Fanny Hill in Bombay

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In form, the Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure is an uneasy hybrid of two common types of eighteenth-century narrative: the fictional autobiography and the novel in letters. Its hybridity is uneasy because it apes the format of both narrative genres without fulfilling the expectations usual to either. It deviates from the conventions of “epistolary verisimilitude”—the illusion of a plausibly motivated, real-seeming correspondence—and the effects of emotional or temporal immediacy that had come to define the novel in letters as practiced by Aphra Behn and (recently and decisively) Samuel Richardson, and Cleland leaves unexplored the potential play or clash of contesting voices that Richardson had orchestrated so effectively in Clarissa (published 1747–1748). For Richardson, the essential “Nature of Familiar Letters” is that they are “written, as it were, to the Moment, while the Heart is agitated by Hopes and Fears, on Events undecided”; but this link between temporal open-endedness and affective intensity is disregarded in Cleland’s text, whose events are narrated by an older Fanny from a perspective of sheltered “ease and affluence” (1). Cleland did later write an epistolary novel in a more Richardsonian vein, The Woman of Honor (1768), but the Woman of Pleasure largely bypasses or ignores the techni-
cal and expressive possibilities of epistolary fiction that Richardson, Behn, and others had opened up.

Similarly, while Cleland’s first novel exhibits the retrospective form and end-driven claims to meaning typical of eighteenth-century autobiography—as when Fanny, at the outset, promises to “recall to view those scandalous stages of my life, out of which I emerg’d at length, to the enjoyment of every blessing in the power of love, health, and fortune to bestow” (1)—those moral claims are so relentlessly pummeled by Fanny’s unintended and ridiculous double entendres that her pretended structure of meaning collapses into burlesque. This is especially glaring in her concluding moral reflections, in which, lying in “the bosom of virtue,” she writes: “Looking back on the course of vice, I had run, and comparing its infamous blandishments with the infinitely superior joys of innocence, I could not help pitying, even in point of taste, those who, immers’d in a gross sensuality, are insensible to the so delicate charms of virtue, than which even pleasure has not a greater friend, nor than vice a greater enemy” (187). The view she espouses here is similar to that offered by Cleland himself in a number of other texts, but Fanny seems to be unaware of the ways in which the very language she deploys casts doubt on her smug moral distinctions. In such phrases as “the bosom of virtue” and “this tail-piece of morality” (as she labels this summing-up) her words insist on the bawdy second meanings she seems not to notice, as has been true from the novel’s very first page. There, Fanny writes, “Truth! stark naked truth, is the word, and I will not so much as take the pains to bestow the strip of a gauze-wrapper on it, but paint situations such as they actually rose to me in nature”; and as she continues in this half-knowing, half-oblivious vein of obscene double meaning, Cleland does not so much hold her up to ridicule as underline the inescapable ambiguity of all first-person accounts, with their mixture of insight and blindness, authenticity and self-deceit.

By simultaneously adopting and dismantling these familiar novelistic forms in his own first novel, Cleland was acting as both practitioner and critic; he thus exemplifies the degree to which, at least in the mid-eighteenth century, to write a novel was in itself to engage in a critique of the still-emerging genre (or ragbag of genres, as it may better be described). Although he evidently worked on some version of the Woman of Pleasure as early as 1730 and continued to write fiction into the late 1760s, Cleland’s most intense period of engagement with contemporary debates over the aims and effects of fiction was from 1748 to 1752, during which period he wrote his two most successful novels—Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure and Memoirs of a Coxcomb (1751)—reviewed fiction for Ralph
Griffiths’s _Monthly Review_, and translated an important French libertine novel, Charles Pinot-Duclos’s _Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire des moeurs du XVIIIe siècle_ (1751), the third of the three memoirs on which I focus in this chapter. These _Mémoires_ were published in English as the second of a two-volume set, titled _Memoirs Illustrating the Manners of the Present Age_, whose first volume consisted of Pinot-Duclos’s _Considérations sur les moeurs de ce siècle_ (Observations on the Manners of the Present Age), a collection of moral reflections, not translated by Cleland.\(^4\) Pinot-Duclos’s novel was written as a sequel and narrative fleshing-out of the “detached Maxims and Reasonings,” as Cleland calls them, of the _Considérations_, and in it Pinot-Duclos focused on “l’amour, la galanterie, et même le libertinage” (love, gallantry, even libertinism).\(^5\) There are, then, as this last phrase suggests, strong thematic connections between Cleland’s two _Memoirs_ and the _Mémoires_ of Pinot-Duclos.\(^6\) Both authors make use of narrative genres that readers expected to unfold in familiar ways—in particular, the first-person history of moral education—in order to interrogate both narrative form and the moral assumptions that readers (and, usually, authors) bring to particular kinds of texts.

Although the _Woman of Pleasure_ presents itself as a story of moral education, there is still pretty sharp disagreement as to how seriously we’re meant to take this claim. In what follows I propose that it is precisely to the extent he laughs (and invites us to laugh) at it that Cleland takes (and invites us to take) this claim most seriously. As their parallel titles suggest, _Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure_ and _Memoirs of a Coxcomb_ are counterparts, and in this chapter I read them comparatively, arguing for their importance to the fashioning of the self-consciously new, open-ended, self-critical, and self-reflexive form of the novel. I consider Pinot-Duclos’s _Memoirs_ more briefly, focusing on Cleland’s translator’s preface as, in Roger Lonsdale’s words, his “most sustained and serious statement about the nature of fiction.”\(^7\) Like Pinot-Duclos, but more brazenly, Cleland in his two _Memoirs_ experiments with narrative form, constructing the _Woman of Pleasure_ as a set of variations and the _Coxcomb_ as a suspended romance that teasingly frustrates the expectations it creates. In that respect, the latter work may owe a debt to another libertine novelist, Crébillon fils, whose 1738 _Les Égarements du coeur et de l’esprit_ (literally “the wanderings of the heart and spirit,” translated by Barbara Bray as _The Wayward Head and Heart_) similarly withholds the closure its plot seems to promise.\(^8\) As a habituated cosmopolitan—well-traveled, skeptical, “understanding most of the living languages, and speaking them all very fluently”—Cleland drew at least as much from French as from English literary and philosophical writing, and if this set
him against the prejudices and tastes of a good part of the English reading public, it led his fiction into some novel égarements, or wanderings, from the literary mainstream of midcentury London.9

Presenting themselves as novels of education, both the Woman of Pleasure and the Coxcomb (like Pinot-Duclos’s and Crébillon’s works) carry their protagonist-narrators from innocence to experience, naïveté to worldliness, the country to the city, virginal singleness to heterosexual union. Sir William Delamore, like Fanny Hill, claims to have learned, over the course of the life his narrative retraces, the difference between real and sham pleasures, love and mere sex, virtue and vice. In Cleland’s work, even more than in the libertine texts he drew from, the protagonist’s education is not just sentimental or moral but also social—that is, a preparation for insertion into a determinate place in the hierarchies of gender and class. For Fanny, this is the state of a wife and mother in an apparently conventional bourgeois marriage; for the aristocratic Sir William, the state of a wealthy landowner, heir to a vast fortune and member by birth of the ruling class of Britain. If the social gulf between them is deep, however, Fanny and William share one key trait: both are authors, not only the memoirists but, in some measure, the makers of their own lives. Writing their own stories, they fabricate themselves as literary as well as moral and social subjects. But they are no more free, no less constructed, in this role than they are in terms of their social position: both, that is, have to insert themselves into preexisting narrative roles and forms, to interpret and narrate their experience in keeping with familiar forms of life story.

Among Women: Fanny Hill’s “Expressions of Extasy”

The first word of Fanny’s memoirs, “Madam,” comprises a pun and a puzzle: she addresses her unnamed correspondent both politely, as a respectable gentlewoman, and contemptuously, as a whore or bawd (the word was in common use in both senses). Nothing later in the text gives us any clue as to who “Madam” is, and the very few remarks Fanny makes (as when she refers to “such unreserved intimacies as ours” or notes that “you have too much sense, too much knowledge of the originals themselves”—that is, the facts or personages of Fanny’s life—“to snuff prudishly, and out of character, at the pictures of them” [1]) tend to uphold the implication that Madam may well be a woman of pleasure herself. How “unreserved” is their intimacy? How much “knowledge” of the originals might she have? It would evidently be “out of character” for her “to snuff prudishly,” so is she a regular consumer of pornographic “pictures”? 
Certainly she is very keen for what Fanny, who presents herself as a reluctant author, has to write: it is only because she regards Madam's “desires as indispensable orders” that Fanny undertakes the “ungracious . . . task.” Indeed this characterization of Madam as an importunate customer is taken further at the start of the second letter, when Fanny writes that she has “delay'd the sequel of my history” in the “hopes that, instead of pressing me to a continuation, you would have acquitted me of the task of pursuing a confession, in the course of which, my self-esteem has so many wounds to sustain” (91). But Madam insists, and Fanny has no choice but “compliance with a curiosity that is to be satisfied so extremely at my expence.”

Madam, of course, is also Cleland's stand-in for the reader, his own importunate customer, and the implications of this are also puzzling. Does he imagine a female readership? Most critics take it for granted that this is not the case, that the novel can only be read as a text addressed by its male author to a male readership—the usual pornographic contract. In that case, we would have to read not only Fanny as a “drag” persona of Cleland but Madam as a drag persona of the necessarily male reader. The question of the novel’s readership, intended or real, does not have a simple or obvious answer, but even granting that it was directed at an exclusively male audience, what is the effect of addressing this audience as if it were female? This question has not gone unanswered either, in a variety of ingenious and well-argued ways, by such critics as Nancy K. Miller, Julia Epstein, Madeleine Kahn, Rosemary Graham, Felicity Nussbaum, Lisa L. Moore, and David M. Robinson, but taken together, what is perhaps most telling is how stubbornly the questions of gender identity and identification persist. If, with Nussbaum, we read Cleland/Fanny “not as a ‘man’ who puts on a ‘woman,’ but as an ambiguously gendered human embodiment that may resonate with recognized sexualities but may also invent others,” this should also apply, a fortiori, to the reader/Madam. The novel’s first word unsettles every possible reading because it throws our own position into doubt while assigning responsibility for the text to our “curiosity” and “desires,” whoever we are.

Fanny yields to Madam's “pressing” (91) and starts to write some eighteen years after the last scene she narrates, her acceptance of Charles's proposal of marriage. But while the narrative thus has the retrospective form of such fictional autobiographies as Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and *Colonel Jack* (both 1722), it scrupulously avoids their penitential moral structure. Fanny describes herself as having “emerg'd” from the “scandalous” earlier stages of her life, but although she retires from prostitution, she experiences no moral awakening.
even of the ambiguous kind narrated by Moll and Jack. Her memoirs contain no warning and proffer no lesson, nor do they express regret. She does, in passing, describe herself “looking back on the course of vice, I had run, and comparing its infamous blandishments with the infinitely superior joys of innocence” (187), but as Fanny uses them, even the terms “vice” and “innocence” are not really moral, but affective—based, that is, on her affective preference of Charles, the source of those “superior joys,” to all her other sexual partners. Innocence in a prelapsarian sense, as virginity, or ignorance of the ways of the world, is laughable or pitiable, and she never regrets its loss. In any case, it is clear from the start that Madam the reader neither wants nor expects “the history of a wicked life repented of,” as Moll Flanders’s “editor” puts it in Defoe’s novel; instead, Madam has asked Fanny “to recall to view” only the “scandalous stages of my life.” And Fanny offers “no farther apology, than to prepare you for seeing the loose part of my life, wrote with the same liberty that I led it” (1). She is quite happy to flout any censorial standard, “careless of violating those laws of decency, that were never meant for such unreserved intimacies as ours”—implying, of course, that their intimacy is itself indecent, however the reader might choose to interpret this.

If the Woman of Pleasure deviates from the moral pattern of Defoe’s first-person accounts, which value “the penitent Part” far above “the criminal Part” of the narrator’s life (notwithstanding the complexity of Defoe’s treatment of this pattern), it strays even more flagrantly from the pattern popularized in Richardson’s Pamela, as intimated in its subtitle: Virtue Rewarded.14 Cleland’s novel has often been identified as a product of the “anti-Pamelist” faction, whose most notable exponents were Henry Fielding and Eliza Haywood, and of course “virtue” in the narrowly sexual sense is not rewarded in Fanny’s narrative, but blithely disregarded or mocked. Cleland signals his awareness of the Pamela-Shamela conflict early on, when Fanny’s towns- woman Esther adopts the misspelling of “virtue” as “vartue” by which Fielding derided what he represents as the real, mercenary, motivation underlying Pamela’s virtuous pretenses. Urging Fanny to come with her to London, Esther offers a Shamelan spin on the Pamela plot to lure her, telling her “as how several maids out of the country had made themselves and all their kin for ever, that by preserving their vartue, some had taken so with their masters, that they had married them, and kept them coaches, and lived vastly grand, and happy, and some, may-hap, come to be Dutchesses” (3). Fanny, however, is neither Pamela nor Shamela, neither chaste nor a mercenary marriage hunter, and Cleland, as Peter Sabor astutely notes, has produced “a novel that is anti-Shamela as well as anti-Pamela, a critique and an imitation of
That the practice of novel writing was for Cleland a form of both imitation (albeit allusive, refracted) and critique (albeit playful, ambivalent) is borne out by the resistance of both Memoirs to any resolution of the conflicts their plots, or their narrators’ desires, set in motion. Not that the Woman of Pleasure is inconclusive: it ends, like Pamela, with its heroine happily married to a man of higher social origins, and mother to his children, living in “ease and affluence.” Indeed it even follows, in an affective or romantic sense, the model provided by the Richardsonian subtitle “Virtue Rewarded,” for while Fanny is no tenacious defender of virtue-as-virginity, it is her constant devotion to her first love, Charles, that earns her her happy ending. In that respect Cleland’s novel may act as evidence for the defense against Richardson’s detractors, for it serves to remind us that Pamela’s virtue is not only—not even mainly—virginity, but integrity, an articulated sense of her own moral agency and worth. Yet if Cleland, like Richardson, brings the narrative to a close by linking romantic fulfillment to social advancement as fitting rewards for moral or affective integrity, he also pulls the rug out from under the complacent domesticity to which his protagonist imagines herself to have arrived, exposing it, like Fielding, as at least in part a sham.

Fanny’s origins are as unpromising as those of any protagonist in eighteenth-century fiction. “I was born,” she writes, “at a small village near Liverpool in Lancashire, of parents extremely poor, and I piously believe, extremely honest” (1–2): her father a disabled net maker, earning a “scanty subsistance,” and her mother the keeper of “a little day-school for the girls in her neighbourhood” (2). If this last detail suggests a belief in the value of education even for girls of very low social rank, Fanny notes that her own instruction, “till past fourteen, was no better than very vulgar; reading, or rather spelling, an illegible scrawl, and a little ordinary plain-work, composed the whole system of it: and then all my foundation in virtue was no other than a total ignorance of vice” (2). Fanny’s own education is neglected because the social possibilities open to her are so negligible: a little sewing, an illegible scrawl, and a general ignorance of the world are sufficient to her prospects, even in her mother’s eyes. It is only when she is orphaned by the loss of both parents to smallpox that her real education begins, with her setting out for London.

Fanny Hill is even more disconnected, deracinated, than Moll Flanders or Hogarth’s Moll Hackabout, the country girl corrupted of The Harlot’s Progress (1732). She has no kin, no friends, no village connections: her father was an uprooted “Kentish-man” whose settling in Lancashire was “accidental.” Abandoned by her guardian Esther the moment they arrive in London, Fanny is left
“stupified, and most perfectly perplex’d how to dispose of myself” (5). “Disti-
tute,” directionless, she has reached the first of her story’s narrative cruces or
crises. In the scenes of her arrival in London and her visit to an “intelligence-
office” to find a “place,” Cleland works through many of the same motifs found
in the first plate of The Harlot’s Progress, in which Hogarth stages the corruption
and demise of a rural innocent snared into prostitution. All the elements are in
place: the stage wagon (from Chester or York); the inn (unnamed in Cleland,
The Bell in Hogarth); the “rustic wardrobe” of “a young country-girl, barely
fifteen” (6); and of course the ensnarer, “a lady (for such my extreme innocence
pronounc’d her)” whose “grave and matron-like” (7) air conceals her profession
of bawd, and whose flattery and solicitous attention to the welfare of “an artless
unexperienced country-maid” convinces Fanny that she “was by the greatest
good luck fallen into the hands of the kindest mistress, not to say friend, that
the varsal world could afford” (8). It soon transpires that this Mrs. Brown is act-
ing as procuress for a depraved and brutal “monster” (16) with a penchant for
virgins—analogous to the gentleman lurking in the inn doorway in Hogarth’s
image (hand to crotch, leering at Moll), who has been identified as the notorious
Colonel Francis Charteris, convicted in 1730 of the rape of his servant Anne
Bond. Through all these allusions to the well-known components of Hogarth’s
engraving, Cleland both identifies one narrative genre to which the text belongs
and prepares for the deviations from Hogarth’s plot that will mark the Woman
of Pleasure as a radical departure from the traditional, monitory form of whore
narratives, which end with chastisement, confinement, or death.18

The scenes Fanny witnesses at Mrs. Brown’s are the real beginning of
her education, comprising disillusionment, erotic awakening, and dawning
awareness of her own social place. Fanny is groomed as a virgin sacrifice to
the “shocking hideous” (16) elderly gentleman Mrs. Brown calls her cousin,
and to that end she is taken in hand by Phoebe Ayres, “one of [Mrs. Brown’s]
favourite girls, a notable manager of her house, and whose business it was
to prepare and break such young Fillies as I was to the mounting-block” (9).
Phoebe, too, is called “cousin” by Mrs. Brown, a parody of kinship analogous to
Mrs. Brown’s assumption of the place of mother (repeated by the more genteel
bawd Mrs. Cole in the novel’s second half). Throughout the novel, the satirical
equation of brothels with loving family homes has the double effect of glamor-
izing prostitution and unmasking the sexual exploitativeness of the respectable
bourgeois household—thus laying the groundwork for the cynicism or ambi-
guity of the novel’s final pages. In these early scenes, Fanny is still too “simple,
and silly” (13) to perceive herself as an object of exploitation, and even after the
old “monster” Mr. Crofts tries to rape her, obviously with Mrs. Brown’s connivance, Fanny notes that “I sought to deceive myself with the continuation of my good opinion of her . . . sooner than being turn’d out to starve in the streets, without a penny of money, or a friend to apply to” (19–20). Here, the disillusionment integral to a moral or sentimental education is half-knowingly held at bay in consequence of Fanny’s still rather inchoate sense of her own social powerlessness and alienation. Expelled from Mrs. Brown’s “family” (however monstrous or ersatz) Fanny would become just one more of those poor “wandering” the London streets whom Henry Fielding argued should be sent back to their “Habitations” and compelled “to starve or beg at home.”

The focus of Fanny’s education at Mrs. Brown’s is eros. Phoebe, her “tutereness elect” (9), acting at the behest of Mrs. Brown to ensure her submissiveness to her clients’ desires, takes a powerful sexual interest in Fanny herself and elicits Fanny’s sexual curiosity and desire in ways that threaten to bypass the logic of patriarchal control—which Mrs. Brown, although an entrepreneurial woman, serves by constantly replenishing the marketable stock of young women enslaved to a system that ruthlessly commodifies female sexuality. A woman caught up in such a “household,” Cleland wrote in another text the same year, is “enslaved in short so thoroughly, that nothing, no, not her own Person, is her own Property, or at her own Disposal.” This is the abject state to which Fanny is to be reduced or broken, and as Cleland writes in his *Case of the Unfortunate Bosavern Penlez*, “This is effected commonly by indulging and humouring the giddy, wild, thoughtless Turn, natural to that Age, till [the bawd] fixes a good round Debt upon her; the imaginary Terrors of which, keep her in a State of Slavery” (8–9). Indulging Fanny’s wild side is Phoebe’s task. On Fanny’s first night at Mrs. Brown’s, Phoebe, “who was never out of her way when any occasion of lewdness presented itself, turned to me, embraced, and kiss’d me with great eagerness. This was new, this was odd” (10), Fanny writes, but nonplussed as she is at first, she soon experiences “a strange, and till then unfelt pleasure . . . a new fire that wanton’d through all my veins” (11). It is striking that Fanny’s experience of a “till then unfelt pleasure” is not especially pleasant, and produces a sense of self-estrangement: “I was transported, confused, and out of myself,” she writes. “Feelings so new were too much for me; my heated and alarm’d senses were in a tumult that robb’d me of all liberty of thought; tears of pleasure gush’d from my eyes” (11–12). The sensation of pleasure provokes, undoes, overwhelms, but doesn’t prepare her to be tractable or to submit passively to male desire. Indeed, having “caught,” as she puts it, “the first sparks of kindling nature, the first ideas of pollution” (12) at the “licentious” hands of the
sapphically inclined Phoebe, Fanny learns to desire at least as much through her relations with other women as through her encounters with men.\(^{21}\)

Although Fanny finally dismisses her sexual activities with Phoebe as “this foolery from woman to woman” and as “rather the shadow than the substance of any pleasure” (34), I agree with John Beynon and Lisa L. Moore that female same-sex desire persists as an essential component of Fanny’s experience as prostitute, kept woman, and wife.\(^{22}\) Fanny is perplexed, not to say disturbed (and aroused), by Phoebe’s “fierce and salacious” (11) attentions, and speculates that Phoebe, “to whom all modes and devices of pleasure were known and familiar,” finds

in this exercise of her art to break young girls, the gratification of one of those arbitrary tastes, for which there is no accounting: not that she hated men, or did not even prefer them to her own sex; but when she met with such occasions as this was, a satiety of enjoyments in the common road, perhaps too a secret byass, inclined her to make the most of pleasure, where-ever she could find it, without distinction of sexes (12).

As Moore observes, Fanny runs through a range of possible sexual identities and hierarchies of desire in this passage—imagining by turns that Phoebe “prefer[s]” men, that she has a “secret byass” for women, that she makes no “distinction of sexes”—attributing to her not an androgynous body but an androgyny of desire that becomes the keynote of her representations of sexuality itself. In chapter 3 I argued that, in Fanny’s Memoirs, all desire can be subsumed under the heading of sodomy; here I focus instead on Fanny’s construction of other-sex desire as a by-product of her desire for women.

If Phoebe, her hands “like . . . lambent fire” (11), is the first to awaken Fanny to the “tumult” of pleasure and desire, her professional motive for doing so is to prepare her for her “deflowering” by the hideous Mr. Crofts. But Fanny feels so powerful an aversion that when she’s left alone with him she struggles against his “attack,” and his “hot fit of lust” ends with a premature “effusion” (19) on his part and “a nose gushing out blood” on hers (20). In the aftermath of his assault, Fanny falls into “a violent fever” (22), and while this buys her a temporary reprieve, it also induces Mrs. Brown to send the other girls of the house to visit, with an eye, Fanny writes, “to dispose me, by their conversation, to a perfect resignation of myself to Mrs. Brown’s direction.” The plan proves effective, and in short order “the being one of them became even my ambition: a disposition which they all carefully cultivated; and I wanted now nothing but to restore my health, that I might be able to undergo the ceremony of the
initiation.” In the company of whores, Fanny wants nothing else than to be a whore herself—not out of desire for or even curiosity about men, but to be part of this community of women. “Conversation, example, all,” she writes, “contributed, in that house, to corrupt my native purity, which had taken no root in education, whilst now the inflamable principle of pleasure, so easily fired at my age, made strange work within me” (22–23). If the first stage of Fanny’s education was tactile—Phoebe’s “lascivious touches lighting up a new fire that wanton’d through all my veins” (11)—the second and decisive stage is effected by language: the other girls’ “luccious talk, in which modesty was far from respected, their descriptions of their engagements with men, had given me a tolerable insight into the nature and mysteries of their profession, at the same time that they highly provok’d an itch of florid warm-spirited blood through every vein” (23). Conversation, luscious talk, stories, and descriptions all produce powerful physiological effects, and if their stories concern “engagements with men,” Fanny asserts that she is “indebted only to the girls” for her corruption: whatever sexual interest she develops in men is mediated and prompted by the “luccious talk” of other women.

Accordingly, Phoebe, while continuing to “exert her talents in giving me the first tinctures of pleasure,” also builds on the other girls’ spoken lessons or lectures, rather Socratically “leading” Fanny “from question to question of her own suggestion” and so “explain[ing] to me all the mysteries of Venus.” From Socratic dialogue Fanny proceeds to visual demonstration, first spying on Mrs. Brown having sex with her “favourite,” a young horse grenadier (26), and then secreted in a dark closet by Phoebe to observe Polly Philips, one of the girls whose luscious talk so “provok’d” her, with her “keeper,” a young Genoese merchant. In these episodes Fanny sees, for the first time, what she calls “that wonderful machine” (25), the penis, and she does immediately give it pride of place, writing after the first scene of “the rekindl’d rage and tumult of my desires, which all pointed to their pole, man” (27). From this point on, the phallus becomes the object of Fanny’s most ardent descriptive attention and desire. I would, accordingly, not contest the critical claim that the text is phallocentric, but while Fanny attributes her fixation on the phallus to “the instinct of nature” (25), she acknowledges that it was her companions who taught her to see: “Prepared then, and disposed as I was by the discourse of my companions, and Phoebe’s minute detail of every thing, no wonder that such a sight gave the last dying blow to my native innocence.” The wonderful machine “rekindl[es]”—reproduces—the desire that Phoebe has already “kindl[ed]” (12), and Fanny is drawn by “instinct” to the male “pole” in light of her companions’ earlier dis-
course of pleasure. The “instinct of nature” takes effect within a social context that in many ways prioritizes (privileges and places first) same-sex affective and erotic bonds—and in any case, as with Phoebe’s “secret byass,” that instinct may not be other-sex centered.

When Fanny spies on Polly and “the young Italian” (30), what inflames her desire is not so much his body—for “luscious” as her description of it is, her description of Polly’s is no less so—as “Polly’s expressions of extasy” (31): both the words she utters as they have sex, and her gestures and facial expressions. The voyeuristic scene is structured by Phoebe as a demonstration in response to Fanny’s anxious question about the “imaginary disproportion” (28) of female and male “parts.” So, when Fanny sees the Italian naked, she writes that his “grand movement” was “of a size to frighten me, by sympathy, for the small tender part, which was the object of its fury” (30), and Phoebe, ever vigilant, asks Fanny “whether I thought my little maiden-toy was much less” than Polly’s. Fanny, by her affective “sympathy” and Phoebe’s express invitation, watches the whole scene in light of her identification with Polly and is attentive above all to Polly’s responses, as when “she gave a deep sigh, which was quite in another tone than one of pain” (31), or when, afterward, “she gets up, and throwing her arms round him, seemed far from undelighted with the trial he had put her to, to judge at least by the fondness with which she ey’d, and hung upon him.” Of this last tableau, Fanny writes, “From that instant, adieu all fears of what man could do unto me; they were now changed into . . . ardent desires . . . ungovernable longings.” It is Polly’s pantomime of delight that turns fears into desires. Fanny follows up her admission that from this moment she “could have pull’d the first of that sex that should present himself, by the sleeve, and offer’d him the bauble” (31–32) of her virginity, by doing precisely this with the next man she sees. Of course, this is the beloved Charles, but in light of Fanny’s admission, their relationship loses a little of the romantic luster with which she labors to invest it. Any man would have done, for what Fanny “ardent[ly] desires” is just to feel what Polly felt.

Nonetheless, her sighting of Charles marks another of her story’s cruces, a narrative turning point that also marks an apparent shift in genre, from whore narrative to romance. Their chance meeting leads to their plotting Fanny’s escape from Mrs. Brown’s still a virgin, no longer the would-be whore but a personification of virtue in distress, whose getaway from her mistress’s house she narrates in the breathless language of her adopted genre. “It came at last,” she writes, “the dear, critical, dangerous hour came”—this even though no one else in the house is awake to stop her and the key to the front door lies where
it always lies, on the chair next to her bed—“and now supported only by the
courage love lent me, I ventur’d a tip-toe down stairs . . . Love that embolden’d,
protected me too: and now, got safe into the street, I saw my new guardian-
angel waiting at a coach-door ready open” (37–38). The passage exemplifies the
doubleness of Cleland’s writing, in that it both produces a certain excitement or
suspense—similar to the excitement of those scenes from Richardson’s Clarissa
(1747–1748) in which the heroine tries in vain to escape from Mrs. Sinclair’s
London brothel—and makes fun of such hackneyed narrative effects.

The same is true of Fanny’s instantaneous outpouring of love for this young
man she finds sleeping off the previous night’s “drunken revel” (34). She writes,
“No term of years, no turns of fortune could ever eraze the lightening-like im-
pression his form made on . . . my ravish ‘d eyes,” before launching into a cata-
log of his beauties, and if on the one hand her portrait is sensually alluring, on
the other her haste in ascribing the “passion” she then felt not to “gross lust”
but to “new-born love, that true refiner of lust” (35) is faintly absurd, even by
the laws of love at first sight. By the start of the second paragraph after she first
sees him, his health—she is worried he might catch cold with his shirt collar
unbuttoned—“began to be my life’s concern”; by the next page she asserts that
“I could, at that instant, have died for him” (36); a page further in, she exclaims,
“The seeing, the touching, the being, if but for a night, with this idol of my fond
virgin-heart, appeared to me a happiness above the purchase of my liberty or
life. He might use me ill! let him! he was the master! happy, too happy even
to receive death at so dear a hand” (37). Yet for all the clichéed and masochistic
extravagance of Fanny’s rhetoric—the very stuff of romance—the love plot is
really only playing out in her own imagination. Charles doesn’t see her as virtue
in distress or suppose her a virgin; he assumes she is “one of the misses of the
house” (35) and asks her to have sex with him on the spot, “assuring me that he
would make it worth my while.” The best approximation of love he can offer is
to tell her later that he “lik’d her as much as he could think of liking any one
in my suppos’d way of life” (36), and he “ask’d me briskly at once, if I would be
kept by him,” not because he is love struck but because “in his fears of the haz-
ard of the town”—that is, venereal disease—“he had been some time looking
out for a girl to take into keeping.” Although Fanny writes that “it was by one of
those miracles reserv’d to love, that we struck the bargain in the instant,” from
her own evidence there’s nothing miraculous about it: her “person happen[ed]
to hit his fancy,” he took her for a whore, she played along, and they “struck the
bargain.” From this more disenchanted or cynical perspective she has simply
moved on to the second stage of “The Harlot’s Progress,” that of being kept by
a gentleman, and the “miracle” of love proves, in truth, a commercial transac-

tion.

None of which is to say that Fanny as narrator is either insincere, hypocriti-
cal, or deluded, as it is she who registers the dissonances and discrepancies of
this crucial scene. But she wants, like any narrator, to make such scenes intel-
ligible in the light of a meaning-giving plot: intelligible, that is, in terms of its
outcome or ending, which in her case, by her reading—as will also be true of
Sir William in Memoirs of a Coxcomb—is the happy ending of romance. The two
memoirs’ romance plots are the same: the young protagonist falls in love with
an ideal or idealized partner of the opposite sex; the beloved disappears; the pro-
tagontist is prevented from seeking out the beloved; he or she thereupon enters
into a life of wantonness and extravagant but emotionally unfulfilling sexual in-
dulgence; the beloved is accidentally rediscovered; and the lovers are reunited,
this time for life, and of course happily. But if William and Fanny want to write
their memoirs in the form of romance, these are not the only plots at work in
their texts, and a scene such as Fanny’s meeting with Charles may mean quite
different things in the different plots it is part of. As a scene from romance, it
is a fateful, predestined encounter: love is immediate and undying, the story’s
beginning and ending, which every obstacle, interruption, or digression along
the way can only defer, never alter. To her mind, Fanny has no say in the matter:
“love itself took charge of the disposal of me, in spite of interest, or gross lust”
(34). As a scene from a harlot’s progress, however, it shows interest and lust in
action: each of them has some good, economic or sexual, that the other wants,
and a bargain is struck. The naïve Fanny may be “ravish’d,” but in fact she is
only following the familiar path of Polly and Hogarth’s Moll, taken into keeping
at an early stage of their eventual, inexorable downfall. As a scene from Fanny’s
education in desire, it puts to the test her resolution to have sex with the first
man she sees and thus to experience Polly’s pleasure for herself. It is only when
she has heard and seen what other women want, by their discourse and dumb
show, that she begins to conceive what she wants herself. Charles is simply a
means to an epistemological end: the knowledge of pleasure.

Fanny’s departure from Mrs. Brown’s clearly marks a new phase in the nar-
rative, removing her from the woman-centered world in which her education
began. Charles takes over as Fanny’s teacher, “instructing me, as far as his own
lights reached; in a great many points of life, that I was, in consequence of my
no-education, perfectly ignorant of” (53), and taking control of her both eco-
nomically and sexually. Fanny’s lubricious account of their first hours together
takes the clichés of erotic writing—“what floods of bliss! what melting trans-
ports! what agonies of delight!” (43)—to extremes of anguish and disembodiment, ecstatic liquefaction. Of Charles, she writes, “Born head-long away by the fury and over-mettle of that member, now exerting itself with a kind of native rage, he breaks in, carries all before him, and one violent merciless lunge, sent it, imbrew’d, and reeking with virgin blood, up to the very hilts in me” (41). But Charles’s murderous violence only makes her love him more: “I arriv’d at excess of pleasure, through excess of pain” (42), she writes, and this pleasure is a type of death, “a delicious momentary dissolution” (43). In Fanny’s version of the old metaphor of orgasm as dying, Charles, “he who now was the absolute disposer of my happiness, and in one word, my fate” (41), is also her “murderer . . . who hung mourning tenderly over me”—an image that fulfills her earlier boast that she was “happy, too happy even to receive death at so dear a hand” (37). In thus linking “real” sexual pleasure to utter, abject submission to male authority, Fanny’s “progress” appears to affirm Nussbaum’s claim that “sexual desire for the same sex . . . must be rechanneled toward men in order to be fully satisfying”—leading, by the novel’s end, to Fanny’s transformation from whore into “bourgeois matron” and validating “the moral superiority of monogamous wedded love.”

This, of course, is the moral trajectory that Fanny herself insists on imposing on her memoirs in the work’s opening and closing pages. Her elopement from Mrs. Brown’s with Charles represents her passage from the “foolery from woman to woman” offered by Phoebe to “more solid food” (34), from “the shadow” to “the substance” of pleasure. Yet as I suggested in chapter 3, the relationship between Charles and Fanny cannot be summed up or cordoned off as heterosexual, for Charles is not (or not only) of one but “of either sex” (44), and Fanny, too, as Donald Mengay first observed, repeatedly figures herself as phallic—a point Nussbaum also makes, writing, “Cleland radically implies that Fanny Hill’s body is both male and female.” Charles and Fanny can thus be read by turns as sodomites, as tribades, as man and wife—not only confounding the borders between same-sex and other-sex desire but calling into question the very notions of same and other sexes. The novel’s profusion of ambiguous, androgynous, unreadable, unsexed bodies repels any critical effort to fix it as a validation of something that would later come to be known as “heterosexuality,” especially if this is assumed to be already normative or taken for granted at the time Cleland wrote. For if it’s true, as Nussbaum writes, that “sexual desire for the same sex is necessary but must be rechanneled toward men in order to be fully satisfying,” it is also true that desire for the “other” sex, to be fully satisfying, has to be redirected toward women.
The clearest examples of this are found in the novel’s second part, when Fanny joins Mrs. Cole’s “little Seraglio” (95)—a word that in itself, as John Beynon notes, carried sapphic overtones in the period. The extended “ceremonial of initiation” with which the second volume begins repeats the pattern of Fanny’s education at Mrs. Brown’s: first the “luscious talk” of the other girls, as Emily, Harriet, and Louisa tell how they lost their virginity; then visual demonstration, as she watches each of the others in turn having sex, in a kind of genteel serial orgy; and then having sex herself, with the rest of the company looking on. Despite the orgy’s ostensibly “heterosexual” structure, what is striking is the extent to which the action is orchestrated to comply with the interests of what Lisa Moore calls “a female homosexual gaze.” Again and again, Fanny draws attention to the care with which the women arrange their own and each other’s bodies into tableaux of visible and reciprocal desire—reciprocal, that is, not just between the male and female of each couple, but between the female observer and observed. The most flagrant instance appears when Harriet’s beau lifts her petticoats, “at which, as if a signal had been given, Louisa and Emily took hold of her legs, in pure wantoness, and yet in ease too, to her, kept them stretch’d wide abroad. Then lay expos’d, or to speak more properly, display’d the greatest parade in nature of female charms” (115). In part, of course, Louisa and Emily’s action facilitates the beau’s mastery by offering Harriet’s body up to him, but Fanny stresses their sisterly interest in Harriet’s “ease” as well as the “pure wantoness” that betrays their own desire to gaze on this “display” of “female charms.” There is a continuity of desire among all those present: the “wanton” Louisa and Emily; the “enamour’d gallant,” who stands “absorb’d and engross’d by the pleasure of the sight”; Fanny and the others looking, who benefit from the gallant’s desiring gaze, since it holds him spellbound “long enough to afford us time to feast ours, no fear of glutting!” (115–116); and Harriet herself, who begins the scene by appealing to Fanny, “blushing as she look’d at me, and with eyes made to justify any thing” (114), in effect performing for her approbation and pleasure. This continuity of desire extends beyond the scene as well, to include Mrs. Cole—for although she discreetly leaves the room when the orgy begins, she later talks to Fanny about “the pleasures of the preceding night” (125), and Fanny learns “without much surprise, as I began to enter her character, that she had seen everything that had passed, from a convenient place, manag’d solely for that purpose, and of which she readily made me the confidante.” The whole spectacle, in effect, has been “manag’d” for her voyeuristic pleasure, of which she “readily” enlists Fanny as “confidante,” again privileging the circulation of pleasure and desire among women.
Mrs. Cole is thus the mirror of Fanny’s Madam, and of the novel’s reader, the offstage spectator to whose gratification the performance is devoted. Rather than take for granted that the text can only really be addressed to a male “heterosexual” readership by a male “heterosexual” author (ideologically heterosexual if not practically so), I would argue that the Mrs. Cole–Fanny dynamic here foregrounds instead the sheer range of possible desiring positions both inside and outside the space of narrative action. Certainly the relationship between the two, which dominates the novel’s second volume, offers a powerful sapphic counterweight to the linearity and teleology of the heterosexual romance plot, within which Charles is Fanny’s alpha and omega, her master and natural husband. For while her eleven months with Charles represent a crucial stage in her formation, and his disappearance when she is “three months gone with child by him” (54) marks the third of her narrative’s cruces—forcing her to become the “kept mistress” (66) of Mr. H——, her “first launch into vice” (65)—in the economy of the text as a whole, Charles is far more absent than present, and not even an absent object of desire for most of it. So while it may be true that Fanny progresses from sapphic “foolery” to “more solid” phallic “food” when she passes from Mrs. Brown and Phoebe to Charles, she moves on again, after he disappears, to other men, other women—of whom Mrs. Cole has the greatest impact on her life. Just as she described Charles as “the absolute disposer of my happiness, and in one word, my fate” (41), so she refers to Mrs. Cole as “one to whom I had now thoroughly abandon’d the direction of all my steps” (92), stressing that theirs is not just a business partnership: “For Mrs. Cole had, I do not know how, unless by one of those unaccountable invincible simpathies, that nevertheless form the strongest links, especially of female friendship, won and got intire possession of me.” Although Fanny gives no report of any “foolery” between them, she places considerable weight on the sympathy that “links” them, emphasizing its strangeness and “unaccountab[ility].” The sympathy between them is so strong as to blur the boundary between “female friendship” and “intire possession,” with its unignorable (in context) sexual connotation. This ambiguity colors much of the novel’s second half and surfaces most suggestively at those moments when Mrs. Cole’s voyeuristic presence is discovered: on the morning after the orgy, and in the midst of Fanny’s whipping session with Mr. Barvile, when she is “rehearten’d” to let him whip her as she has whipped him, “especially, as I well knew Mrs. Cole was an eye-witness, from her stand of espial, to the whole of our transactions” (148). Later she writes that “this adventurous exploit had more and more endear’d” her to Mrs. Cole, and here again there is a blurring between Mrs. Cole’s sense of Fanny’s economic
value, for Barvile has paid them both well, and the “endear[ing]” pleasures of watching her (153).

A similar sympathy, blending “female friendship” and “intire possession,” links Fanny to her epistolary Madam, whose “desires” are the occasion of Fanny’s writing, in violation of the “laws of decency” (1). Contrary to what some other critics have stated, Fanny does not leave off writing when she is reunited with Charles, even if that is the point where she brings her story to a close; indeed up to that moment she has never written a word. Instead, her writing originates in Madam’s desires, and it is only in writing that the pleasure by which she identifies herself is fully realized. It is curious that Fanny never tries to write Charles, and more curious still that Charles never writes her, during the “two years and seven months” (176) of their separation—so curious, in fact, as to lead Gary Gautier to suggest that Charles, rather than having been kidnapped and “forc’d on a long voyage without taking leave of one friend” (55), as Fanny is told after he disappears, has ditched her to avoid being saddled with a child and the burden of supporting them both.34 I return to this point in my discussion of the novel’s ending, but the fact that Fanny writes of her sexual and affective experience only to another woman reinforces the pattern established during her time at Mrs. Brown’s: the circulation of eros—as gazes, stories, confessions—among women. And this sapphic circulation of “expressions of extasy” (31), whether the bodies involved are same sex, other sex, or something else, displaces or decenters the operations of the novel’s various ready-made or generic plots: romance, Bildung, the harlot’s progress.

One of the critical problems the Woman of Pleasure poses is that of how to make sense of the tension between the end-oriented momentum of the novel’s plot or plots and the very episodic character of the text’s unfolding, consisting as it largely does of a repetitious series of sexual descriptions. Robert Markley, while acknowledging the overarching structure of “female Bildung” described by Nancy Miller and others, writes that “the novel often seems less an educative harlot’s progress than a nearly paratactic series of sexual adventures and descriptive vignettes.”35 More recently, John Beynon has proposed that “the pleasure we derive from [this] text” does not lie “in the traditional narrative imperatives of fiction and its teleological drive” but in its “proliferation” of “self-contained moments presenting a variety of sexual propensities, situations, and bodily configurations.”36 Annamarie Jagose, decrying what she calls “the overvaluation of story and the undervaluation of sexual description” in “most critical discussions” of the novel, argues that these miss out on the novel’s crucial ideo-
logical intervention: its role in “giv[ing] voice to an emergent sexual ideology,” that of “heterosexuality” itself.37 Finally, in an essay exploring “the interaction of male and female erotic dynamics of plot,” Antje Schaum Anderson argues that the particular “female plot model” at work in Cleland’s narrative undermines “the male, linear plot of Fanny’s sexual initiation and education.”38 All these readings offer insights into the tension between linear progress and descriptive repetition in Cleland’s text, and I want to follow up by looking at what Fanny, or Cleland, has to say on the inescapability of repetition in writing about eros. Author and narrator superimpose the form of variations on a theme on the intersecting linear plots I have been tracing: an experiment in narrative form analogous to the challenge originally set by Charles Carmichael in Bombay, to write about sex without using “plain words.” How do you tell a story through repetition? Cleland uses the tension between repetition and plot as a way of testing or interrogating the value of plot, especially as this affects the formation of personal identity. In so doing he contributes his part to the fashioning of the novel as a genre that distrusts and does violence to the plots it depends on.

Circles of Pleasure / Poisonous Remedies: Cleland and the Novel Form

As Robert Markley writes, “Few novels stop in mid-course to tell you how boring they are,” but Fanny’s apology to Madam at the start of the Woman of Pleasure’s second volume raises the possibility or threat of boredom as integral to any story with sex at its center.39 “I imagined indeed,” she writes, “that you would have been cloy’d and tired with the uniformity of adventures and expressions, inseparable from a subject of this sort, whose bottom or ground-work being, in the nature of things, eternally one and the same, whatever variety of forms and modes, the situations are susceptible of, there is no escaping a repetition of near the same images, the same figures, the same expressions” (91). Fanny’s apology, however, is also a boast disguised as a gesture of authorial modesty: if her subject is “in the nature of things, eternally one and the same,” it is her ingenuity in devising a “variety of forms and modes”—inventing images, figures, and expressions that, if “near,” are nevertheless not “the same”—that the reader has to thank for not being “cloy’d and tired.” Quite the opposite: Madam has demanded a continuation of the narrative, and anyone who reads this passage has opted to pay for and plunge into the second volume (or at any rate, as when the two volumes are published together, to keep on rather than stop reading). So if
Fanny pays her obligatory respects to Madam’s imagination and sensibility as necessary “supplements, where my descriptions flag or fail,” Madam’s “pressing” desire for a continuation demonstrates that Fanny hasn’t failed at all.

Fanny’s apology, indeed the text as a whole, plays with the dialectic between sameness and difference: if each scene of sexual description is, structurally, more or less the same—preliminaries, penetration, simultaneous orgasm—the variety of settings, body types, motives, emotional bonds, and visual or narrative perspectives is considerable. Apart from the two scenes Fanny spies on from a dark closet (once alone, once with Phoebe), the first volume ranges from the same-sex erotics of her initiation by Phoebe to the “pestilential” (18) Mr. Crofts’s attempted rape; from the extreme physical pain of her defloration (which is nevertheless an expression of affective bliss) to the “lifeless insensibility” and subsequent “pleasure merely animal . . . struck out of the collision of the sexes, by a passive bodily effect” (60, 64) of her first encounters with Mr. H——; and it culminates in her “extacy, that extended us fainting, breathless, entranced” (83), with the bashful but “prodigious” footman Will. In the second volume, there are extended episodes in which the bodies on display are virtually interchangeable: the orgy at Mrs. Cole’s, with its succession of couplings, or the edenic “party of pleasure” involving Fanny, Emily, and “two very pretty young gentlemen” (166) where, as Fanny writes of one couple, “as their limbs were thus amorously interwoven, in sweet confusion, it was scarce possible to distinguish who they respectively belonged to” (170). The couple’s unsexed bodies affirm the lability of desire, but in thus depersonalizing it they also collapse every enactment of eros into a repetition, however pleasant, of the same—so that when Fanny and her spark in turn “finished our trip to Cythera, and unloaded in the old haven,” she dryly notes that “as the circumstances did not admit of much variation, I shall spare you the description” (171). It was perhaps to offset an increasing sense of “the uniformity of adventures” that Cleland extended the range of proclivities in the second volume to include flagellation, fetishism, and of course sodomy.

Against this encyclopedic impulse to encompass the diversity of sexual practices and tastes, Fanny repeatedly expresses the sense that at bottom (to deploy her own pun) one scene is much the same as another. She suggests this in her very first description, writing of Mrs. Brown and the horse grenadier, at the end of their second go-round, “And thus they finish’d, in the same manner as before, the old last act” (26). The phrase is more suited to the mature, worldly writer than to the ingenuous, inflamed voyeuse, but repetition seems integral to desire from the very start. Later, Fanny uses similar terms to bring what she rep-
resents as sexual “freaks” (166) or “criminal scenes” (159) within the compass of the familiar: so Louisa, at the end of her “terrible sally” with the “soft simpleton” Good-natur’d Dick, “kept him faithful company, going off, in consent, with the old symptoms” (165), while at the end of the sodomitical scene she writes, “The height of the fit came on with its usual symptoms, and dismiss’d the action” (159). “The old last act,” “the old,” or the “usual symptoms”: the wording seems to connote exhaustion, ennui, excitement recollected in weariness. But repetition has another sense in the novel: refreshment, renewal, the continued force of desire even after its satisfaction. If, as Steven Marcus writes, “fulfillment implies completion, gratification, an end”—that is, death—repetition acts as a sign of life, the inexhaustibility of pleasure. So, when Fanny is reunited with Charles, as they launch into their second round of lovemaking, she writes that “we play’d over-again the same opera,” which on its own might sound dismissive, but not as she goes on to develop the figure: “with the same delightful harmony and concert: our ardours, like our love, knew no remission” (185). Play, whether of music or games, makes repetition a condition of pleasure, and as Fanny spins out the musical metaphor, repetition becomes a necessary condition of love as well.

This association of repetition with play echoes Fanny’s account of her first night together with Charles, “when after playing repeated prizes of pleasure, nature overspent, and satisfy’d, gave us up to the arms of sleep” (43). Nature is “satisfy’d,” but unlike what Marcus calls “fulfillment,” satisfaction doesn’t imply an end, but a pause. And if orgasm and sleep have often been figured as little deaths, they are crucially unlike death in that life (waking, desire) keeps renewing itself in their wake. So in this first scene with Charles, Fanny extols “the fierceness of refreshed desires” (42) and, adopting a figure analogous to that of musical repetition, writes that “we spent the whole afternoon, till supper-time, in a continued circle of love-delights” (43). The circle is a figure for everything that doesn’t count as, or doesn’t advance, plot, but it does advance, does count as time: time spent “playing repeated prizes of pleasure.” The same image recurs in the “party of pleasure” episode, where Fanny concludes “that what with a competent number of repetitions, all in the same strain, (and by the bye, we have a certain natural sense that those repetitions are very much to the taste of) what with a circle of pleasures delicately varied, there was not a moment lost to joy all the time we staid there, till late in the night” (171). Joy unfolds in and over time, like music; and like the sapphic circulation of pleasure, the “circle of pleasures delicately varied” does not just delay the forward motion of plot but offers an alternative model for structuring time and text alike. The
novel, of course, has a plot, or rather multiple generic plots—whose biography, romance, heroine’s progress—which Cleland follows, deviates from, parodies; Fanny, too, uses such plots to make sense of the experiences she narrates. But to say the text is involved in plot is not to say it’s governed by plot—not unless we privilege the novel’s last two pages over the roughly two hundred that precede them. Instead of (or while also) reading the *Woman of Pleasure* as a romance or progress punctuated or stalled by sexual descriptions that, as Markley writes, “bring the ostensible narrative action . . . to a standstill,” it needs to be approached as a set or cycle of variations on a theme: “the same strain,” “the same opera,” the “circle of pleasures delicately varied.”

Partly through differences in external features (sex, age, beauty, locale, love), partly through “variety of forms and modes” (“expressions,” “images,” “figures”), the text draws variation from sameness. Rather than a simple contrast between static episodes and temporally progressive story line—between dilations and the drive to an ending—the variation form registers the unfolding of experience in time while loosening this from the teleological grip of the plot’s terminus or outcome. Narrative action doesn’t come “to a standstill” in these episodes, but Cleland shifts the text’s emphasis away from ready-made patterns and endings and toward a more open-ended, plural, or diffuse model of novelistic plot.

Cleland’s interest in questions of plot is evident not only in the self-reflexive play of his first foray as a novelist but in his critical essays on the self-consciously experimental form of the novel at midcentury. In his review of Henry Fielding’s last novel, *Amelia* (1751), which he was unusual in considering perhaps the best of Fielding’s fictions—calling it “the boldest stroke that has been yet attempted in this species of writing”—Cleland suggests that Fielding’s “original turn” is clearest in his deviation from the conventional romance plot:

The author takes up his heroine at the very point at which all his predecessors have dropped their capital personages. It has been heretofore a general practice to conduct the lover and his mistress to the door of matrimony, and there leave them, as if after that ceremony the whole interest in them was at an end, and nothing could remain beyond it worthy of exciting or keeping up the curiosity of the reader.

His remark is astute even if it overlooks one obvious precursor: that is, Richardson’s *Pamela*, close to a third of which follows Pamela after she has walked through the “door of matrimony” with Mr. B. But what is significant in Cleland’s observation is not whether he is correct that Fielding diverges from “all” his predecessors but, first, his implication that boldness and originality—that is, novelty—are essential to “this species of writing”; second, that they are best
measured by an author’s departure from received or conventional plots; and third, that the challenge implicit in such a departure is to find other ways of “exciting or keeping up the curiosity of the reader.” Indeed, “he who does not peruse” Amelia, Cleland writes, “will hardly imagine how the relish of such conjugal endearments, as compose the basis of it, could be quickened enough to become palatable to the reader.”

As this last remark suggests, if Amelia and the Woman of Pleasure are alike in the challenge they face of “exciting” or “keeping up” the reader’s curiosity, they differ radically in their “subject”: in Fielding’s case, “the history of two persons already married”; in Cleland’s, the “circle of pleasures” prior and alien to marriage (for in Fanny’s narrative, sexual pleasure stops at the “door of matrimony”). This difference is all the more striking in that Cleland’s statement of Fielding’s moral aims in Amelia is almost identical to the “tail-piece of morality” (187) with which Fanny concludes her memoirs. According to Cleland, “the chief and capital purport” of Amelia “is to inculcate the superiority of virtuous, conjugal, love, to all other joys; to prove that virtue chastens our pleasures, only to augment them; that the paths of vice, are always those of misery, and that virtue, even in distress, is still a happier bargain to its votaries, than vice, attended with all the splendor of fortune.” For her part, Fanny asserts of her married state that “in the bosom of virtue, I gather’d the only uncorrupt sweets” (187) and offers her condolences to “those who, immers’d in a gross sensuality, are insensible to the so delicate charms of Virtue, than which even Pleasure has not a greater friend, nor than Vice a greater enemy” (187). But if Fanny espouses the same moral views that Cleland finds praiseworthy in Amelia, should we conclude we are meant to take her “tail-piece” straight? Rather than offering guidance in how to read Cleland’s fiction, his critical writings on the novel, I would argue, complicate rather than clarify our relationship to the fictional text, drawing attention to the distance between the pronouncements Cleland makes in his own voice and their ironic or ambiguous effect as fictional utterances.

Cleland took energetic part in contemporary debates over the moral and aesthetic aims of fiction, both in the pages of the Monthly Review and in his practice as translator and novelist, and if the relationship between theory and practice is slippery and complex, his work in both domains exhibits a sophisticated critical intelligence informed by his familiarity with developments in French as well as English literature. Like the Woman of Pleasure, Memoirs of a Coxcomb offers itself as a work of moral instruction: Sir William Delamore describes his narrative, on its first page, as the “history of my errors, and return to reason.” And in his critical writing, Cleland, like Samuel Johnson in his famous Rambler
essay on fiction, asserts that the novelist’s project is fundamentally instructive, as in his review of Smollett’s *Peregrine Pickle*:

> There are perhaps no works of entertainment more susceptible of improvement or public utility, than such as are thus calculated to convey instruction, under the passport of amusement. How many readers may be taught to pursue good, and to avoid evil, to refine their morals, and to detest vice, who are profitably decoyed into the perusal of these writings by the pleasure they expect to be paid with for their attention, who would not care to be dragged through a dry, didactic system of morality; or who would, from a love of truth universally impressed on mankind, despise inventions which do not at least pay truth the homage of imitation?

Like Johnson the year before, who had memorably declared, of works of fiction that “exhibit life in its true state,” that “these books are written chiefly to the young, the ignorant, and the idle, to whom they serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions into life,” Cleland ties the efficacy of the novel’s moral instruction to its convincing imitation of truth, its verisimilitude. But whereas Johnson held that the semblance of reality was necessary in order to reinforce the exemplary value of fiction—“for what we cannot credit we shall never imitate”—Cleland aligned himself with such authors as Cervantes, Sarah and Henry Fielding, and Smollett, who tried, as he wrote in his review of *Amelia*, to “[paint] the corruptions of mankind, and the world, not as it should be, but as it really exists.” If for Johnson the purpose of fiction is, above all else, to provide the reader with virtuous models for imitation, for Cleland its proper aim is to expose folly and vice through ridicule.

This argument is most fully developed in the translator’s preface he wrote for his version of Charles Pinot-Duclos’s *Memoirs Illustrating the Manners of the Present Age* (1752), in which he bolsters his defense of contemporary fiction by linking it to the aesthetic principles advanced by the Roman lyric poet and satirist Horace and rediscovered in the sixteenth century, as Cleland argues, by Cervantes. There are three main strands to Cleland’s preface: an introduction to Pinot-Duclos and the moral aims of the *Memoirs*; a discussion of “Ridicule” as “the surest Method of attacking [the] Errors . . . of the human Heart”; and a brief history of “this Branch of Writing” to which the *Memoirs* belongs, that of “Romances, Novels, and Novel-Memoirs,” in which Cleland argues on behalf of those “Authors, who naturalized Fiction, and employed it in the Service of the most useful Truths,” among whom he names Cervantes, Fénelon, Scarron, Le Sage, Marivaux, and Crébillon (234, 236). This last group, along with the Fieldings and Smollett in English, stand as the culmination of an evolution-
ary process that began with “the old Romances, full of imaginary, unnatural Characters, all of [which] deserved the Motto prefixed to one of the most noted of them, *Amadis of Gaul, Lis et oubliè* (Read and forget)” (236). It was the “great Physician *Cervantes*” who “disenchanted or dispossessed his Nation” of the “en- demial Madness” of readers’ taste for “false Heroism and Knight-errantry” and in so doing made “a Revolution in the Ideas of his Age” (236–237). But such is the perversity of readers that “to this Vein of Romance succeeded another as silly, and surely more tiresome,” the romances of Honoré d’Urfé, La Calprenède, and Madeleine de Scudéry, “in which Love, tortured, and sophisticated a thousand Ways, and ever out of Nature, formed a flimsy Web, unmercifully spun out to ten or twelve Volumes” (237). This “Depravation of Taste” was soon “exploded,” and these works succeeded by “Romances at least less voluminous, and in which the Passion of Love was treated with more regard to Probability, but with still not enough to Nature”—the best being Madame de La Fayette’s *La Princesse de Clèves*. Such “Novel-Romances” were popular enough to furnish “whole Libraries,” but as “Amusement nearly constituted all the[ir] Merit,” they were in time supplanted by works more natural, and so more useful. Apart from Fénelon, whose didactic romance *Télémaque* is rather out of step with the others, the authors Cleland favors are affiliated to either the picaresque-satirical (Cervantes, Scarron, Le Sage, Smollett) or libertine (Marivaux, Crébillon) modes. Richardson does not figure in his criticism at all, although it is intriguing that he finds much to praise in the arguably Richardsonian *Amelia*. But for the most part, Cleland associates “Nature” and “naturalized Fiction” with the comic and erotic rather than the exemplary, sentimental, or tragic.

Pinot-Duclos’s *Memoirs* fits in with the other works Cleland admires not so much because of its topic, “the Provinces of Love and Gallantry,” as because of Pinot-Duclos’s aggressive manner of treating it (which Cleland compares to that of a physician “point[ing] out the Rankness and Malignancy” of his patient’s “Symptoms” [236]). “His Plan and Design are sensibly to explode that egregious Mixture of Vice and Folly which the *Gayloves* of the Age had erected into a Sort of Fashion, and which consisted in debauching as many Women as they could come at, and in triumphing over the Spoils of Virtue and Innocence” (233). Pinot-Duclos’s vehicle for this “explosion”—a key term in Cleland’s critical lexicon—of vice and folly are “the Intrigues and Procedure of a sprightly young Nobleman” (232–233) who, just like Sir William Delamore in *Memoirs of a Coxcomb*, has a series of sexual liaisons until he is “brought at length back by the Strength of his own Reflections on the Emptiness and Vanity of such a Course, to the Simplicity of Virtue and domestic Happiness” (236). Cleland’s
and Pinot-Duclos’s novels are almost identical in plot and moral message, and utterly conventional in their opposition of domestic virtue to the “infamous blandishments” of vice, as Fanny puts it in her tailpiece. Yet if the “lesson” of all three memoirs is trite, almost tautological (surely “virtue” is a word that already praises itself), the aesthetic strategy of “sensibly . . . exploding” what they mean to condemn puts both authors in a tricky spot. In order to explode the vice he condemns, Pinot-Duclos has to bring it “sensibly”—vividly, feelingly—to the reader’s mind. Or, as Cleland puts it in another passage of the preface: “In Attention then to the Necessity of discovering the Enemy before he fires at him, our Author paints, with great Vivacity of colouring his Hero, carried impetuously down the Stream of false and fashionable Pleasure, making Butterfly-love to the whole Sex” (236). A “sprightly young Nobleman,” “great Vivacity of colouring,” “making Butterfly-love to the whole Sex”: both content and style, as Cleland describes them, are alluring. As he put it in his review of Peregrine Pickle, the reader is being decoyed by pleasure. But he also knows—it was already a commonplace in eighteenth-century arguments on the moral dangers of fiction—that a reader decoyed by pleasure may not want to renounce it, and that a text that presents itself as morally therapeutic may entice readers to imitate the very vices it represents so “sensibly”:

There are, it is true, some worthy and well-meaning Persons who disapprove this Way of handling of Vice, and who think that its Sores are of the noli me tangere Sort, not to be touched for Fear of inflaming and irritating the Itch of them: That even the End aimed at in presenting the Situations of it, does not atone for the Indecency of the Means; that it is holding the Light too near the Magazine; that in short they corrupt oftner than they instruct. (235)

Here, the metaphorical explosion—what happens when a “Light” is held “too near the Magazine”—is not a purgation but an inflammation of vice: the light of public exposure via literary representation ignites illicit desires. Cleland acknowledges the danger: “Such an History” as Pinot-Duclos’s Memoirs, he writes, “could not but imply certain ticklish Situations, in which austere Morality at least had some Reason to complain . . . but our Author has treated them with all imaginable Regard to Decency and Modesty” (236). Like the physician, the author needs to calibrate the dosage precisely: just enough “Vivacity of colouring” to bring the attractions of “false and fashionable Pleasure” alive, not so much as to make the work itself indecent or immodest.

Readers, however, make bad patients. In a passage toward the end of the preface, Cleland acknowledges that his endeavors may be futile. If the value of
fiction is to provide vivid examples in order to impress moral truths more forcibly than “Volumes of the finest Reasoning,” still, “how few [readers] are there whom their Passions suffer to benefit by them!” (239). In much of Cleland’s critical writing, readers and authors are locked in a kind of fatal embrace, bringing out each other’s most vicious tendencies. Surveying the literary marketplace at the start of his review of *Peregrine Pickle*, Cleland asks, “What are so many worthless frivolous pieces as we constantly see brought out, but the marks of that declension of wit and taste, which is perhaps more justly the reproach of the public than the authors who have been forced to consult, and conform to, its vitiated palate?” Aiming to please, authors and booksellers have issued a “flood of novels, tales, romances, and other monsters of the imagination, which have been either wretchedly translated, or even more unhappily imitated, from the French, whose literary levity we have not been ashamed to adopt, and to encourage the propagation of so depraved a taste.” But Cleland’s lashing out, as here against translators and imitators from the French, is self-incriminating, even as he seeks to lay the blame elsewhere. When he wrote this, he was in the midst of writing his own imitation of French libertine fiction, the *Memoirs of a Coxcomb*; he had just published his explicit translation of the medical case history of the cross-dressing lesbian seducer Catherine Vizzani, full of “flagrant Instances of a libidinous Disposition”; he was soon to translate Pinot-Duclos’s libertine *Memoirs*; and in the preceding sixteen months he had been arrested and threatened with prosecution twice for having written the *Woman of Pleasure*. Who exemplified the wretched and unhappy state of authorship better than Cleland? Even when he draws a clear line of moral demarcation, he places himself on both sides of it. In his preface to Pinot-Duclos, he writes,

> As to the Objections which are made against this Branch of Writing in general, that is to say, against Romances, Novels, and Novel-Memoirs, they can certainly take place only against the Abuse of them. Every thing obscene, or tending to corrupt the Morals of the People, cannot be too severely animadverted upon, though even those Poisons have their Use, when their Distribution is properly guarded and restrained. (236)

Having made a clear distinction between literary forms and their abuse, and having unreservedly condemned “every thing obscene, or tending to corrupt the Morals of the People,” he then switches to an apologist for the corrupting and obscene: they can be useful, too, as long as they are properly administered. But useful for what? In the right physician-author’s hands, in an especially severe or desperate case, perhaps such poison is useful as medicine, a purga-
tive or emetic. Or perhaps, if the case is desperate enough, the only cure is the reader’s death. What cures one may kill another, but given “the Rankness and Malignancy of the Symptoms” (236), the risk has to be run.

The same antagonistic relationship between author and reader—a hostile confrontation of depraved tastes and poisonous remedies—finds its most lurid expression in Cleland’s discussion of ridicule, the second principle, along with realism, of his theory of fiction. Cleland credits this “surest Method of attacking [the] Errors . . . of the human Heart” to Horace, and compares it to a form of artillery, tapping into the metaphorical vein of military bombardment that runs through the text (234). But when he turns to examine Pinot-Duclos’s use of ridicule, Cleland adopts a different but equally murderous metaphor, that of a knife:

Our author has given the Ridicule he has employed so exquisite an Edge, by making it proceed even from the Hero of his Piece himself, in a Strain of unaffected Self-Condemnation . . . that he entirely gets the laugh on the Side of Virtue, which is the most shrewd Way of breaking the Heart of Vice. It is effectually turning its own Arms against itself; for Vice can less stand before a Laugh than before all the Artillery of grave Arguments, or Maxims of Morality. But especially when Folly is forced to laugh at itself, it dies, well-pleased, and licking the Knife that cuts its Throat. (234)

Cleland, having praised the “exquisite Edge” of Pinot-Duclos’s ridicule, turns that purely figural edge into an actual knife, a keener, more intimate form of “Arms” than bombastic artillery. It would be hard to devise a more gruesome, more perverse emblem for the moral aims of fiction than this of Folly—a figure for the reader in need of a cure—licking the knife that cuts its throat, “well-pleased.” The extreme degree of sexualized violence is startling—sadistic and masochistic at once. Folly takes such avid pleasure in its own murder that it licks the bloody knife that is killing it, even as we register that the hand that wields the knife is its own. The “Edge” of ridicule “proceed[s] even from the Hero . . . himself”; Vice “turn[s] its own Arms against itself.” In this emblem Cleland gives us Virtue cutting the throat of Folly, the author cutting the throat of the reader, and Pinot-Duclos’s self-condemning, self-murdering hero cutting his own throat, and laughing. Thus an emblem of moral correction is also a symbol of the author’s hatred for his audience and a self-lacerating acknowledgment of his own folly and vice, exemplified in his “propagation” of the very “depraved taste[s]” he condemns.

In Cleland’s critical writings on the novel, then, his forceful if rather conven-
tional argument that the purpose of fiction is “to convey instruction, under the passport of amusement” is unsettled by images and admissions that reveal the real transactions between authors and readers to be more hostile and disorderly than that of wise tutor and docile pupil. Readers may want vicious pleasures, not well-meant lessons in virtue; indeed Cleland’s own history of the novel’s development suggests that while there has been an overall progress toward the more probable and natural, readers keep backsliding, hungry only for “monsters of the imagination.” Authors, in response, have flooded the market with wretched, imitative works that only encourage more depraved tastes, and even those who endeavor to expose, and thus explode, vice run the risk of inflaming illicit desires by their skill in representing them.

Matters are further complicated in Cleland’s two “Novel-Memoirs,” the Woman of Pleasure and the Coxcomb, by his experimentation with narrative form and his deployment of sometimes egregiously unreliable narrators. Just as the variation form loosens the teleological grip of the Woman of Pleasure’s romance and education plots, thus calling the ready-made moral lessons of those plots into question, so the Coxcomb’s suspended ending, and its narrator’s self-absorption and dim-wittedness, challenge his characterization of his own text as a “history of my errors, and return to reason” (39). Unlike Fanny’s memoir, Sir William’s is structured as romance from the start. In its first scene, the nineteen-year-old Delamore (the name itself announces the genre) meets the beautiful and secretive fifteen-year-old Lydia, on the run for reasons unknown from her family. He falls immediately in love; she flees him when he starts to inquire into her identity; he vows to find her. Only a letter warning him that any further inquiries will endanger her, he writes,

hindered me from setting out that instant, and acting the part of a true knight-errant, in pursuit of a wandering princess. And indeed there was something so singular, and out of the ordinary road of things, in my meeting, falling in love with, and losing of Lydia, that did not make the less impression on me, for carrying a spice of the romantic through the whole adventure: I found, it seems, something flattering, in the idea, that such a peculiarity was reserved for me. (72–73)

From the first, Sir William interprets his experience according to romance conventions, although his very awareness of these as conventions—that in pursuing Lydia, for example, he would be “acting the part of a true knight-errant”—registers a certain ironic distance between William as narrator and William as romantic hero. Having set in motion this plot of love, disappearance, and pursuit, however, he pretty quickly drops it, and the novel shifts into
an episodic account of William's various sexual liaisons as he makes his entry into society. The first of the novel's three parts concludes with two affairs he has while living at his aunt's house in Warwickshire—with a lecherous widow, Mrs. Rivers, and Diana, a chambermaid—while in the second and third parts the theater of operations moves to London. With each of his three subsequent affairs William becomes vainer of his own charms and more scornful of the women with whom he's involved, all wealthy, and two titled: Miss Wilmore, Lady Oldborough, and Lady Bell Travers. As these affairs become more and more frustrating and entangling, his memoirs degenerate from libertine romp to misogynist rant. “I declared war within myself,” he writes, “against the whole sex” (193), and he sets off on a series of “conquests” of women he doesn’t even bother to name: the “immemorables” (194). But having “obtained the honour of passing for the most splendid, happy, dangerous coxcomb in town,” he grows “cloyed and sick of my successes,” leaves off seduction, and suddenly remembers Lydia, who “once more rose to my rescue, triumphantly, and dispelling the clouds and fumes of a debauched imagination, resumed a flame which was to burn the purer and fiercer for its victory over the fewel of a grosser fire” (195). Restored to his proper narrative genre, “in this violent reflux of the tide of love, I determined nothing so strongly as repairing my failure, and going personally in quest of her, with a diligence that should leave no hero of a romance, in pursuit of his princess, the odds of comparison to his advantage” (196). In short order he finds her, and . . .

“At this interesting conjuncture,” Smollett writes in his review of Cleland's novel for the Monthly Review, “the curtain is drawn so abruptly, as to leave the reader impatient of the disappointment, and eagerly desirous of seeing in another act, Sir William happy in the arms of the beauteous Lydia.”51 James G. Basker has argued that Smollett’s remark means that the work as published is unfinished and that Smollett “clearly perceived it as the first volume of a multi-volume novel.”52 Basker also cites the final sentence of the review—in which Smollett calls it “one of those few productions, which . . . a discerning reader may peruse to an end, without yarning, and even rise from it, with a wish, that the entertainment had been prolonged”—as evidence of Smollett’s “desire [for] a continuation.”53 As I read them, neither of Smollett’s statements really supports these claims: the second offers blandly polite praise of Cleland’s ability to sustain the reader’s interest, while the first expresses irritation with the ending’s abruptness and a sense of frustration at the absence of a suitably fulfilling final image of conjugal happiness. Smollett evidently disapproves of what he sees as the novel’s inconclusiveness, and in this sense may have de-
scribed it as unfinished, but I don’t find evidence in his review of any belief that a further volume was planned. Basker’s own remark that “the sudden reversal at the close of the book not only invites continuation, but lacks the material that would resolve the plot and balance the novel’s structure,” is astute, and I take up his argument in the final section of this chapter, in which I discuss the three memoirs’ endings. But whether or not the text of the Coxcomb has been cut off prematurely, it clearly corresponds to the Woman of Pleasure in its use of the romance plot as a vehicle for unifying, if not resolving, the narrative of the protagonist’s education.

Specters of Masculinity: William Delamore’s Education

The theme of education is introduced in the opening pages of the novel, as Sir William complains of the shortcomings of his own upbringing at the hand of his “over-tender” aunt: “for that a woman who had from her infancy constantly lived in the country, and of course had been but little acquainted with the world, could not be the fittest person in it, to superintend the bringing up of a young gentleman of my pretensions to make a figure in it, both from my birth, and my fortune” (40). His complaint displays William’s characteristic arrogance but also his understanding that the education he requires has less to do with Latin and Greek than with acquiring the manners needed to “make a figure” in the world in accordance with his wealth and social rank. William, like Fanny, is orphaned; both are thus free (or compelled) to make their own ways in the world. Yet if, as I’ve suggested earlier, their narrative trajectories are similar, taking each from the country to the city, innocence to experience, ignorance to worldliness, and the like, their social positions, from the start, are antithetical, as different as “woman” is from “man,” or plain Fanny from Sir William. By contrast with the dirt-poor Francis Hill, Sir William Delamore has inherited, along with his absent parents’ wealth, a place in the world, and this literal place—“two of the best estates in two of our richest counties in England” (39)—corresponds to his inherited social position as a member of Britain’s ruling class. Possessing as his birthright the prerogatives associated with both halves of the term gentleman—the prerogatives of masculinity and gentility—Sir William needs to learn, either by instruction or experience, how best to assume the responsibilities that go along with those prerogatives.

Cleland’s novel thus poses, from the outset, the same problem addressed in John Locke’s influential treatise Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693), in which Locke declared that “the principal aim of my Discourse is, how a young
Gentleman should be brought up from his Infancy.” Like Pinot-Duclos’s protagonist, who states that “I owe much to my Experience; but to my Education nothing” (2), William complains that his fortune “was secured to me much more effectually, as it happened, than a good education: For to say that I had not a bad one was barely all that I dare venture, and keep any measures with truth” (39–40). William does at the outset have a tutor who makes a start on educating him in keeping with the Lockean idea that “the great Principle and Foundation of all Virtue and Worth, is placed in this, That a Man is able to deny himself his own Desires, cross his own Inclinations, and purely follow what Reason directs as best, tho’ the appetite lean the other Way.” But because his education is interrupted at a crucial point, “just as the heat and impetuosity of my age, barely turned of seventeen, most required the guidance and direction of a governor” (41), he veers off course, and his regret at his tutor’s departure is “soon dissipated by the pleasure of thinking that I should have a greater swing of liberty.” In this sentence, “liberty” is affiliated with “dissipation” and “pleasure,” the antithesis of the self-denial for which Locke argues. Here, on the novel’s third page, William’s formal instruction ends, and here, with a swing away from Lockean self-control over his inclinations and appetites, his story proper begins. At liberty, about to fall into “errors,” if he is to “return to reason” by the close of his memoirs, he has to find his own way of making “a young Gentleman” of himself and so acquire an appropriately masculine and patrician identity. The question his memoirs raise, for all his preemptive claims in the affirmative, is whether he succeeds.

The vacuum opened up by his tutor’s departure is first filled by “the pleasures of the chase” (41) and, when those wear off, by “the ferment of desire for objects far more interesting than horses and dogs.” These “objects,” of course, are women—or, rather, phantasmal images of the abstraction “woman,” as William seems to have encountered few actual women in his life. In fact “the ferment of desire” is not an effect of encountering any other person, but a kind of spontaneous combustion or outpouring of the self. It is as if his “unbounded pursuit of hunting” animals triggers some interior thermal reaction, for as soon as satiety “put an end to the violence of my passion for [hunting],” he writes, “my blood now boiling in my veins, began to make me feel the ferment of desire” for those other as yet unseen “objects.” His own body, not another’s, dictates desire:

And a robust, healthy constitution, manifest in the glow of a fresh complexion, and vigorous well-proportioned limbs, gave me those warnings of my ripening man-
hood, and its favourite destination, by which nature prevents all instruction, and suggests the use of those things that most engage our attention, without putting us to the blush of asking silly questions . . . But now, those transient desires inspired by this rising passion, began to take a more settled hold of my imagination, and to grow into such tender pantings, such an eagerness of wishes, as quite overcame, and engrossed me intirely. Woman it was, that I may say, I instinctively knew, was wanting to my happiness; but I had as yet no determined object in that sex, but yearned, and looked out for one every where. (41–42)

The natural history of desire outlined here is almost the opposite of Fanny’s voyeuristic, imitative training in the Woman of Pleasure, even if the outcome—both are primed to have sex with the first man/woman they see—is the same. In sharp contrast to Fanny’s carefully graded lessons in eros, proceeding through “luscious talk” and visual demonstration, William explicitly sets “nature” in opposition to “instruction” and posits other-sex desire as instinctive, naturally dictated by the body. But if the body’s “boiling,” “ripening,” and “rising” come over him spontaneously and unbidden, they take hold, as he writes, of his “imagination”: it becomes the crucible where physiological sensations “grow into . . . tender pantings” and eager “wishes.” At the same time he asserts the instinctive nature of desire, then, he also acknowledges the transformative effects of imagination, by which an inchoate (and not even species-specific) “ferment” is turned into the wish for a woman, which he invests with all the “tender[ness]” and “yearn[ing]” suitable to a young man of sensibility.

As this passage suggests, the dynamics of erotic desire in William’s first-person account are complex: on one hand the pure instinct of boiling blood and vigorous limbs, on the other a “tender melancholy” by which, as he writes, he “was really mastered,” such that “this passion had a contrary effect on me to all others . . . from fierce and insolent, I was now I may say, transnatured to somewhat a more civilized savage” (42). Nature is itself subject to transformation, and desire, which is initially associated with animality—horses and dogs, the chase—becomes, by way of imagination, a civilizing force. There is, then, from the very beginning of William’s narrative of the origin of erotic desire, a splitting off of the affective from the bodily, even if the former is also described as an effect of the latter. This splitting off is taken a step further in the same paragraph—which acts as a prelude to the scene in which he meets Lydia—when, having described the softening and civilizing effects of eros, William writes, “Yet, strong as this youthful passion ever is, it was fated for some time at least to give way to a stronger and a nobler one, even love itself.” Fanny makes
a similar claim just before she meets Charles, and just after confessing she was ready to sleep with the first man that offered, writing that “love itself took charge of the disposal of me, in spite of interest, or gross lust” (34). But Fanny’s distinction between love and “gross lust” is crucially different from William’s distinction between the passions of love and eros. Love, for Fanny, burns away the grossness but is inseparable from lust—indeed is unimaginable apart from it. For William, by contrast, sexual desire, even in its softened and civilizing form, has to be displaced onto another object from the beloved, while she, as a sign of her idealized status, is regarded as asexual. So, after recounting his first meeting with Lydia, William writes that “all the desires I had hitherto felt the pungency of, were perfectly constitutional: the suggestions of nature beginning to feel itself. But the desire I was now given up to, had something so distinct, so chaste, and so correct, that its impressions carried too much of virtue in it, for my reason to refuse it possession of me” (47). Love passes the Lockean test by carrying the imprimatur of reason, and this underlines how utterly distinct it is from the “Inclinations” and “Desires” that William, as proof of his love’s and of his own “virtue,” has to make a parade of denying himself.

From her first appearance, then, Lydia is made to embody a distinction between two types of desire: one “constitutional,” bodily, “pungen[t],” the other rational, virtuous, “chaste.” As an object of the second type of desire, she comes to embody, for William and the reader alike, a specifically, stereotypically, feminine model of virtue. Significantly, however, she has nothing to say for herself: “In all that time,” as William admits, she “had scarce opened her mouth, and that only in monosyllables; but with such a grace of modesty, such a sweetness of sound, as made every string of my heart vibrate” (46). This last observation gives the game away. Incapable, for all he knows or cares, of forming a sentence, she does not present herself to him as a rational being capable of conscious virtue but instead as a source of pleasing vibrations, a purely sensual creature. Similarly, William’s occasional proto-Freudian slips make a mockery of his hymns to virtue. When he declares, for example, “Nothing was truer than that I had never once harboured a thought about [Lydia] inconsistent with the most rigid honour” (59)—or, later, when he writes, of the cottage she has fled, that “so far from the paradise my raptured ideas had once erected it into, it now wore to me the aspect of a cold, dreary, disconsolate desert” (72)—the silly, obvious sexual puns create a gap between narrator and author, between William’s account of his own motivations and Cleland’s ironic deflation of his claims. The effect is to put in question the binary opposition on which the moral and narrative structure of the Coxcomb rests: between (virtuous) love and (vicious)
gallantry, or sexual pleasure for its own sake. Failing to see that, at least in his own case, love and desire are all confusedly entangled, he conceives of Lydia not as a person but an abstraction, a figure out of the romance and amatory fictions in whose light he reads his own experience. And because the real women he encounters after Lydia’s disappearance choose, for reasons of their own, not to follow the models of feminine behavior he has learned from fiction, William swings wildly between extremes, one moment a lovesick swain, the next a heartless roué, by turns over-idealizing love and cynically exploiting the women he compulsively pursues.

William’s immersion in the clichés of romance is signaled by the occasional self-conscious allusion, as when he describes himself as “more romantically in love than all the Celadons that ever owed their existence to fiction,” Celadon being the archetype of the despairing, devoted lover, from the French pastoral prose romance L’Astrée (1607–1627) by Honoré d’Urfé. Here, William is being ironic at his younger self’s expense, and in such passages he presents himself as one who has grown out of his youthful naïveté, having exchanged romance for realism, error for reason. But Cleland is less easy on William than William is on himself, for just when he most emphatically repudiates the clichés of romance, as after his first meeting with Lydia, he betrays how thoroughly they have ensnared him:

I cannot here refrain from observing, that, not without reason, are the romance, and novel writers in general, despised by persons of sense and taste, for their unnatural, and unaffecting descriptions of the love-passion. In vain do they endeavour to warm the head, with what never came from the heart. Those who have really been in love, who have themselves experienced the emotions, and symptoms of that passion, indignantly remark, that so far from exaggerating its power, and effects, those triflers do not even do it justice. A forced cookery of imaginary beauties, a series of mighty marvelous facts, which spreading an air of fiction through the whole, all in course weaken that interest and regard never paid but to truth, or the appearances of truth; and are only fit to give a false and adulterated taste of a passion, in which a simple sentiment, is superior to all their forced productions of artificial flowers. Their works in short give one the idea of a frigid withered eunuch, representing an Alexander making love to Statira. (47–48)

It is perhaps unsurprising that William, in the grip of his “ripening manhood,” should equate aesthetic merit with sexual potency, so that the “unaffecting descriptions” of literary “triflers” are likened to the ridiculous exertions of “a frigid withered eunuch” vainly pretending to be the virile Alexander; but the
comparison not only emphasizes the blurring of sexual desire with the chaste “love-passion” he claims to feel for Lydia, it also raises doubts about the authenticity of his regard for her. For the name “Statira” is effectively a symbol for the interchangeability of female bodies and identities under male domination, referring as it does to two different women, mother and daughter, who became Alexander’s lovers in turn—the second taking her mother’s name when she took her place. The historical allusion suggests a parallel between “Alexander making love to Statira” and William making love to Lydia, and if the parallel flatters William’s nascent masculinity, it also suggests that Lydia has no identity of her own but simply “is” whatever William chooses to see her as.

William’s larger point in this passage is similar to Cleland’s own observations on the “imaginary, unnatural” conventions of romance in his critical essays on fiction. The first principle of any writing worthy of “persons of sense and taste” is realism: “truth, or the appearances of truth.” The fictional context of William’s literary-critical tirade damagingly compromises his authority, however, even if the views he espouses are also Cleland’s, for his attack on “novel writers” follows his own “forced productions of artificial flowers.” Lydia, for example, is described as exhibiting “the shape of a nymph, an air of the Graces, features such as Venus, but Venus in her state of innocence, when new-born of the sea” (44), and so, formulaically, on. The hackneyed comparisons put him firmly on the level of the romance writers he berates; indeed the last image, equating Lydia with the naked Venus, could have come from the pen of Shame-la’s Parson Tickletext, fantasizing Pamela “with all the Pride of Ornament cast off.” Similarly, when William turns to look back at the cottage where he has just met her, he writes, “Then! then I perceived all the magic of love. I saw now every thing with other eyes. That little rustic mansion, had assumed a palace-air. Turrets, colonades, jet-d’eaus, gates, gardens, temples, no magnificence, no delicacy of architecture was wanting to my imagination, in virtue of its fairy-power, of transforming real objects into whatever most flatters, or exalts that passion” (46–47). It is characteristic of Cleland’s complex rhetorical effects that we are invited at once to enjoy the artificiality and elegance of Sir William’s language and to observe how he deceives himself into believing that his own descriptions of “the love-passion” are more “natural” than those of other novel or romance writers.

In fact the phrase by which he condemns earlier, rival love narratives, “a forced cookery of imaginary beauties,” stands as a fair encapsulation of the Coxcomb, especially those parts dedicated to the romance with Lydia—not because William (or Cleland) is a bad writer, but because love, like writing, is an act of
imagination. Nothing, for example, really distinguishes Lydia from the vacuous mannequin Agnes, whom William unsuccessfully pursues in the novel’s second part, except for his imaginative investment of her with all the qualities of a heroine of romance. Like Agnes, she is virtually mute during their scenes together; as with Agnes, William can only approach her through the intermediary of a vigilant female guardian, to whom in effect he is compelled to make his addresses. Lydia has an air of “sweetness and gentle simplicity” (44) and a nice complexion; so has Agnes. If Sir William writes, of Agnes, that “she was, in short, in point of understanding, little better than a beautiful pantin [a marionette], of which Lady Oldborough directed the motions, and played the wires as best suited her views of interest or pleasure” (118), he notes of Lydia that, even as he is thunderstruck with love for her, she “had scarce opened her mouth, and that only in monosyllables” (46). As he writes later, “One could have indeed wished she had spoke more” (66), but in fact her silence, her essential blankness, allows William to project onto her the emotional qualities required of a love object—required, that is, by the codes of romance fiction, which as narrator he both mocks and (involuntarily) emulates.

Reading the story of his life according to the conventions of romance narrative—as a series of adventures and misadventures set in motion by the loss, and subsequent pursuit, of the original and only beloved—William serves for Cleland as a kind of test case in an inquiry into the adequacy of fictional forms as models for imitation or self-understanding. Despite his ironic awareness of his own susceptibility to the attractions of romance—as when, in the passage above, he describes the tricks his imagination played on him, “in virtue of its fairy-power, of transforming real objects into whatever most flatters, or exalts that passion [of love]”—he nevertheless remains in thrall to it in his essentially arbitrary idealization of Lydia, the infant incognita. “Fifteen was her utmost,” he writes on first meeting her (44), and when he observes that “her native modesty suffered her to say but little, and that only on subjects proper for her age,” he only underlines the limits of her childlike or doll-like allure. But those limits are really William’s, not Lydia’s. We see only what he relays, so if she is more than “a beautiful pantin,” if his “love-passion” is different in kind from his indiscriminate “panting” after interesting “objects,” the onus is on him to furnish the “appearances of truth” needed to sustain such distinctions. Failing that, he joins the company of literary “triflers” he condemns.

Samuel Johnson, in his *Dictionary of the English Language* of 1750–1755, defined a coxcomb as “a fop; a superficial pretender to knowledge or accomplishments” and a fop as “a coxcomb; a man of small understanding and much
ostentation . . . a man fond of show, dress, and flutter.” Yet despite the seeming interchangeability of the two words, the coxcomb Sir William is no fop as that term had come generally to be applied in literature of the period, for if both figures were portrayed as vain and “superficial pretender[s],” only the fop was derided as effeminate. A case in point from the *Coxcomb* is the “pale meager, spectre-like, young man of quality” whom Miss Wilmore “drag[s] after her” (103) when William first meets her at the theater. “As for her poor conductor, who had the air of a figure of straw stinted in the stuffing,” William writes,

he was it seems one of those insignificant danglers by trade, whom she could take and leave without consequence, and who was not absolutely without some merit, since he did himself justice enough to pretend to none, and humbly contented himself with handing the ladies to public places, and held it for the greatest honour, if they would let him fancy a suit of ribbons for them, or play with their monkeys, and to say the truth he looked as if favours of another sort would have cursedly embarrassed him. (106)

William’s close attention to this nameless figure who plays no further part in the story is a sign of his hunger for reassurance as to his own masculinity: this bloodless, asexual hanger-on lacks what William most emphatically, even insistently, has. He serves, as Cleland punningly suggests, as a straw man whose effeminacy shores up, by contrast, William’s vigorous, heterosexually rapacious masculinity. Unlike this “insignificant dangler,” whom the aptly named, assertive Miss Wilmore “rather dragged after her, than she was led by,” William is primarily concerned, during the affair that soon follows, to demonstrate his power over her: the power to compel her, if she cannot have William’s love, to renounce sex altogether. As he observes, “The idea of being the first to inspire her with sentiments of love, to fix her, to show her all over the town as my captive, and ty’d as it were to my triumphal car, carried with it something so soothing to my vanity, that I could not help giving it a dominion over me” (109). By forcing Miss Wilmore to renounce her “rakish” and promiscuous ways—the prerogative of aristocratic males like himself—Sir William asserts his own masculine dominance and differentiates himself from the beaus, fops, and fribbles whom Cleland satirically delineated two years later in his *Dictionary of Love*.

If the connection between masculinity and power is the subject, implicit or explicit, of every major episode of the *Coxcomb*, William’s anxiety about a possible breakdown in that connection is brought to an extreme of what Isobel Grundy calls “dread and disgust” in the episode detailing his affair with “the celebrated lady Bell Travers” (171). The final scene of this episode is certainly
among the most bizarre in eighteenth-century fiction. Hiding in Lady Travers’s closet one day in order to surprise her, William instead witnesses a perverse sort of primal scene: the unexpectedly maternal Lady Travers cradling her “ghastly” foreign manservant Buralt while a reluctant country woman, hired for the purpose, nurses him. The whole scene is marked by a descriptive excess that only accentuates its mysteriousness. “It is hardly possible to figure to one’s self,” Sir William writes,

a more ghastly spectre than what this wretch exhibited, wrapped in a kind of blue coat, that sat on him yet less loosely than his skin, which was of a dun sallow hue. His eyes goggled from sockets appearing sunk inwards, by the retreat of flesh round them, which likewise added to the protuberance of his cheek-bones. A napkin in the shape of a night cap covered all his hair, (except a platted queue of it, and some lank side-locks) the dull dingy black of which, by its shade, raised, and added to, the hideousness of his grim meagre visage. (188–189)

As if to reinforce the feeling of horror this “spectre” provokes, William writes that once he begins nursing, he “looked more like a sucking demon, or a vampyre escaped from his grave, than a human creature” (189). But if this last phrase—perhaps the first appearance of the word “vampyre” in an original work of English fiction—emphasizes Buralt’s alterity, his foreignness and unlikeness to William, the words “meagre” and “spectre,” which were earlier used in the portrait of Miss Wilmore’s fop, imply that the threat is close to home, and that William’s horror is a reaction not to monstrous otherness but to self-recognition. In Buralt he sees a reflection of himself unmanned, his masculine authority ceded to Lady Travers.

The threat Lady Travers poses to that authority was, however, what drew William to her in the first place. Reporting his first impressions of her, he writes that “she displayed, in fine, a sort of imperiousness much after my own heart, which began by awing, and ended by captivating, me. I conceived now that I had met with my match, and promised myself, without looking further, that I would try what was to be won, or lost, with one, whose reduction was however with me rather a point of ambition than of love” (173). Confronted with a strong and sexually assertive woman, as earlier with Miss Wilmore, William is driven, by an “ambition” that amounts to a compulsion, to plot her “reduction.” But unlike Miss Wilmore, Lady Travers beats William at his own game, and even “absorb[s]” his love for Lydia “in this ruling passion of my senses” (186). Ruled by, rather than ruling over, his desire for Lady Travers, Sir William begins to come undone. “My constitution,” he writes
overdrawn upon by the fierceness of my desires, and even by the vanity I took in the
pleasure I gave, began to give signs of suffering by my unmoderate profusion . . .
All my sprightliness, vigour, and florid freshness, the native attendants of healthy
youth, began to give shew of drooping, and flagged under the violence of the heat,
with which the constancy of fire in my imagination melted me down into current
love (186).

It is not so much the overtaxing of his body by sexual excess as the loss of con-
trol over his own desires that threatens a breakdown in William's constitution,
a breakdown that would make of him another “sucking demon,” a vampiric
“babe of delight” (189) utterly and abjectly dependent upon Lady Travers.

She, meanwhile, remains altogether in control of her own pleasure as well
as his; she does nothing without a careful calculation of its effects. As Wil-
liam writes, she “joined to the charms of her person, a consummation in all
the mysteries and science of voluptuousness, [and] employed such successive
varied refinements of it, that she appeared a new mistress to me upon every
re-approach” (186). Her disciplined self-regulation shows up his own inability
to govern his desires: “Lady Travers indeed, from reasons of self-interest, and
of an experience not unfamiliar to her, often recommended moderation to me,
but while she preached that necessary virtue, her presence made the practice
of it impossible.” It is this recognition of his powerlessness to resist “the ab-
solute dominion of an unremitting gust for her” (187) that leads to William's
absurd, misogynistic rantings after he sees Lady Travers with his shadow self,
Buralt. Buralt acts as a nightmarish foreshadowing of his own emasculation—
that is, the stripping away of his “natural” masculine authority—at the hand of a
woman who coolly assumes the prerogatives traditionally linked to masculinity.
Cleland’s ironic distance from his narrator is nowhere clearer than in the after-
math to this episode, when Sir William turns from rage to condescending pity:

I soon came to see lady Travers in no other light, than as one of those unfortu-
nate characters, constitutionally subjected by the violence of their passions, to those
weaknesses which too often debase those of the highest intellects, beneath their
own notions and principles; and who, by this means, become lessons of humility
to man in general, by shewing him, in the examples of others, to what excesses
intemperance, and mis-rule of appetite, are, at times, capable of carrying even the
wisest. (192)

It is, of course, William himself who has shown, in “the violence of [his] pas-
sions,” every sign of “weakness,” “debase[ment],” “intemperance,” “excess,”
and “mis-rule of appetite,” while Lady Travers has consistently maintained her “penetration, and acuteness of sense” (172) as she caters to her own pleasure. In the light of this episode, in fact, one might think back over William’s accounts of his earlier affairs with some skepticism. While he consistently portrays himself as the dominant figure, masterfully manipulating to his own designs any woman who attracts his attention, one can read these relationships the other way round and see the female characters as controlling, rather easily, the conceited Sir William. From Mrs. Bernard and Lydia through the young widow Mrs. Rivers, the aspiring maidservant Diana, the lighthearted Miss Wilmore, the licentious Lady Oldborough, the money-grubbing brothel keeper Mother Sulphur, to Lady Travers herself, all the women Sir William encounters gain precisely what they are seeking from their dealings with him, from sexual gratification to financial security to the furthering of their fashionable (read scandalous) reputations. Faced with a parodic image of his own debility in the figure of the “chamber-satyr” Buralt (190), Sir William seems to sense how tenuous his presumed authority has been all along, and he lashes out indiscriminately. “I declared war within myself against the whole sex” (193), he writes, as if the battle between masculine and feminine has to be waged inside his own psyche.

In contrast to the self-divided, self-deluded William, it is Lady Travers, of all the characters in the *Coxcomb*, who best exemplifies Cleland’s ideal of the “rational pleasurist,” as Fanny Hill labels the wise, benevolent, still sexually attractive sixty-year-old gentleman with whom she lives for eight months in the *Woman of Pleasure*. As she writes of him, in words that apply equally well to Lady Travers,

> Age had not subdued his tenderness for our sex, neither had it robb’d him of the power of pleasing, since whatever he wanted in the bewitching charms of youth, he atton’d for, or supplemented with the advantages of experience, the sweetness of his manners, and above all his flattering address in touching the heart by an application to the understanding. . . . He it was, who first taught me to be sensible that the pleasures of the mind were superior to those of the body, at the same time, that they were so far from obnoxious to, or incompatible with each other, that besides the sweetness in the variety, and transition, the one serv’d to exalt and perfect the taste of the other, to a degree that the senses alone can never arrive at. (174–175)

Lady Travers, with her “penetration, and acuteness of sense,” has taken for her own both William’s would-be sexually dominant role and his claims to superior reason; no wonder, when he realizes this, he “overflow[s]” with “gall and vinegar” (191). Of all the male characters in the *Coxcomb*, only Lord Merville,
William’s epicurean mentor, comes close to this union of reason and pleasure, which was a recurrent theme in Cleland’s writing and conversation. In one of his diary entries from 1779, Boswell writes, of a conversation he had with the then sixty-eight-year-old Cleland: “He said Epicurus was now well defended as not being a sensualist; that intellect and sense must unite in pleasure.”

Meriville, too, strikes the right balance: as William writes, “Even our most sensual gratifications were those of rational votaries to pleasure, and had nothing of the grossness of tavern-bacchanals, or brothel-orgies” (102–103). Yet Meriville remains a rather shadowy figure in the text, an instructor who serves as little more than a foil to Sir William—graciously yielding the point, for example, whenever they find themselves in competition for the same “prize” (always, of course, a woman)—and lacking any independent existence apart from his friend.

Lady Travers, by contrast, emphatically leads her own life. Although married, she “hoisted” early on “the flag of independance, and made all her advantages of her irregular condition, being now, properly speaking, neither maid, widow, nor wife” (172). Her evasion of the settled categories of feminine confinement is one sign of her freedom; a second is her “noble indifference” (184) to scandal. “She had taken the lead in life, with so high a hand,” William writes, “that she could very easily despise or dispense with the approbation of the rest of the world.” Robert Halsband and Isobel Grundy have both argued that Lady Travers is based on Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and while such an identification is conjectural, she corresponds to Lady Mary in intriguing ways.

Lady Mary spent time in Turkey as the wife of the British ambassador; Lady Travers is described by Sir William as “a seraglio of beauties” (186). Both eloped young with rich men whose love soon turned to indifference; both “had seen most of the courts in Europe” and were “flattered and consulted” by poets and political ministers (178). Lady Mary had a villa in the riverside suburb of Twickenham; Lady Travers has her own in the nearby riverside suburb of Chiswick. It may even be that Cleland had heard of Lady Mary’s infirm Swiss servant Fribourg and based the grotesque Buralt on him: “He was by birth a Swiss,” William notes; “she had picked him up abroad in her travels” (188).

In her biography of Lady Mary, Grundy contends that “Cleland’s Bell Travers episode is deeply misogynistic” and suggests that it originated in Cleland’s parents’ friendship with several of Lady Mary’s enemies: “Their son,” she writes, “came honestly by his prejudice against Lady Mary.” To my mind, the biographical evidence is far from clear, interesting as the complex history of the Clelands’ alliances and feuds may be. Cleland’s father had been dead for ten
years, and relations between John and his mother were by this point frigid and hostile by turns, so it is not obvious why he should want to take up his parents’ part in an old dispute. The one time Cleland does explicitly refer to Lady Mary, in his *Institutes of Health*, he singles her out for extraordinary praise. Noting her key role in promoting inoculation against smallpox in Britain (a practice she had first observed in her travels in Turkey), Cleland writes, “Was merit to be estimated rather by the nature of things, than by vulgar opinion, the British lady who first introduced that practice in this nation, by which, in all human probability, so many thousands of lives have been, and will be saved, certainly deserved, and perhaps, in a more grateful age than this, would have had a statue preferably to any of the illustrious destroyers of mankind.” For all William’s denigration of Lady Travers—he writes that she has no wit but only the “appearances of wit” and “the rage of being thought one” (178)—his memoirs make clear that she is far more conversant with “the pleasures of the mind,” (*Woman*, 174) in Fanny’s words, than he is: “flattered and consulted” by poets, courted by “authors who had read their works to her;” familiar enough with the “courts of Europe” to be the equal in her knowledge of politics of any “ten modern ministers” (*Coxcomb*, 178), she even knows enough of the world’s prejudices against learned women “to avoid making too great a display of her acquisitions” (179). As Grundy observes, his text is full of “casual insults” against Lady Travers and women in general, but instead of reading his misogynist screeds as the product of Cleland’s supposed animus against the real Lady Mary, they need to be read as outbursts of impotent rage.

William’s tirade echoes his earlier “impotent sallies of rage, and railing” (149) after he catches on that he’s been played for a fool by Lady Oldborough, who not only induces him to have sex with her in the vain hope she will let him sleep with her ward, the beautiful orphan Agnes, but tricks him into believing he has been pipped at the post by a secret lover, whom she shows to William lying with Agnes. In fact what he has seen is an artfully arranged tableau, illuminated by the light of a single candle, and the supposed farmer’s son, who lies “with his hand passed under her neck, and clasping her as it were to him” (145), is really “a lusty country-girl, picked out, and disguised for the purpose” (147). William later acknowledges that Lady Oldborough’s trick was “a coarse one enough employed on any but a novice” (147) and his inability to see through her counterfeit tableau belies his supposed skills in gallantry. For “the most splendid, happy, dangerous coxcomb in town” (194), as he styles himself, he is pretty easily duped, and he knows it. Only a “novice” could be fooled as he was, and it is precisely his recognition that he has been “reduc[ed]” by the women
he aimed to reduce that leads to his “copious expectoration of spleen, which I vented, in a ranting soliloquy, against the sex” (149).

The crisis that both Lady Oldborough and Lady Travers in their different ways provoke is one of power or, more precisely, the insufficiency of masculine authority. In both cases William is brought face to face with his own debility: his poor powers of sight, or insight, by Lady Oldborough and her tableau vivant; his “mis-rule of appetite” and imminent physical breakdown by the spectacle of his shadow self, Buralt. In both cases he “suppress[es]” the truth to Merville so as not to lose face (150, 190–191), and in both he tries to compensate for his sexual humiliation by what he graphically terms a “copious expectoration of spleen.” He is not unaware of his own ridiculousness, as when he describes himself embellishing his “ravings, with some scraps of poetry, theatrically tattered away,” and he confesses that the rhetorical excess of his “ranting soliloqu[ies]” is an expression of his own weakness in relation to the women he attacks, “whose power never stands more sensibly confest, than in these impotent sallies of rage, and railing” (149).

William’s constant anxiety to bolster his own sexual prestige and authority, so evident in his contempt and disgust for men like Miss Wilmore’s fop, the broken-down rake Lord Melton, or the vampire Buralt, and in his compulsion to subjugate all the women he meets, points to his failure ever to achieve a confident sense of his own sexual and social identity. After his break with Lady Travers, he writes, “I set out then full speed in the same career, which I had seen pursued by a number of coxcombs, whom I heartily despised” (194). That he chooses to imitate “coxcombs” he despises shows how insecure his sense of himself and his desires still is. Lacking any clear sense of what he wants, he also lacks any models of exemplary masculinity. There is a near total absence in the novel of admirable figures of male authority, in either the public or private spheres: no fathers, judges, patriarchs; no political, religious, or military standard-bearers. His tutor, Mr. Selden, exits too early to have lasting impact, and Merville—who, “at an age when most young men are held to begin the world, [had already] exhausted all its variety”—is also governed by “a constitutional indolence, which would not suffer him to give himself the trouble of maintaining his dissent from the humours or inclinations of his acquaintance” (101). Affable and well-bred as William declares him to be, Merville is as exhausted morally as the vampire Buralt is physically. Apart from Merville, the novel offers an array of even more obviously ineffectual, dissipated, broken-down coxcombs, from William’s four guardians, who dither inconclusively when he first arrives in London over whether he should be packed off on the grand tour, to the
“Mock-Machiavel” Lord Tersillion, whose repetition of a speech he had given in the House of Lords provokes William to ask, “What was this, however, but coxcombr, only of another species than mine?” (175–176).

The lack of any compelling figure of male authority leaves William with no one to emulate and no social responsibilities to assume. The inheritor of two of the best estates in England, he has no interest in managing or even visiting them, although he lives off their rents.\(^{66}\) Similarly, he has no interest in either military or political affairs, the usual domain of a man of his station, and while this may make him more appealing as a person, it leaves him with nothing to occupy his time except “gallantry.” At best he is an ornamental figure, at worst a parasite on the labors of others, and in either case soon to become one of the dissipated wrecks he has so mercilessly satirized.

But then, suddenly, everything changes. Lydia, like some fever-dream deus ex machina, “once more rose to my rescue, triumphantly, and dispell[ed] the clouds and fumes of a debauched imagination” (195). This quasi-religious vision of Lydia “rouzes” his heart and leads him to repent of his “follies” and resume his “quest of her” (196). The plot begins to accelerate as William decides to go abroad in search of her, meets a strangely alluring incognita at a masked ball, accompanies his aunt back to Warwickshire to retrace Lydia’s steps, finds the boat on which she sailed from Bristol to Ostend, stops off in London to join Merville (his traveling companion) only to get caught up in Merville’s new infatuation with the mysterious debutante Lady Gertrude Sunly—who turns out, of course, to be not only the incognita of the masked ball but Lydia herself, restored to her family and her true identity. All of this is shoehorned into just over ten pages of a novel that to this point has ambled along at a pretty leisurely tempo, and it produces a rushed, chaotic effect, as if the narrator has just noticed he is running out of time.

Lydia’s visionary reappearance triggers the libertine Sir William’s reformation and sets the romance plot back in headlong motion toward the outcome the reader surely expects: that is, in Smollett’s words, “Sir William happy in the arms of the beauteous Lydia, who (by the bye) turns out a young lady of high rank and fortune.”\(^ {67}\) But at the same time, nothing has changed, or changed convincingly, for as James Basker argues, “The sudden reversal at the close of the book . . . lacks the material that would resolve the plot and balance the novel’s structure.”\(^ {68}\) Despite William’s assurances on the opening page that the story of his life has the shape of a fully “resolved” plot—the “history of my errors, and return to reason”—in the closing paragraphs he is in a state of “transition from a painful to a not unpleasing inquietude,” his preparations to go
abroad “countermanded in an instant” (220), leaving him waiting, in suspense, to hear if he will be allowed to present himself to the beloved Lydia. Of course, as he has just learned, there is no Lydia but rather a Lady Gertrude Sunly, and his discovery that he has known and pined for her under a false name only emphasizes how little he has known her at all. She is little more than a cipher he can invest with the sensibility and virtue of a heroine of romance, and for that reason his reinstatement of her as the be-all and end-all of his existence is rather a regression to a kind of boyish fantasy than an advance. For all his worldliness and his indeed often witty observations on the self-delusions of the people he has encountered in his passage through upper-class London life, he has no way of imagining love or the shape of his own life apart from the conventions of romance fiction—according to which, having rediscovered the lost beloved, he has arrived at the happy end of the story. But really he is only back to what he was at the beginning: a good-looking country bumpkin smitten with an untested and uninterrogated fantasy-ideal. Rather than a genuine novel of education, then, what Cleland has produced in the _Coxcomb_ is a novel of _failed_ education.

Tailpieces: Fanny’s and William’s Last Words

It could be objected that this reading of the _Coxcomb_ overlooks the fact that the novel is simply unfinished. I agree that it is, in the same way that its protagonist is unfinished, but not, as Basker suggests, that the three-part text as it stands was intended to be just the first half of a two-volume novel published in installments, on the model of the _Woman of Pleasure_. The argument either way is necessarily speculative, and the evidence of the text suggests that Cleland did alter his original plan. He probably intended at first for William to go on his grand tour, as several passages in parts 2 and 3 prepare us to expect. This would have allowed Cleland to enlarge the scope of his catalog of the manners and follies of high life and to show off his own cosmopolitan breadth of knowledge, even as William pursued Lydia from one fashionable resort to another. But if this was his original plan, he clearly changed it before the masquerade scene, where the masked Lady Gertrude makes her debut. The plot turns of the novel’s last twenty-five pages—the hero’s sudden conversion, the heroine’s equally sudden return, the William-Merville love rivalry subplot (abandoned almost as soon as it is introduced), the formally awkward recitation by Mr. Withers of Lady Gertrude’s backstory—do bring together the main strands of the narrative, and they leave little more work for the plot to do to bring about
the foreordained union of William and his love. There is certainly no scope for another two hundred pages of misunderstandings and pursuits: if Cleland planned to keep the novel going, he surely would not have nipped the Merville-William rivalry in the bud or reconciled “Lydia” to her authoritarian father, who set the whole plot in motion by trying to force her to marry the odious Lord F. Instead, by removing every obstacle to Sir William and Lady Gertrude’s union, Cleland leaves the narrative nowhere else to go even as he refuses to provide the ending he has so visibly prepared.

Cleland’s closing off of these avenues of potential narrative complication suggests that as abrupt and unresolved as the Coxcomb’s ending is, he published it as a completed text. Unlike the first volume of the Woman of Pleasure, which ends with Fanny set up in new lodgings and promising Madam that “the number of adventures which befell me in the exercise of my new profession, will compose the matter of another letter” (89), there is no hint of a sequel at the end of part 3 of the Coxcomb.70 It’s true that the novel’s closing sentence, in which Sir William calls off his trip abroad and tells his aunt, in the last five words of the text, about “the revolution in my schemes,” invites the reader to wonder what happened next, in a quite different way than would the expected matrimonial finale. The effect is to reinforce Cleland’s representation of William as a notably unfinished hero, appropriate not for romance but for the novel: half-educated at best; lacking any settled or mature sense of his place in the world; suspended, as he says, between hope and inquietude. If this seems anachronistic, too “postmodern” a reading, I’d suggest that, to the contrary, such a strategy of inconclusiveness is within the norms of the midcentury French libertine fiction Cleland clearly drew on as his model. Pinot-Duclos’s Memoirs, for example, structured, like the Coxcomb, as a “Review” of the “Errors of my Youth” (4) in which promiscuous “Follies” are contrasted to rational “Pleasure” (2), concludes with a jarring and unexpected plot twist—unexpected by narrator and reader alike—that emphasizes the hero’s state of doubtful irresolution. Having finally mustered the courage to propose marriage to his first and greatest love, the widowed Mme. de Canaples, Pinot-Duclos’s narrator finds himself also in love with an orphaned ex-convent girl whom Mme. de Canaples has brought to live with her. Nevertheless, despite “this Division of my Heart” (189), when he honorably tells Mme. de Canaples of his conflicting desires, he seems to have reached that state of rational self-knowledge and self-control to which a reformed-libertine novel is meant to lead. As worthy as Mlle. de Foix may be of being loved, he says, “there can be no preferring her to you. My Reason in this Moment protests against a Moment of Surprise” (187). To his astonishment,
however, Mme. de Canaples refuses to listen to his protestations, telling him it is her will that he marry Mlle. de Foix. The latter, when the hero asks her if she loves him, says only “that I have assured Madam de Canaples, that she is the absolute Mistress of my Disposal, and that whatever were her Designs for me, she might depend upon a blind Obedience from me” (193). Confused by this arrangement between the two women, the narrator is further astonished when Mme. de Canaples announces that she has settled her late husband’s estate on him; when he protests against such an excess of generosity, she tells him he has no right to refuse: “Your Gratitude ought to make me no Answer, but by your Silence, and I dare add, by your Respect, and a perfect Submission to my Will” (197). Stunned into silence, as she commands, he is shepherded into marriage with Mlle. de Foix, and in the novel’s last paragraph reports himself “happy and tranquil” (198).

Far from having attained self-knowledge or any degree of clarity on the distinction between coxcombry and love, Pinot-Duclos’s narrator, like William at the end of his Memoirs, is caught in a state of bewildered disquiet. Uncertain what or whom he desires, Pinot-Duclos’s hero gives up all control over his erotic and domestic life to Mme. de Canaples, his happiness an effect of numbed acquiescence. William is left hanging more visibly, unsure what awaits him. If Pinot-Duclos’s text has an ending without a hero, Cleland’s has a hero without an ending. Pinot-Duclos’s Memoirs finishes with the promised happy ending of conjugal felicity at the cost of the protagonist’s will and power of speech; Cleland’s ends with a suspension of plot at the moment of the protagonist’s greatest disorientation and emotional tumult. In that respect, the Coxcomb signals the influence of the most significant work of a novelist Cleland singled out in his critical writing: Crébillon’s 1738 The Wandering Head and Heart, a novel that similarly comes to a halt before the promised ending of its reformed-libertine plot. Just as William, introducing the “history of my errors, and return to reason” (39), writes that “if I owed to that amiable and unaccountable sex [that is, ‘the ladies’], my having been a coxcomb, I owe to a select one of it too the being one no longer,” so Crébillon declares that while his hero, Meilcour, “simple at first and artless,” lapses into “a man full of false ideas and riddled with follies,” he is, “finally, in the last part, restored to himself, owing all his virtues to a good woman.”

Meilcour, like William, falls in love with his “good woman” (Hortense) at first sight, not knowing her identity; as Catherine Cusset observes, and as is also true of William and Lydia, Meilcour “never finds Hortense when actively seeking her; he meets her always by chance, and her vision strikes him when he least expects it.” For both narrator-protagonists,
the beloved embodies a categorical distinction between what William calls “the true love-passion” (195) and “the wantonness of a promiscuous chace” (194), yet in both cases the narrator inadvertently plants a seed of doubt as to the authenticity of “true” love by betraying how much this owes to the model of other romance narratives. As Meilcour writes of the emotions provoked by his first view of Hortense at the opera: “Full of agitation I returned home, all the more convinced that I was deeply in love because the passion had been implanted in my heart by one of those bolts from the blue that characterize all great affairs in novels” (788).

Reading his experience in light of the topoi of romance fiction, Meilcour casts his ensuing vacillation between the young, silent, melancholy Hortense and the forty-year-old libertine Mme. de Lursay as an inward struggle between true and false selves, the faithful lover and the vain coxcomb. But while the whole meaning of his text hinges on his eventual return to his true self after a period of égarement, or libertine errancy, Crébillon’s novel ends with its hero more self-divided than ever. Having resolved to break with Mme. de Lursay, Meilcour nevertheless goes to her house in search of the elusive Hortense, but instead of leaving when he finds she’s not there, he stays, “carried away by emotions that I did not understand and could not have defined” (894). In short order, Mme. de Lursay seduces him. Soon, however, he feels “an emptiness in my heart” (909), and in a moment that prefigures William’s “redemptive” vision of Lydia, even as Meilcour lies in Mme. de Lursay’s arms, “Hortense, whom I adored though so utterly forgotten, resumed her sway over my heart.” Yet the effect of this triumphant return is not to recall Meilcour to virtue but instead to impel him “to drown in new frenzies a memory that continually plucked at my mind,” so that “torn away from pleasure by remorse, snatched from remorse by pleasure, I could not be sure of myself for a moment” (910). Pleasure and remorse, figured as harpies that tear and snatch at the narrator, are linked metonymically to the two women he desires, and while the novel’s preface seems to promise a moral awakening that will lead Meilcour to a conventional happy ending with Hortense, this final scene suggests that, for Meilcour, the condition of being “restored to himself” is just a keener awareness of his own unresolvable “contradictions” (910). “I was still far,” he writes in the novel’s penultimate sentence, “from resolving the conflict within me.” This is confirmed in the text’s final sentence, in which Meilcour writes, “I left [Mme. de Lursay], promising, in spite of my remorse, to see her early the next day, firmly resolved, moreover, to keep my word.” The irony of this is not just, as Cusset argues, that Meilcour uses the lexicon of keeping faith (“firmly re-
solved”; “to keep my word”) in the context of his infidelity and “incapacity to resist carnal pleasures and to be faithful to his genuine love for Hortense,” but also that Meilcour’s assertion that he was “firmly resolved . . . to keep my word” actually implies that he did not do so. This would be in keeping with a pattern running throughout the novel, that whenever Meilcour resolves to do one thing (to find Hortense, to break with Mme. de Lursay), he does the opposite. It also leaves us, as readers, in the same position we’re left in by the last sentence of the *Coxcomb: face to face with our own frustrated expectations of a “real”—in other words, fictional—ending.

We readers, that is, expect romance. So do the narrators, Sir William and Meilcour. And Cleland, following Crébillon, provides romance, up to a point, while withholding and so inducing us to reflect on the satisfactions it pretends to provide. By suspending the action just when readers are waiting for the loose ends of the plot to be tied up and the true lovers to be reconciled, Cleland and Crébillon not only draw attention to the artificiality of such plot structures but also call on us to question the narrators’ claims to have reached some final understanding of themselves and of their own experience. William, like Meilcour, links self-understanding to love for the “right” woman, but both authors ironically undercut their narrators’ representations of true love by showing them to be unconscious imitations of what they have read in other novels. In adapting Crébillon’s device of the “suspended ending” (as Cusset terms it) to the *Coxcomb*, Cleland thus provokes broader questions about the relationship between incomplete narratives and unfinished selves.

No such questions arise, it seems, at the end of the *Woman of Pleasure*. Fanny is certainly married to Charles, in what she calls “this happiest of matches” (187), and is mother to a number of “fine children.” She is living in “great ease and affluence” (1), and even if her occasional absurdities of language tarnish her moralistic summing up, she has clearly “got snug into port” (187) in a way that William and Meilcour emphatically have not. Enjoying “every blessing in the power of love, health, and fortune to bestow” (1), she seems, in a comically outrageous affront to Richardsonian ideals of sexual virtue, to offer a model for the formation of a married “bourgeois” female subject. Yet for all Fanny’s material rewards and expressions of happiness, not every reader has been swept up in the celebratory spirit. Carol Houlihan Flynn has observed that “we leave the happy couple not hand in hand, but separated,” Fanny at home writing letters while Charles trawls through brothels with their eldest son. Kate Levin has unpacked what she calls “the illusion of the *Memoirs*’ happy ending,” in which “middle-class morality” is revealed to be “infected” by the logic of prostitution.
Gary Gautier, more bluntly, has maintained that her “eloquent defense of virtue patently proves Fanny a fool.” The evidence to support such skeptical or contrarian views of the novel’s ending is twofold: the economic motivation of Charles and Fanny’s marriage, and Charles’s habit of whoring, which he has bamboozled her into accepting as a vehicle for their son’s moral education. As she writes to Madam in the text’s penultimate paragraph:

You know Mr. C—— O——, you know his estate, his worth, and good sense: can you? will you pronounce it ill meant, at least of him? when anxious for his son’s morals, with a view to form him to Virtue, and inspire him with a fixt, a rational contempt for vice, he condescended to be his master of the ceremonies, and led him by the hand thro’ the most noted bawdy-houses in town, where he took care that he should be familiariz’d with all those scenes of debauchery, so fit to nauseate a good taste. (188)

The more closely one looks at this passage, the more doubts it provokes. The educational method she approves of here is the same she called for in the heat of her confrontation with the sodomites, but as her whole memoir has shown, this is the way to excite, not curb, desire: far from inducing nausea, familiarization with “scenes of debauchery” leads first to arousal and then, inexorably, to an imitative acting out. Her failure to connect her husband’s and son’s activities to her own experience may prove Fanny a fool, but it may also betray a profound anxiety about the marriage in which she is trapped. For although she urges Madam to accept his claim that it is only because he is “anxious for his son’s morals” that Charles “condescended to be his master of the ceremonies” on a whorehouse tour, her insistent repetitions (“You know . . . you know”) and rhetorical pleas (“can you? will you . . . at least of him?”) signal her own even more anxious need for reassurance.

And what, one might ask, is Charles’s “estate”? He has none from his father, who “over-liv’d his income” (47), nor is anything left of his grandmother’s annuity, “out of which she had laid up no reserves” (56). Charles “lost the little all he had brought with him” (180) from his colonial venture in the South Seas on his journey home, and he has no profession; so whether “estate” refers to land or social position, Charles’s only comes from the wealth that legally became his the day he married Fanny. It is he who insisted on marriage, but the topic only arose when she told him the full extent of her fortune, built up over a career as prostitute (“a reserve of eight hundred pounds” she earned at Mrs. Cole’s [173]) and concubine (the “vast possessions” she inherits after the rational pleasurist’s death [176]). She ascribes his insistence to “the plea of love” (186), as she had
already offered to give him her fortune as an “unreserv’d, unconditional dona-
tion,” but she does not consider (or allow herself to ponder) that only marriage
can secure it to him by law and so make his real economic dependence on her
disappear, as if by magic. After marriage, she has no fortune, no estate, but
his.

As with “estate,” so with “worth”: economically, Charles is worth what mar-
riage brought him; in any other sense, his worth is questionable. It is as an
object of sexual desire that he is most vividly present, and so worth most, in the
text, but by the time Fanny writes, even that fire has died out. This is in fact why
she writes. As she puts it in her account of their first day together, “Yes even
at this time, that all the tiranny of the passions is fully over, and that my veins
roll no longer but a cold tranquil stream, the remembrance of those passages
that most affected me in my youth, still chears, and refreshes me” (42). With
Charles and son off on their bawdy-house crawl, eros, for Fanny, can only be
conjured in writing. This is nowhere more striking than in her account of her
reunion with Charles, in which the temporal distance between the sexual scene
and her writing of it collapses: “my thighs now obedient to the intimations of
love and nature, gladly disclose, and with a ready submission resign up the soft
gateway to entrance at pleasure: I see! I feel! the delicious velvet tip!—he enters
might and main with—oh!—my pen drops from me here in the extasy now
present to my faithful memory!” (183). Fanny’s drift into the present tense—in
a scene predominantly narrated in the past—effects a confusion between her
body then and her body now, highlighting at this moment more than any other
the power of writing to make sensations present, and thus to offer a medium
for not only the expression but also the experience of “extasy.”

Fanny’s story, then, ends where her letters begin: she takes up a pen to write
her memoirs, in answer to her reader’s “desires.” For that reason it might be
more telling to describe her text, and William’s, as artist’s novels than simply as
novels of education. Of course, every first-person narrator is, as the author of
his or her own text, to that degree an artist, from Robinson Crusoe to Crébillon’s
Meilcour and the narrator of Pinot-Duclos’s Memoirs. But Fanny and William
are much more self-conscious than these other three about their own activity
and aims as writers, and about the challenge of forging a literary style capable
both of conveying the truth of their sensations of love and sexual desire and
of triggering or evoking those sensations in the reader. While neither of them
admits to designs of an authorial career, both set themselves in self-aware oppo-
sition to the deficient productions of rival authors, as when William denounces
“novel writers in general . . . for their unnatural, and unaffecting descriptions
of the love-passion” (47), or when Fanny positions her work “between the revoltingness of gross, rank, and vulgar expressions, and the ridicule of mincing metaphors and affected circumlocutions” (91). Indeed the challenge they take up is the same taken up by Cleland in Bombay: to “write freely” about eros “without resorting to the coarseness of . . . quite plain words.”

As Ruth Yeazell has argued, Cleland’s, and his narrators’, motive for shunning “coarseness” and “plain words” is double: to avoid revolting their readers with the “gross, rank, and vulgar,” but in so doing, paradoxically, to give to their descriptions more of what Fanny calls “their due spirit and energy” (91). Some thirty years later, in a conversation Yeazell cites to shed light on this paradox, Boswell reports Cleland saying that he found “Sterne’s bawdy too plain” and that he had once told Sterne off for it. As Cleland tells Boswell: “I reproved [Sterne], saying, ‘It gives no sensations.’ Said he: ‘You have furnished me a vindication. It can do no harm.’ ‘But,’ [I said,] ‘if you had a pupil who wrote c—— on a wall, would you not flog him?’ He never forgave me.”

It is no wonder that Sterne could not forgive Cleland for equating him to a dirty-minded schoolboy in need of a flogging. But the basis on which Cleland reproved Sterne is not, or not just, that his language is “gross, rank, and vulgar” but that “it gives no sensations”—that it is neither arousing nor affecting. Sterne twists this aesthetic reproof into a moral vindication, but for an author so attuned to sensation in all its forms, the criticism must have stung. Sir William faults his rival authors for the same deficiency: “In vain,” he writes, “do they endeavour to warm the head, with what never came from the heart” (47). To “warm the head,” however—that is, to excite the reader’s imagination—is, as Sterne saw, to run the risk of doing harm: of inflaming or, as Cleland wrote in the preface to Pinot-Duclos, “holding the Light too near the Magazine” (235).

It was Boswell who, reporting an earlier meeting with “old Cleland,” referred to the Woman of Pleasure as “that most licentious and inflaming book.” In doing so, he paid tribute to Fanny’s authorial success in finding the right stylistic register, a “mean temper’d with taste” (91) between the “gross” and the “mincing.” Like William, she has taken to writing to show up other, inferior authors, as well as to give “the remembrance of those passages that most affected me in my youth” the clarity and shapeliness of art. Like William, too, she has cast remembrance in the form of romance and has cast herself as the protagonist of a narrative of moral education, but neither of them, by their stories’ end, is in secure possession of the happy outcome to which their plotlines lead, and neither has disentangled the real from their fantasy-ideals. William’s self-congratulation on his avowed but untested “return to reason” and Fanny’s gran-
diloquent but self-deceiving “tail-piece of morality” may make them objects of
the reader’s laughter or contempt—Fanny does her best to head off precisely
this reaction from Madam (187)—but such a response only confirms the seri-
ousness of the novels’ moral aims, in that both require the reader to gauge the
distance between the narrators’ claims and the truth that leaks through their
representations. Judgment is only half the story, however. If we are invited by
the ironic gap between Cleland and his narrators to assess the truth of their
statements, we are also warmed by the sensations—of eros, love, and delight in
the play of language—that the text inflames. To the extent that they succeed in
this, Fanny and William have grown into authors who, like Cleland, can both
give pleasure and do harm.