrong door threatens to turn Fanny into a boy, inverting the more familiar pattern of boys’ school, prison, and pirate narratives in which the “pathic” male is feminized by sodomitical penetration. While the caddish Mr. Norbert, interested only in women, is “flimzy” and “wrack’d” and boasts a “machine, which was one of those sizes that slip in and out without being minded” (132, 133), the “manly-carriag’d” sailor with his “splitter” needs to cast Fanny as his Ganymede to get “snug into port” (187), as Fanny later says of herself.

In the second quasi-sodomitical scene, Emily, one of Fanny’s fellow whores, attends a masquerade in the guise of a shepherd boy and is accosted by “a gentleman in a very handsome domino” (154). As Fanny observes of Emily, “Nothing in nature could represent a prettier boy than [she] did,” but Emily fails to realize that the domino “took her really for what she appear’d to be, a smock-fac’d boy” and so assumes “all those addresses to be paid to herself as a woman, which she precisely ow’d to his not thinking her one” (154). Fanny describes this double confusion as a “joke,” and the laugh is on Emily and the domino alike, for both exhibit a confidence in their ability to distinguish natural from unnatural which turns out to be misplaced. Emily fancies that the domino feels natural desire for her as a woman; the domino imagines that she is naturally the boy she appears to be. Both are wrong, but their mistakes
owe as much to the inadequacy of the category of the “natural” as to their inadequacies of judgment. Emily is a better (“prettier”) boy than any produced by nature, while to the charge that his desire is unnatural, the domino might respond, with Cannon’s “too polish’d” pederast, “Desire is an amatory Impulse of the inmost human Parts: Are not they, however constructed, and consequently impelling, Nature?” (54). So it seems, at any rate, as the scene unfolds. For a surprise awaits: “when they were alone together, and her enamorato began to proceed to those extremities which instantly discover the sex . . . no description could paint up to the life, the mixture of pique, confusion, and disappointment, that appear’d in his countenance, which join’d to the mournful exclamation, ‘By heavens a woman!’” (155). The moment is the precise mirror image of that when Amorio discovers Hyacinth to be “of Gender masculine.” Unlike Amorio, however, of whom Cannon writes, “Surprize invades; yet more predominates Desire” (50), the domino is at first put off by his discovery, and it is only when, like the sailor, he positions Emily so as to conceal her natural sex that he can press on, short-circuiting his awareness that she is not the boy she plays.

Yet this, not surprisingly, creates a new problem: as Fanny writes, “He was so fiercely set on a mis-direction, as to give the girl no small alarms for fear of losing a maiden-head she had not dreamt of”—exactly the danger Fanny had to sidestep with the sailor. And Emily’s solution is much the same: “her complaints, and a resistance gentle, but firm, check’d, and brought him to himself again; so that turning his steed’s head, he drove him at length in the right road” (155). In this scene, too, the ostensible “normality” of the encounter is thoroughly undermined by our apprehension that the “right road” of other-sex desire is only a simulacrum: the would-be sodomite can only be “brought to himself again”—by which Fanny actually means the opposite, that is, brought to impersonate a man who desires women—by an imaginary substitution of the boy Emily seems to be for the woman she naturally is, and of the “wrong road” for the right. As Fanny concludes, “His imagination having probably made the most of those resemblances that flatter’d his taste, he got with much ado whip and spur to his journey’s end” (155–156). The domino’s performance of normal masculinity is as flagrant a travesty as Emily’s shepherd-boy getup.

The unnaturalness, in this scene, of “natural” desire fails to register with Fanny when she hears Emily’s report. Instead, she responds, as we have seen, with bafflement, asking “how it was possible . . . to run into a taste, not only universally odious, but absurd, and impossible to gratify.” Or, put another way: how can the impossible be possible? Sodomy, for Fanny, is impossible in that it must violate the limits of the body, “since, according to the notions and experi-
ence I had of things, it was not in nature to force such immense disproportions” (156). Bodily “proportion” is the standard by which the natural and unnatural can be distinguished. But if her logic is clear, this only makes sodomitical desire all the more baffling, as it can never be satisfied. Such is the quandary Fanny aims to clear up, some months later, when she puts her eye to the peephole.

What she sees, at first, is just “my two young sparks romping, and pulling one another about, entirely to my imagination, in frolic, and innocent play” (157). That she thinks of the two as her young sparks might help to explain her outrage when it turns out they only have eyes for each other, but it also might suggest a sense of affinity or likeness, especially given the feminine and sexual connotations of “romp” and “romping” in the period. The elder of the two “sparks,” Fanny guesses, is “towards nineteen, a tall comely young man”; the younger “could not be above seventeen, fair, ruddy, compleatly well made, and to say the truth, a sweet pretty stripling.” (Is it impertinent to recall here that Cleland was “towards nineteen” and Carmichael seventeen when, “on an occasion immaterial to mention,” they came up with the plan of Fanny’s history?) Fanny herself is eighteen, of the same social background as the younger (“a country lad, by his dress”) and, like both of them, still “in the rashness” of youth, as her imprudent escapades, around this time, with the sailor and “Good-natur’d Dick” confirm. Although for the moment they only romp “in frolic, and innocent play,” her close attention to their “comely,” “pretty” looks implies an erotic fascination that both she and the reader may expect will lead, as in many previous scenes, from voyeuristic arousal to rapturous gratification. Yet she has already framed the scene as an “ocular demonstration” of the “infamous passion” she finds it impossible to imagine (156, 159). Nothing sodomitical seems to be happening, but soon “the face of things” alters: “For now the elder began to embrace, to press, to kiss the younger, to put his hands in his bosom, and give such manifest signs of an amorous intention, as made me conclude the other to be a girl in disguise, a mistake that nature kept me in countenance in, for she had certainly made one, when she gave him the male stamp” (157).

With this last, tortuous sentence, Fanny scrambles to make sense of the scene she has so assiduously sought out, putting forward a number of different potential answers to the riddle of sodomy (“How can the impossible be possible?”). Perhaps the younger boy is really “a girl in disguise”: as in the anecdote of Emily at the masquerade, the female’s “natural” sex is concealed behind a false male costume. This would still leave the older boy’s desire ambiguous—does he, like the sailor and the domino, only desire females he can imagine
as male?—but it would allow Fanny to bypass the worrying “impossibility” of sodomy in favor of a game of let’s pretend still anchored in the “natural” intercourse of other-sexed bodies. The answer to the riddle would be that nothing impossible is taking place: what looks like sodomy is not. Yet within this same sentence Fanny advances another, contrary idea: perhaps there is an indeterminacy in nature as to “female” and “male.” As soon as she concludes the younger “to be a girl in disguise,” she reverses course, calling that conclusion “a mistake,” but it is “a mistake that nature kept me in countenance in, for she had certainly made one, when she gave him the male stamp.” What does this mean? Is the “one” that nature has made “a girl” or “a mistake”? The first option seems nonsensical: how could nature have made “a girl” by giving “him” the “male stamp”? Yet this might be thought of as a very similar hypothesis to that offered by the nineteenth-century sexologists who proposed that the male “invert” was effectively a female in a male body. This would not totally solve the riddle, as “immense disproportion” would still be a problem, but it would neutralize the perversion or threat of sodomy by making it really an expression of other-sex desire with some scrambling of body parts. On the other hand, if “one” refers to “a mistake”—so that “nature had certainly made [a mistake] when she gave him the male stamp”—the sentence is perhaps even more puzzling, for what other stamp could she have given “him”? It would be hard to be more ambiguously sexed than this sentence makes the young lad, whose gender indeterminacy is not deplored as unnatural but explicitly attributed to nature, thus subverting the typical appeal to “the natural” as the standard by which sodomy was condemned. By this logic, the solution to the riddle is that the impossible is not impossible—just a cock-up, so to speak, of nature on an off day.

Nevertheless, whatever the origin of sodomitical desire might be, the problem of bodily disproportion persists, and so Fanny remains with her eye to the peephole. As the older spark begins to undress the younger, she describes their bodies and gestures with a closeness we may read as forensic or desiring (or of course both). There were a number of sodomy trial reports in circulation in the 1740s in which the witnesses’ testimony prefigures key elements of Fanny’s account. In the trial of Richard Manning and John Davis from 1745, for instance, one witness, an innkeeper’s wife, testifies, “There is a wainscot partition between the 2 rooms [her own bedroom and one adjoining], about 5 feet high, and the rest is glass, and a curtain to part of it. I looked through the glass, and saw them sitting facing one another with their knees jammed in together . . . Then I looked through a thin curtain and saw them kissing one another. A little after I looked in again, and saw Manning’s hand in Davis’s breeches . . .
I looked again, and saw them acting as man and woman.” The witness, like Fanny, has first to explain how she gained visual access to the scene and then report what she saw in coherent narrative sequence in order to secure conviction. A similar partition played a role in the 1722 trial of John Dicks (reprinted in the widely circulated Select Trials of 1742), in which the key witness states that “I saw the Prisoner and the Boy come in together, and go into an Apartment by themselves. There was but a thin Partition between them and me . . . I look’d thro’ a Slit in the Partition. I saw the Prisoner in the very Act of Sodomy, making several Motions with his Body, and then I saw him withdraw his Yard from the Boy’s Fundament.” In this case, the witness and an unnamed “Woman, who was in the same Room with me,” act as agents of the police in precisely the way Fanny attempts: “It was not long before [Dicks] began to repeat his unnatural Leudness; and then the Woman, who had been peeping all the while, cry’d out, I can look no longer,—I am ready to swoon—He’ll ruin the Boy! We both rushed in and seized the Prisoner, as he lay upon the Boy’s Backside.” Fanny’s case, of course, ends calamitously for her but well for the sparks, who, “alarm’d, I suppose, by the noise of my fall”—for in her attempt to seize the miscreants she trips on a nail, knocking herself out—“had more than the necessary time to make a safe retreat” (159).

But if Fanny emulates these witnesses in her forensic attention to the details needed for legal prosecution—averring, in a passage cited before, that she was able to keep watching “purely that I might gather more facts” (159)—the language of her report also reveals a rather breathless erotic attraction. So when the older lad begins “playing” with the “white shaft, middle-siz’d, and scarce fledg’d” of the younger, she observes that this was “all receiv’d by the boy without other opposition, than certain wayward coynesses, ten times more alluring than repulsive” (158). In a later passage, Fanny writes that as with one hand the older “diverted himself” with the younger’s “red-topt ivory toy,” with the other “he wanton’d with his hair, and leaning forward over his back, drew his face, from which the boy shook the loose curls that fell over it, in the posture he stood him in, and brought him towards his, so as to receive a long-breath’d kiss” (159). As with Cannon’s sexual descriptions, Cleland’s “lusicious pen . . . describes the thing so feelingly,” in the words of a 1767 satire, as to solicit the reader’s arousal, too. Of course the language of erotic arousal alternates with the language of moral condemnation, as when Fanny writes, of the older youth’s “engine,” that it “certainly deserv’d to be put to a better use,” but her sniffy disapproval is quite complexly enmeshed with other, more ambiguous discursive threads. In this passage, for example, after declaring that the “engine . . . deserv’d to be put to a
better use,” she proceeds to assert that it was “very fit to confirm me in my dis-
belief of the possibility of things being push’d to odious extremities, which I had 
built on the disproportion of parts” (158). Not only is there a hint of personal 
jealousy in her reproach—picked up on later by Mrs. Cole when she complains 
that sodomites “take something more precious than bread” from the “mouths” 
of “woman-kind” (159)—but she connects her repudiation of sodomy as “odi-
ous” to her belief in its impossibility owing to the necessary “disproportion of 
parts.” Yet as the scene plays out, this belief is exploded, from two different 
angles.

First, the two sparks demonstrate pretty unmistakably that their desire is 
anything but “impossible to gratify.” When the older “introduces” his “instru-
ment” into the younger, she writes that “the first streights of entrance being 
pretty well got through, every thing seem’d to move, and go pretty currently on, 
as in a carpet-road, without much rub, or resistance” (158). There is no sense 
of struggle or difficulty; even her characterization of “the writhing, twisting, and 
soft murmur’d complaints of the young sufferer” is far gentler than her usually 
violent reports of her own sexual response. Second, even if there is some valid-
ity to Fanny’s belief that “it was not in nature to force such immense dispropor-
tions,” in asserting this she actually subsumes all desire under the heading of 
sodomy. For immense disproportion has been, from the beginning, the keynote 
of her representation of other-sex desire as well: the more immense, the more 
strongly desired. The novel’s first scene of sexual intercourse is witnessed 
by Fanny through a partition very much like the one in the Manning-Davis 
sodomy trial, so that “seeing every thing minutely, I could not myself be seen” 
(24). Initiating the pattern of voyeuristic arousal that runs through the text and 
culminates in the sodomite episode, Fanny in her “dark closet” feels “every vein 
of my body circulate liquid fires” (25) as she watches. But afterward, asked for 
her reaction to the spectacle, she tells her bedmate Phoebe that “having very cu-
riously and attentively compared the size of that enormous machine, which did 
not appear, at least to my fearful imagination, less than my wrist, and at least 
three of my handfuls long, to that of the tender, small part of me which was 
framed to receive it, I could not conceive its being possible to afford it entrance 
there, without dying” (27). And this inconceivability, articulated in almost the 
same terms as in her diatribe against sodomy, remains a constitutive part of her 
experience of desire as such.

When, for example, she first undresses the “clever-limb’d” young footman 
Will (second only to Charles as an object of sexual pleasure), she beholds “with 
 wonder and surprize, what? not the play-thing of a boy, not the weapon of a
man, but a may-pole of so enormous a standard, that had proportions been observ’d, it must have belong’d to a young giant . . . and it now fell to my lot to stand his first trial of it, if I could resolve to run the risques of its disproportion to that tender part of me, which such an over-siz’d machine was very fit to lay in ruins” (70, 72–73). If immense disproportion is the mark of the unnatural, Fanny’s accounts of other-sex desire repeatedly denaturalize it, recast it as another kind of sodomy.36 And this is the case not only when she explicitly refers to disproportion but also when she makes figural use of the lexicon of violence. Will’s “machine” is “very fit to lay [her] in ruins”; Charles is “the sweet . . . murderer of my virginity” (41); the sailor penetrates her with a “splitter”; Fanny’s friend Louisa, in their escapade with Good-natur’d Dick, is “torn, split, wounded . . . she was tied to the stake, and oblig’d to fight the match out, if she died for it” (164). This current of violence in the novel may be disturbing or comically exaggerated or both, but the one thing it’s not is literal. The desiring body is pushed to its limits, or in some sense beyond, but Louisa is not actually tied to the stake, nor is Fanny murdered or split. Instead, death, ruin, and agony are figures that Fanny deploys to convey the extremity of her own or another’s sensations of pleasure, just beyond what can “naturally” be borne. So when she first experiences sexual pleasure with Charles, she bursts out, “What floods of bliss! what melting transports! what agonies of delight! too fierce, too mighty for nature to sustain” (43). Desire and delight are out of proportion to the body through which they’re felt; other-sex desire is as unnatural as sodomy, indeed is a form of it.37 Hence Fanny’s “burning . . . with rage, and indignation” (159) after she spies on the scene that she has, after all, taken some pains to see. In confounding any distinction between natural and unnatural, possible and impossible desires, the “young sparks romping” in the next room have made a mockery of the moralistic pretensions that, incongruously enough, structure her narration.

The Mount-Pleasants of Rome

Like Fanny’s sailor and Emily’s gentleman in a domino, the older of the two sparks positions the younger to face away from him, with his head against the back of a chair, so that “slipping then aside the young lad’s shirt, and tucking it up under his cloaths behind, he shew’d to the open air, those globular, fleshy eminences that compose the mount-pleasants of Rome, and which now, with all the narrow vale that intersects them, stood display’d, and expos’d to his attack” (158). Here, too, the effect is to introduce a degree of sexual indeterminacy.
(is the body thus displayed male or female?)—an effect underlined by Fanny’s periphrasis for the young lad’s buttocks, “the mount-pleasants of Rome.” She has once referred to her own mons veneris as a “mount-pleasant,” when Phoebe first explores her body with “lascivious touches” (11) in the novel’s early pages. In returning to (almost) the same phrase—which is synonymous with the name Fanny Hill itself—Cleland draws attention to the likeness between Fanny and the lad at the same time that he emphasizes the shift from front to back of the body. If Fanny’s name is in one way a joke at her expense—a reduction of her self to her sex, so that she is nothing that is not sexual corporeality—in another way it just affirms the primacy of the body as a source of pleasure, the centrality of eros to her experience of the world. In that sense, the movement of the mount-pleasant from Fanny’s front to the lad’s rear, while it can be read as simply a way of feminizing him, and thus reinforcing his role as the older lad’s catamite or “Ganymede” (158), also forms part of a larger pattern in the novel of unsexing the body—that is, unmooring it from a single sexual identity, male or female, to reconfigure it as an unfixed, polymorphous locus of desire, one’s own as well as others.

Migrating from Fanny to the lad, from female to male, from front to back, Cleland’s “mount-pleasants” embody the variability and multiplicity of desire, its openness to transformation and substitution—as the domino and the sailor have already shown with their artful construction of the tableaus that allow each to get to “his journey’s end.” That the lad’s are “the mount-pleasants of Rome” alludes both to the Latin origins of the phrase itself and to the hackneyed antisodomite claim, cited earlier, that Italy is “the Mother and Nurse of Sodomy.” Fanny’s (and of course Cleland’s) increasing emphasis in the novel’s second volume on “naked posteriours” (141)—in the scenes discussed here as well as the extended episode in which Fanny whips Mr. Barvile’s “pair of chubby, smooth-cheek’d, and passing white posteriours” (146) and has her own flogged in turn, leading to “such violent, yet pleasingly irksome sensations . . . that I scarce knew how to contain myself” (151)—points to an increasing, if wary, fascination with sexual “inversion” as well as with indeterminate or ambiguous bodies. None is more ambiguous, as I’ve already argued, than that of the younger lad, most vividly when the older boy takes hold of the younger’s “red-topt ivory toy, that stood perfectly stiff, and shewed, that if he was like his mother behind, he was like his father before” (158). Like his mother, like his father: he is in one sense both, in another sense neither. He is also like the pupil in Cannon’s version of Petronius, who, far from finding “the Pathic’s Part disagreeable,” shares (and then some) “in the accurst Rapture” (45). Neither biological sex nor positions of
pleasure are fixed; the body, at least to the desiring imagination, is plurally and malleably sexed.40

Perhaps Fanny’s subsequent pratfall and lapse into unconsciousness are produced by the shock of this moment. But the figure of the body unsexed by desire continues to haunt her, even in the novel’s climactic scene, when she is reunited with the long-lost Charles. As they reach the culminating moment of rapture, she writes, he “took me so much out of my own possession, whilst he seem’d himself so much in mine, that in a delicious enthusiasm I imagin’d such a transfusion of heart and spirit, as that coagulating, and making one body and soul with him, I was him, and he, me” (184). Fanny here imagines a wholesale transfusion of bodies, impossibly both a merging and an exchange of selves, such that neither of them retains any marks of a specific, separate, individual sexual identity. Once is not enough, though, and soon after, “we play’d over-again the same opera” (185). This time, the only way she can express what she experiences is to reconfigure Charles himself as female, “lavish of his stores, and pleasure-milk’d,” his “instrument of pleasure” imagined as “the nipple of Love,” which she “thirstily draws and drains”—likening herself to “infants at the breast . . . extract[ing] the milky stream prepar’d for their nourishment.” The conceit is comically outrageous, but fittingly brings to a close the motif of sexual reversibility or lability by showing this to be integral to even the most “conventional” of other-sex relationships.41 Fanny and Charles are no less engaged in a “project of preposterous pleasure” (157) than the lads in the next room, for eros turns the body topsy-turvy.

When Fanny, back home, tells Mrs. Cole about her sodomitical misadventure, the latter tries to reaffirm her faith in an impermeable border separating the deviant from the normal, declaring, “whatever effect this infamous passion had in other ages, and other countries, it seem’d a peculiar blessing on our air and climate, that there was a plague-spot visibly imprinted on all that are tainted with it” (159). But all the evidence Fanny has amassed from her own and others’ observations belies this: nothing marks the sodomites out, any more than the Dulwich schoolboys in danger of imitative “infection.”42 There is no bodily imprint by which the sodomite can be known and cordonned off.43 Indeed there is nothing to distinguish the lads in the next room from the two youths, Will and Charles, who are the objects of Fanny’s most lustful gaze, and who are consistently portrayed as desirable precisely for their androgynous beauty. Charles is first labeled, like the younger sodomite, “a fair stripling” (34), and Fanny’s descriptive blazon, while referring to his “manly graces,” lingers over features most often treated as feminine: “his eyes closed in sleep, displayed
the meeting edges of their lids beautifully bordered with long eye-lashes, over which no pencil could have describ’d two more regular arches than those that grac’d his fore-head, which was high, perfectly white and smooth; then a pair of vermillion lips, pouting, and swelling to the touch, as if a bee had freshly stung them” (35)—and so, adoringly, on. Will is singled out for “his maiden bashfulness (for such it seem’d, and really was)” —an odd parenthesis that turns him into a girl—and even his “may-pole” is feminized, as Fanny recalls “its skin, whose smooth polish, and velvet-softness, might vye with that of the most delicate of our sex” (72). In another paean to Charles, she writes, “Think of a face without a fault, glowing with all the opening bloom, and vernal freshness of an age, in which beauty is of either sex” (44), so representing him as another Ganymede (as she calls the younger sodomite), and even, I would say, as one of those “unsex’d male-misses” (160) that Mrs. Cole deplores.44

This phrase comes at the end of her tirade to Fanny, in which she insists that sodomites “were scarce less execrable than ridiculous in their monstrous inconsistency, of loathing and contemning women, and all at the same time, apeing their manners, airs, lisp, skuttle, and, in general, all their little modes of affectation” (160). Again, none of the sodomites we have seen fit this bill, and Mrs. Cole seems here to be conflating two quite distinct eighteenth-century types: the “fribble,” an effeminate, more or less asexual fop, and the sexually desiring sodomite proper with whom Fanny struggles to come to terms.45 The first of these types is “unsex’d” in the sense of impotent or sexless, lacking desire; the second, by contrast, in the sense of desiring with such ardor that the body is transformed. The younger sodomite is an unsex’d male-miss in this latter sense, “perfectly stiff” but at the same time androgynous: “like his mother behind . . . like his father before.” Will and Charles are similarly polymorphous, their awesome phalluses fantastically, perversely feminized, and their “beauty . . . of either sex.” Nothing, really, accounts for their not being sodomites themselves except that they have never been schooled in the practice.

For as Fanny demonstrates in her memoirs, and as Cleland would go on to contend in a number of later works, all desire is an effect of imitation, voyeuristically aroused and then acted out. Fanny, as a novice in Mrs. Brown’s brothel, is first exposed to the “luscious talk” of the other girls, which “highly provok’d an itch of florid warm-spirited blood through every vein” (23); her “bed-fellow” Phoebe next “artfully whetted” her curiosity and “explain’d to me all the mysteries of Venus”; but the decisive step in the creation of desire is her voyeuristic observation of two sexual encounters. “From that instant,” she writes, “adieu all fears of what man could do unto me”—that is, the fears inspired by dispro-
portion—“they were now changed into such ardent desires, such ungovernable longings, that I could have pull’d the first of that sex that should present himself, by the sleeve, and offered him the bauble” of her virginity (31–32). And in fact this is precisely what she does, for the next man she sees is Charles. Nor does the two-step process of arousal followed by imitation end here, as is shown, for example, in the long opening sequence of the novel’s second volume, Fanny’s “ceremonial of initiation” (95) at Mrs. Cole’s, at which she first listens to each of the other girls tell the story of her first sexual experience, then watches each in turn have sex with one of four “young gentlemen” (95) Mrs. Cole has provided for the purpose, and finally has sex with her own “particular-elect” (120). “Now,” she writes, “all the impressions of burning desire, from the lively scenes I had been spectatress of . . . throb’d and agitated me with insupportable irritations: I perfectly fever’d and madden’d with their excess: I did not now enjoy a calm of reason enough to perceive, but I, extatically indeed! felt the policy and power of such rare and exquisite provocatives as the examples of the night had proved towards thus exalting our pleasures” (123). Desire is never original, always an imitation—which is not to say inauthentic or ungenuine, but learned from what we hear and see.

Reading too is a sort of voyeurism, exposing us to otherwise unsuspected behaviors and desires and so prompting us to enact them. Such at any rate was Dudley Ryder’s concern in the indictment of Thomas Cannon’s printer: what we observe or read has the power to “Debauch Poison and Infect the Minds of all the Youth of this Kingdom and to Raise Excite and Create in the Minds of all the said Youth most Shocking and Abominable Ideas and Sentiments” (39). This is why Fanny’s argument that “all young men” should be taught the dangerous “snares” of sodomy just as she was (158)—that is, by spying on (or reading about) other comely young men having sex—is such a snare itself. She calls for suppressing immorality by pornographically multiplying its representations. But such a strategy, as her own example illustrates, would only engender new legions of sodomites. Perhaps this was Cleland’s intention; certainly it is what his and Cannon’s would-be prosecutors accused them of intending, and explains why they sought to suppress their books. Reading infects the soul.

**Luscious Pens**

As things turned out, neither Cannon nor Cleland was ever prosecuted. When the legal machinery against him was set in motion, Cannon, as I’ve mentioned, disappeared. According to John Ibbutt, who in June 1750 had been sent to serve
notice to Cannon’s bails that he had been summoned to court the following week, when he went to “the late Dwelling House of Mrs Cannon Mother of abovename Defendant in Delahaye Street Westminster,” he found the house shut up and Elizabeth Cannon “retired with her family into the Country.” But Thomas, the neighbors told him, “went beyond Sea sometime since and still continues there.” He spent three years abroad “and then returned to England,” as his mother later stated when she sought pardon for him, “partly constrained by Necessity (having neither property nor any other means of Subsisting himself) but principally in order to make the only Atonement in his power to the Publick, by Printing and Publishing his Retraction or Recantation.”

This retraction, long supposed lost, was recently found, “prefix’d” to a rare text published in 1753, A Treatise on Charity, which is credited on its title page to “Mr. Cannon.” John Purser, of course, was tried for having printed the text, found guilty during Trinity term 1751, and sentenced to be fined, imprisoned for one month, and pilloried at Charing Cross and the Royal Exchange. He was also required to provide security for good behavior for a period of seven years. According to a note added to the register, Purser was afterward pardoned and “the Rule was never drawn up,” that is, the sentence was never fully carried out, though he may have served part of it. Cannon, at the time of his mother’s petition for pardon (ca. 1755), was said by her to be living “the most recluse life at Windsor” with her and his sisters, “abstracted from Society, and almost wholly dedicated to Religious Offices,” his cleric father’s son at last. In his premature and “indigent” retirement, according to Elizabeth, he looked ahead to “a future course of Life Expressive of his utter abhorrence and detestation of the Principles which have unhappily fallen from his Pen but never yet descended into his heart.”

Cleland, meanwhile, although arrested and examined, managed to avoid prosecution, but it is unclear how or why, as the secretary of state did convey “Directions to prosecute” to the attorney general on more than one occasion, both for the Woman of Pleasure and for its expurgated 1750 abridgement, the Memoirs of Fanny Hill. Cleland’s obituarist, John Nichols, circulated the unlikely story that “for this publication he was called before the Privy Council; and the circumstances of his distress being known, as well as his being a man of some parts, John Earl Granville, the then president, nobly rescued him from the like temptation [that is, of writing an obscene work for money] by getting him a pension of £100 a year, which he enjoyed to his death.” Cleland evidently did enjoy a government pension for some or much of his life—although he told Josiah Beckwith it was for £200 and was taken away “on Account of his
Publications” (but which? and when?)—but this would have been for what he did write (such as progovernment articles), not for what he didn’t. In any case, both he and Griffiths must have decided that the sodomitical material of the first edition was too dangerous, and it was severely cut back in later editions, all of which retain the seven paragraphs in which Fanny leads up to the scene but omit the two long paragraphs in which the lads undress and actually have sex, bringing the curtain down, in effect, after Fanny writes, “They now proceeded to such lengths as soon satisfied me, what they were” (158). The abridged text adds, “And O! what a shocking scene ensued,” but when the curtain rises again, the action (whatever the reader may imagine it to have been) is over. Cleland was careful in the abridgment to expunge every teasing sodomitical hint from the earlier scenes as well: in it, the sailor does not knock at the wrong door, turn Fanny back to front, or say “any port in a storm,” while the gentleman in a domino, although labeled “an old S——te” in the chapter heading, does not go through any of the substitutions and repositionings that allow him to turn Emily into the boy she imitates, instead leaving her with “a confus’d apology” when he discovers her sex.

So while Cannon and Cleland were both able to avoid prosecution, the heavy-handed censorial machinery of arrests, interrogations, and threats did lead to the suppression of what was evidently seen as most disruptive or ambiguously enticing in their texts—which in Cannon’s case amounted to the whole of it, in Cleland’s just to those passages in which the antisodomite surface was troubled by insinuations of sexual dissidence or laughter. The absence of the two explicit paragraphs from all but one (the first) of the novel’s early editions led to speculation in later years that those paragraphs were someone else’s work: specifically, in the most influential of such speculations, the work of Samuel Drybutter, a shopkeeper, sometime bookseller, and accused sodomite who was also, it turns out, a friend, or at least a friend of a friend, of Cleland. It was the bibliographer Henry G. Bohn who in 1864 wrote that after the novel first appeared “the language was considerably altered for the worse by Drybutter, the bookseller, who was punished for it by being put in the pillory in 1757.”

Drybutter’s curious name and comparative obscurity led a number of scholars to conclude that there was no such person, but in 1992, Rictor Norton established not only that he was real but also that he was a friend of the playwright and actor Samuel Foote, a longtime friend of Cleland’s who was himself later accused (and acquitted) of sodomy. Whether Drybutter, Foote, and Cleland were part of a sodomitical or otherwise suspect coterie is impossible, without further evidence, to know, just as it is impossible to verify that there was a 1757
edition of Cleland’s novel including the suppressed paragraphs or that Drybut-
ter was pilloried for it. But it is quite interesting that Drybutter, who was used, 
after Bohn’s attribution, to distance Cleland from the taint of sodomitical incli-
nations by acting as the fall guy for the text’s most incriminating passage, now 
connects Cleland, albeit indirectly, to a largely hidden sodomitical demimonde, 
leaving some support to the rumors of sodomy reported by Beckwith in 1781.

Shorn of its most daring passage, Cleland’s work nevertheless continued to 
be scourged by moralists and sought out by immoral readers (the unexpurgated 
text was far more popular than the expurgated). In a satirical Lucianic dialogue 
of 1767, The Sale of Authors, attributed to Archibald Campbell, “Mr. Cl——d” is 
portrayed as a figure who “haunts” the bawdy houses and bagnios of London to 
enjoy the company of “fine jolly, buxom, Wenches.” The premise of the dia-
logue is that Apollo and Mercury are discussing various contemporary authors 
whom they can put up for sale to customers in a kind of mock slave auction. 
Apollo asks Mercury if he has “any Authors in your Collection . . . who instead 
of being praised and rewarded for their works, deserve to be hanged for them. 
I mean such Authors as inflame the passions of mankind, and stimulate them 
to vice, lewdness and debauchery; or instruct them in Arts and practices not 
only pernicious and destructive to themselves, but to society in general” (130). 
Such authors are the most likely to fetch a good price. Cleland’s name comes 
up, linked to that of “Mr Harris the Pimp,” author of The Man of Pleasure’s 
Kalendar, a guide to London’s prostitutes. Cleland has already, as it happens, 
been “bespoke” by “a worthy and pious Lady” (131), but a group of “Bucks and 
Bloods” want to buy Cleland and Harris together—for, in Apollo’s words, “after 
the one has raised and inflamed their passions, they will be obliged to consult 
the other how to gratify and allay them” (132). So far, so conventionally bawdy, 
but the young male “Bucks and Bloods” put it rather differently. Fired up by his 
writing, they paint Cleland as “our most curious and delicious author” (142), 
whose body they want for themselves: “C——d,” they declare, “has a most lus-
cious pen, he possesses infinite Powers, he describes the thing so feelingly: in 
short, we must have him and will give you any money for him” (139). It is as if 
Cleland, by whoring and writing about whores, becomes a whore himself, and 
an object of sodomitical desire to his male readers.

If Cleland’s “luscious pen” can transform him into one of the whores he 
portrays, or his hot-blooded readers into sodomites, the moralists and censors 
had good reason to warn against the dangers of unrestricted publication. It may 
be that Cannon’s writing posed a still greater potential threat, for Cannon is far 
more interested than Cleland in the subjective experience of desire and even
love between men, and unlike Cleland’s voyeuristically observed youths in the next room, Cannon’s “pederasts” speak feelingly of their desires and in spirited defense of their practice. After his brief moment of notoriety and his pained public retraction, he seems, as his mother wrote, to have lived a “most recluse life.” I have only found one other trace of him—if it is him—from 1779 or 1780, around the time of Beckwith’s visit to Cleland. In the autobiographical Life of the radical playwright, actor, and novelist Thomas Holcroft, Holcroft’s friend, the musician William Shield, ventures one day into a “dark, dirty-looking” cookshop in an alley off St. Martin’s Lane called Porridge Island—“a mean street,” according to Hester Thrale Piozzi, “filled with cook-shops for the convenience of the poorer inhabitants.” There he meets “a grave, elderly looking man” presiding at the head of a table at which “philosophy, religion, politics, poetry, and belles letters were talked of, and in such a manner, as to shew that every person there was familiar with such subjects, and that they formed the ordinary topics of conversation” (208). The elderly man turns to Shield, “telling him that he seemed a young man, and by his countenance shewed some grace,” and urging him not to mind the “rather free turn” the conversation sometimes takes (208–209). The person “who thus assumed the office of a censor” is named Cannon, said to be “the son of an Irish bishop” (209). Shield is “so much amused with this old gentleman” that he tells Holcroft about him, and with a couple of other friends they form what they call “The Cannonian Society,” even though Cannon is “rather tenacious of his opinions, and impatient of contradiction” and frequently argues with the outspoken Holcroft (210–211).

This Cannon, to whom Holcroft never assigns a first name, “was a man of letters, and had traveled. He spoke a very florid language, full of epithets and compound words, and professed to be engaged in an edition of Tibullus” (210). Albius Tibullus, who died young in 19 BCE (the same year as Virgil), was one of the greatest Latin elegists, his work addressed both to male and female lovers. No extant edition has been attributed to Cannon, Thomas or otherwise, but it is not hard to imagine that the same “man of letters” who in his late twenties produced “spirited” English versions of Petronius and Lucian might at sixty still pursue an amateur interest in classical erotic writing, especially the work of an author concerned with the lability and changeability of desire. As to “very florid” language, the phrase calls to mind the sinuous, ornamental style of Ancient and Modern Pederasty: “when polish’d Greece bow’d her once laurell’d Head to all-subduing Rome” (40–41); “the all-surpassing Beauty of my Host’s son” (45); “Love-inspiring Goddess, by thy heart-bowing Divinity I swear” (45); “the Star-glowing Sky” (46); “the dissolving lovely Dissolver” (46); “Nature with
wonder-working Hand” (47); “the joy-ravishing Amorio” (47); “this bank-scorn-
ing Torrent” (48); “with forceful Tears, and heart-bled Sobs, I vent the high
swoln Passion” (57); or, in the last words preserved of the original, “I, a Mortal,
thus extacy’d begin to know the closing Dissolution” (58). This final phrase,
in which sexual pleasure foreshadows the “dissolution” of the self in death, is
from the younger Cannon’s version of a passage from Petronius, “one of the
finest Raptures,” as he wrote then, “ever pour’d from mouth” (58). It can stand
here as the last word both of the younger Cannon, whose life was turned upside
down by his spirited pamphlet, and of the elder, with his affectionate interest in
the graceful-countenanced young William Shield. Despite Elizabeth Cannon’s
well-meaning denials, it seems that the “Principles” which had “fallen” from
Cannon’s “Pen” had also, perhaps not “unhappily” for him, “descended into his
heart.”