Fanny Hill in Bombay

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Of all the works he produced in the 1750s, the one whose failure stung Cleland the most was his translation of Pietro Metastasio’s libretto for *La Clemenza di Tito* (1734). First set to music by Antonio Caldara, this heroic *melodramma*, best known today in Mozart’s version of 1791, was transformed by Cleland into the blank verse tragedy *Titus Vespasian*, whose rejection by the actor and theatrical impresario David Garrick came as both an aesthetic and a financial blow. Although it was hard to get new work produced, especially after the 1737 Licensing Act tightened restrictions on both plays and playhouses, the theater offered writers the possibility of earnings far greater than the twenty guineas Cleland got for the copyright of the *Woman of Pleasure* or the twenty-five he would later be paid for the *Woman of Honor*. In addition to the money they could make from selling the copyright to the text itself, playwrights were paid the net takings from the play’s third night (and, if they were so lucky, the sixth and even the ninth), and this “benefit,” by the second half of the eighteenth century, could amount to some hundreds of pounds. So it made sense for Cleland to persist in extolling to Garrick the merits of *Titus Vespasian*
even after Garrick had given it the brush-off, in the hope (vain, as it turned out) of changing his mind.

Cleland made his case in a letter dated 31 July 1754. Characteristically, the letter offers his distinctive blend of the crabby and the lofty, the sardonic and the aggrieved: while soliciting Garrick’s favor, Cleland also accuses him, at least obliquely, of poor judgment and worse taste. His rhetorical strategy throughout is wholeheartedly to endorse Garrick’s views on tragedy but then insinuate that Garrick fails to live up to them, having caught “that infection from a false taste, of which I can scarce name that dramatic author who has not died his theatrical death for these fifty years past.”2 He writes, for example, “The ‘calm admirable’ is, as you most justly indeed observe, unconstitutional to tragedy, which delights in storms,” but berates Garrick for missing the essential point: “these storms must be the work of Nature, letting them loose on a subject great and worthy of their fury,—the deep, in short; not like those paltry blasts of art employed in raising storms in a tea-cup, such as tragedizing trivial or even ludicrous situations, as for example, the Adventures of a London-Prentice, or the whine of a true [girl] like Demetrius, in the Brothers” (57). Cleland’s examples of the “trivial” and “ludicrous” are aimed straight at Garrick himself, who as manager of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane had kept George Lillo’s The London Merchant (the play to which Cleland’s “Adventures of a London-Prentice” refers) in repertory, and who had acted the leading role of Demetrius in Edward Young’s The Brothers (1753) just the year before. Cleland’s mocking “whine of a true [girl]” attacks Garrick’s performance as much as the play itself, a neoclassical tragedy Garrick had the poor taste to choose over Titus Vespasian.

Cleland follows this taunt with an apparent endorsement of Garrick’s theory of tragedy: “As to the Striking! the Pathetic! the Terrible! the blending of which you likewise recommend, as the very sine qua non of Tragedy, I subscribe without reserve to your sentiment” (58). Fair enough, but he goes on to suggest that Garrick doesn’t know what these terms really mean. Of the “striking,” for example, he asks, “Are rants to be called so? or those sonorous expressions which fill the ear, and leave the head empty? And yet, do not these compose the blow-bladder style of most of our modern tragedians, whose pieces have not been unjustly damned, if but for containing so many of those horrid sins against Nature, which true wit never commits” (58). Nature is as usual Cleland’s touchstone of aesthetic value: his aim in Titus was to avoid “the abuse” of the striking, the pathetic, and the terrible, to “temper the dose of them just sufficient for [Titus’s] health and vivacity, so as to exhibit the colouring of Nature, which I have vainly, it seems, preferred to the more striking ornaments
of modern tragedies, which appear for the most part tauder’d out, like some pale hags of quality, with paint, patches, and false-brilliants of french paste” (58). Setting himself against such patched and painted hags, Cleland implicitly casts Garrick as one of their admirers, or even a hag himself, “tauder’d out” in his stage makeup and costumes. Although celebrated for his “natural” style of acting and turn away from the declamatory, Garrick’s rejection of Titus betrays his actual fondness for the artificial.

Cleland writes to convince Garrick that Titus fulfills Garrick’s own definition of tragedy better than other plays he preferred to it and that it would succeed on stage: the “contexture” of Metastasio’s opera, he writes, “exclude[s] all declamation, all florish of sentiment, but what rise naturally out of the situations, which are numerous, and some of them appeared to me, at least, singularly theatrical” (56). In particular, “the situation in the fifth act,” when Titus forgives the friends who have betrayed him and plotted his death, “was never scenefied before. It is absolutely new and original, and the effect of it . . . was such as to draw tears from eyes not much used to the melting mood” (57) when Cleland gave a private reading. In claiming that Titus has the power to “draw tears” from its audience, Cleland moves away from his propensity elsewhere to blame readers for the degeneracy of modern taste. Indeed he aligns himself with a popular current of taste in the later eighteenth century: an appeal to sentiment and the body—such as here, the tears that are drawn (involuntarily, irresistibly) “from eyes not much used to the melting mood.” Instead of blaming the “vitiated palate” of the public for the debasement of literature, he turns the tables, though still casting himself as the lone champion of literary virtue. It is not readers but authors and showmen—and no one embodied the blending of those two roles more successfully than Garrick—who are guilty of polluting the cultural waters, an act Cleland equates to bestiality and murder, as in the final paragraph of his defense of Titus:

I shall leave to happier authors the by me unenvied task of elevating, surprizing, and frothing up that wonderfull sublime which is it seems so necessary to secure the acceptance, if not to make the fortune, of a new play. Let who will for me, supply with their drugs the poison-shops of taste: for should it even be true that the Public was so eat up with that green-sickness, that craving for trash which is imputed to it and which I never observed; for to me, it ever seemed rather to good-naturedly endure, than to palate, it, for want of better fare set before it; but still those authors who against their better Judgement, and taste, would nurse the distemper, for the sake of their gain by it, can with no better grace excuse themselves than the Florentine, who
being condemned to death for coupling with a She-goat, pleaded that it was not for
the sin-sake he had committed the fact, but in the hopes of its producing a monster
for him to get an honest livelihood by making a Show of it. (58–59)

No wonder Garrick didn’t change his mind about *Titus Vespasian*. Cleland por-
trays him to his face as a worse-than-sodomite, who would make a show of his
own “horrid sins against Nature, which true wit never commits.” Insinuating
that he is a showman exhibiting monsters of his own perverse making, a mur-
derer turning theaters into “poison-shops of taste” and forcing a “craving for
trash” onto an otherwise healthy, good-natured public, Cleland could not have
been more caustic in his representation to Garrick of Garrick’s own crimes. It
is as if he has been carried away by both the intensity of his feelings and the
extravagance of his figurative imagination, so that what spills out on the page
runs counter to his professed and practical aims.

If tragedy “delights in storms,” Cleland’s most impassioned tragic outbursts
are to be found not in *Titus Vespasian* but in his private letters, such as this
to Garrick.4 The middle to late 1750s in particular—the years of *Titus, Tombo-
Chiqui*, and the satirical verse epistle *The Times!*—seem to have been the most
distressing and maddening of Cleland’s life. The combination of financial in-
security, bordering on penury, and family antagonisms, bordering on hatred,
led him to write a series of letters in which his emotions are laid barer than in
any other of his writings. They are also self-consciously writerly performances,
aiming to project a persona of himself as unjustly injured gentleman and ma-
liciously disinherited son, “sick and languishing,” as he puts it in one letter,
“dying of every death at once,” as he writes in another.5 All letters are per-
formances, but if Cleland’s at times have the air of the theatrical “rants” he
deplores in the letter to Garrick, there is no reason to doubt the genuineness of
the anger, pain, and frustration he pours out in them. In a set of thirteen letters
dating from November 1752 to September 1762, one to his mother, Lucy, and
the others to her lawyer Edward Dickinson, Cleland rails against what he rep-
resents as her cruel treatment of him in freezing him out of the administration
of his father’s and her estates and tightly restricting the payment of his modest
annuity (£30 per year).6 Insofar as this is just a dispute over his allowance, his
epistolary ragings might seem like the “storms in a tea-cup, such as tragedizing
trivial or even ludicrous situations,” that Cleland mocked to Garrick. But the
letters are compelling not only for what they reveal of the severely dysfunctional
state of the Clelands’ family life but for the violence, excess, and extravagance of
the writer-son’s authorial voice. Seemingly out of control, his language in these
letters—which presumably survive only because Dickinson retained them with his other business papers—captures Cleland’s emotional volatility while also registering the impact of the value placed on feeling in the mid- to late eighteenth century.

With Cleland, the feelings in question are seldom those of tenderness, sympathy, or pity, which burst in the form of tears from the eponymous hero of Henry Mackenzie’s novel *The Man of Feeling* (1771); they are more often those of fury, outrage, and scorn. Or such at least is the case in his letters from the 1750s, which are closer in spirit and rhetoric to the violent tumult of Sturm und Drang than to the sighs of sentimental novels. In his fiction of the 1760s, however, Cleland did turn to sentimental romance of a more conventional kind, even if his aim was in part to interrogate those conventions, as he had in the *Coxcomb* and *Woman of Pleasure*. Although he was still estranged from his mother—in a letter of September 1762 he wrote that he had heard from a third party “that Mrs Cleland, did not know whether I was alive or no”—his life after 1760 was in less of an uproar, and by later in the decade he appears to be in pretty comfortable circumstances, even going on holiday now and again in Somerset and Buckinghamshire. Lucy Cleland’s death in May 1763 brought him a legacy of £100 and an annuity of £60 per year, and the four comic-sentimental novellas collected in *The Surprises of Love* (1760–1764) were his first real success since the 1753 *Dictionary of Love*, so he was no longer so financially and emotionally wracked as he had been the decade before. Not that Cleland ever mellowed, exactly: in a journal entry from 1772, Boswell, who seems to have found him intriguing, describes Cleland as “a fine sly malcontent,” and in a letter to Garrick the same year, eighteen years after *Titus’s* rejection, Cleland is still complaining about it. But one should keep sight of the “fine sly[ness]” Boswell observed: when Cleland, near the end of this last letter to Garrick, writes, “Your having, however, been the death of my vain hopes, gives me, at least, some title to your forgiveness of the tremendous length of this address,” he is needling, even baiting him, but no longer lamenting; there is some asperity in his tone, but not the anguish that shoots through the letters to and about his mother in the 1750s.

In this chapter I set Cleland’s later fiction—*The Surprises of Love* and the 1768 *Woman of Honor*, a three-volume epistolary novel—against the Cleland-Dickinson-Cleland correspondence of the 1750s to explore the different registers of feeling in his private and public writing and the changing role of sentiment from his earlier to his later work. The letters seem to represent the antithesis of everything he celebrates in the later fiction: instead of delicacy and restraint, the letters seethe with violent, excessive language; instead of subordinating the
passions to virtue and reason, the letters’ author is overwhelmed by emotions he cannot control. “My brain is on fire,” he writes in one; “I do not know what to write, or how to act.” Of course it is hardly surprising that the author in private life does not live up to his own prescriptions; the wonder would be if he did. But letters are not wholly private—they can be passed around, copied, read aloud—nor are they necessarily any more transparent than more obviously public writing. Cleland’s letters to Dickinson may be heartfelt, but they are also intended to elicit an emotional response, to be read or sent on to Cleland’s mother, to be discussed between Lucy Cleland and her sister, Lady Allen, to be pored over within his mother’s circle of friends; indeed he imagines such a scene in one of them. By the historical accident of their survival as a collection, these letters present many of the same interpretive challenges as an epistolary novel: how to reconstruct a coherent story line from fragmentary materials, how to assess the motivations of the various correspondents, how much faith to place in their words. It would be facile simply to equate real and novelistic letters but no less so to separate “public” and “private” texts into mutually distinct spheres. To do so would be to ignore the fluid and plural readerships of the private texts as well as the isolation and privacy of much novel reading, and to overlook the theatricality and bombast of the letters as well as the intimacy of address of the public, published work.

If too categorical a division of public and private begs the question of the different possible relationships between Cleland’s texts and their real or imagined audiences, the pitting of “earlier” works against “later” poses problems of its own. When can a work be said to originate? Does the Woman of Pleasure date from the early 1730s or the late 1740s? Was its author (were its authors) around eighteen or closer to forty? There is no way of knowing how thoroughly Cleland “new-cast” whatever text he may have brought back with him from Bombay, so it can never be precisely placed in the author’s life history. Such a history is usually plotted along the axis of publication dates, as reckoned from title pages, newspaper advertisements, and the like, but texts can circulate (or molder) in manuscript for years before seeing print. Sometimes a letter like that to Garrick can establish that a work was making the rounds for some time before it was offered for publication, or, as with the Woman of Honor, a bookseller’s records might mark the date of a manuscript’s delivery. But for most eighteenth-century authors, Cleland certainly included, the biographical record is haphazard and full of gaps, leading to doubtful attributions and puzzling hiatuses. It is not always straightforward to plot a corpus of texts into a narrative of authorial development or (as tends to be said of Cleland) decline. Yet while I would
guard against both the “late flowering” and the “waning powers” plotlines, The Surprises of Love and The Woman of Honor undeniably revisit and rework the romance motifs of erotic awakening and the triumph of natural love that he first explored in the two Memoirs. Indeed the title of his last fiction is a variation on that of his first, the Woman of Honor making amends for the Woman of Pleasure. 12 By that light, Cleland’s career as a novelist might be understood as a movement from the early text’s scandalous, sly assault on all forms of propriety to the late one’s dreary paean to conjugal respectability, from satirical and enflaming to sentimental and chaste portrayals of love. This may be true, although the earlier work also builds to such a paean, and Fanny’s language pulses with sentiment, but it ignores the defiant oddness of the Woman of Honor, its lumpy, intransigent structure and “loose, undigested manner,” as Cleland said of another of his late works, published two years before. 13 With their “nonharmonious, nonserene tension” and their uningratiating insistence on “going against,” to adopt Edward Said’s phrase, Cleland’s late works present him as out of sorts and out of step with the sensibility and values of the social world he inhabits, even as he stubbornly struggles to have his voice heard. 14 Cleland’s late style is not just a function of formal awkwardness, either: the four novellas of The Surprises of Love are quite artfully wrought, their playfully artificial plots full of contrivances, disguises, false identities, bawdy-house abductions, and narrow escapes. Presenting themselves as “very innocent and diverting amusements,” as a writer for the Critical Review put it, they allowed Cleland to approach issues of licit and illicit desire, and the seeming arbitrariness of romantic love, in a way that, as Said writes of Cavafy, “render[s] disenchantment and pleasure without resolving the contradiction between them.” 15

A Poor, Lone, Unsupported Being

After publishing the Dictionary of Love with Ralph Griffiths in November 1753, Cleland fell away from commercial authorship for most of the 1750s. He had stopped being a regular contributor to the Monthly Review after 1751, and Memoirs of a Coxcomb and the Dictionary were most likely the final payments on his debt to Griffiths. There is no evidence of a falling-out nor any reason to think he could not have carried on at the Monthly and as a “miscellaneous writer,” having achieved some success over the previous five years, but he must have decided the writing trade was too wearisome, undignified, or unrewarding to abide. Judging from the letter to Garrick, he tried his luck next as a playwright, writing Titus in 1753–1754 and Tombo-Chiqui a year or so later, but even though
he thanks Garrick “for the great encouragement you give me” on the comedy in progress, he writes, “The truth is, that I do not foresee to myself ease and tranquillity enough of head to finish it as it ought to be by the next season.” 

This statement may have been his last bid to gain Garrick’s sympathy, and so his approval of Titus, but it also suggests that Cleland’s circumstances and mind were in turmoil.

When Cleland moved out of his mother’s house in St. James’s Place, their relationship had long since deteriorated into one of bitter (on his part) and disdainful (on hers) antagonism, though he was the only one of her three children still living. His 1748 imprisonment for debt was proof of what he acknowledged, in a later letter to her, as “my greatest fault, my contempt and ignorance of the value of money, but just when I feel the pinching want of it, and thence my improvidence of a child of four years of age,” while her failure or refusal to secure his release was, for him, proof of “immortal hatred or what is more unnatural yet a brutal indifference to now your only child.” The clearest sign of her hatred and indifference, as he believed, was her will, dated 4 February 1752, of which he was pointedly not named executor and which limited his inheritance to a strictly controlled annuity, which he was forbidden to “alien sell or assign mortgage charge or otherwise incumber . . . to any person or persons whatsoever.” It was likely this last provision—and a similar restriction on the allowance she paid him during her lifetime—that most infuriated Cleland, for it meant he could not borrow on his future income to pay off his present, pressing debts. This was probably a smart precautionary move on Lucy’s part, given his track record, but it left him at risk of being thrown a second time into debtors’ prison. As he wrote in one of the earliest of his letters to Dickinson, “My persisting in a jail, and, in effect sent thither by herself would, as things appear, have been a matter of the highest indifference” to her. Her “insensibleness” to his suffering, he continues, “murders me . . . it keeps me dragging my existence down in the dirt, and robs me of all the patrimony my poor father left me, and seems to justify the extremities to which it must of all necessity subject a solitary, detached, unsupported individual.”

In the letters he wrote to Dickinson between 1752 and 1762, Cleland does not so much argue his case or narrate the history of their estrangement as perform a series of dramatic monologues, vivid stagings of rage and despair. But this is not to say he feigns the emotions he projects: at times he is so overcome he breaks into a kind of mad scene. He tends to write Dickinson at moments of crisis or shock, and the fact that we do not always know what precipitated the crisis only heightens the effect of a soliloquist spiraling out of control. In one
letter, Cleland sets the scene by writing, “An incident perfectly new, which is like a thunder-bolt to me, occasions you this trouble.” The thunderbolt signifies emotional storms, but Cleland frames it in a sentence that promises to give a rational account of them. He reports that his landlady has gone to Mrs. Cleland’s house to press for the rent he hasn’t paid, but then he interrupts himself: “But whilst I am writing to you Mrs Kyme brings me up the enclosed. See! this poor family on the brink of destruction, only for having trusted me!” This interruption by Mrs. Kyme’s entrance, threatening letter in hand, feels quite stagey, especially when Cleland figuratively gestures toward the enclosure and exhorts Dickinson to “See!” We can only guess at the enclosure’s contents, but the interruption knocks the letter off course, and instead of finishing the story he began, he gives vent to the storm:

I am raving mad to think to what scenes that woman’s execrable obstinacy exposes me, and the innocent, who have depended on me. My brain is on fire. I do not know what to write, or how to act. If my going to god, or my blood will satisfy the inveteracy of my mother, I am ready to lay down my life; but, to have such innocent creatures involved, and turned out into the street upon my account, is a torture beyond that of Hell. I am in such a confusion that I can scarce subscribe myself what I really am.

Cleland’s letter is a cri de coeur, the urgency of his distress conveyed by his incapacity to write. But that too is a familiar device: think of Fanny Hill dropping her pen when in the grips of a different but equally overpowering feeling. As she wrote, “Description too deserts me” (183); so Cleland. But like Fanny, Cleland is nevertheless able to convey both the feeling and the dramatic scene that brings it on: on one side, the “innocent creatures” the Kymes, threatened with “turn[ing] out into the street” by their own creditors; on the other, “that woman,” Mrs. Cleland, the offstage villainess; caught between them, the hero, Cleland himself, who has, without meaning to, put “the innocent, who have depended on me” in peril, and who now offers himself as a blood sacrifice to appease the “inveteracy” of his mother. Garrick could not have asked for a scene more striking, more pathetic, more terrible.

Cleland’s mother is the most vividly rendered and the most vital of his literary creations, a figure of almost demonic glamour. How closely it resembles the real Lucy Cleland is impossible to know, but Cleland’s portrayal is so rhetorically extreme, his fixation on her so intense, as to make her seem less a real person than a projection of the “illness, and pain” that, as he writes at the end of one letter, “afflict me so, that I cannot longer hold the pen, on this disagreeable
subject,” his ill treatment at her hands. Yet he returns to this subject again and again, never more histrionically than in a letter from 1758 provoked by another now-missing enclosure. It is not clear what this was, or how Cleland got hold of it, but its intent, he says, was “to insult, and grossly trifle with a gentleman under such distresses, as surely to anything of a human heart, could at least be no provocation to such a wanton piece of cruelty.” Whether written by Lucy Cleland or on her behalf, it was then passed around, to “the amusement of many.” He breaks out in fury:

Where is that Highwayman, that cut-throat, I could complain of, when from a mother it is I receive these stabs! Stabs, which as if of themselves not murder enough must be poisoned too with a treacherous air of kindness to make a parade of at her wretched, comfortless fire-side, to her cronies, her little lordees and ladies . . . whilst they re-echoe to her “Lord, Maam to be sure you are vast good indeed, and Mr Cleland must be mad to reject such an offer: and this pretious stuff satisfies her tender conscience . . . But whither am I going? She is but too severely punished in being what she is, incapable of loving even herself. No! hatred is her element.

This is not the first time Cleland presented himself as a murder victim: in the first of the Bombay trials he accused Lowther of “low dishonourable Stabs,” and in the note on Thomas Cannon’s front door he accused Cannon of “join[ing] with his own mother to consummate the murder of an unfortunate gentleman who had saved his life, and whom, in return, he poisoned five times with common arsenic.” Only Cleland’s mother, though, would both stab and poison him, combining the phallic violence of the highwayman and cutthroat with the stereotypically feminine, secretive violence of poisoning (not coincidentally the murder method favored by “Molly Cannon”). She, too, is one of the unsexed who haunt Cleland’s writing—not unsexed by desire but by murderous impulses prompted by sordid interest. In this, she surpasses even Lady Macbeth, who only imagines the crime of filicide that Cleland’s mother has committed. Lady Macbeth’s terrible invocation could also be Lucy Cleland’s: “Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here / . . . / That no compunctious visitings of nature / Shake my fell purpose.” Like Lady Macbeth’s, Lucy Cleland’s unsexing is a turning away from nature, a repudiation of the natural affections of a mother: she is, her son writes, “incapable of loving even herself” and lacks “anything of a human heart.”

This strain of the inhuman runs through Cleland’s epistolary portrait of his mother, always in contrast to his own ineradicable filial love (which he has a singular manner of expressing). In a letter of 1756 he writes of his mother and
his aunt, Lady Allen, that “had I even deserved this implacability at their hands, if they had had a heart like mine, or but a human one, nothing could have held out against the exquisite joy of forgiving a son, a nephew, who the instant that he became so unfortunate, must cease to be at least unpardonably guilty.”

There is something perverse and denatured in his mother’s “negative persecution,” her acts of refusal, estrangement, and silence. She has barred him from her house and refuses to read his letters: as early as 1752 she writes a postscript to a letter to Dickinson to say that she has kept a letter from her son “to add to the large Collection I am already possessed of, of the like and worse abuse, but be assur’d ’tis the last I ever will read.” But if this refusal, to Cleland, is just a sign of “immortal hatred” or “brutal indifference,” it cannot fail to strike us that whatever distress he may have been in, from the evidence of his letters he was relentlessly on the attack. Lucy Cleland’s letters confirm this sense of the son’s aggression. In one, she says she rushed to her banker’s for fear that if she went later she might run into her son there, “which wou’d be mortal to me.”

She thanks Dickinson “for all your kind attentions and indeavours, to ease me of a Load that I fear will still lye heavy on me, for his manner of accepting [his allowance] is like doing me a favour, and rather receiving an injury . . . I am very sensible I owe all my present peace to you.” From these glimpses she seems weary of her son’s harassment and abuse and worried that her “trouble will never cease.” Around seventy years old when she wrote this, her older sister increasingly infirm, her husband and two youngest children long dead, her fortune mostly gone—her son well knows, she writes, “that his poor Father had nothing to leave me and that I have lost all I had in the world”—she might have a better title than he to call herself “a poor, lone, unsupported being.”

One might wonder what right Cleland thought he had to his mother’s support. Dickinson raises this question in a letter to Cleland dated 18 October 1755, writing that, while he is “very sorry for your situation so it would give me great pleasure at any time to hear of its mending by your own Abilitys which you are far from wanting without dependance upon any body . . . I wish you would give your mind another turn & endeavour to work out your own happiness upon the foundation she has laid for it which would be of service to you in every one’s Opinion.” It is not certain what Cleland wanted from her; probably it was free access to the annuity money to pay off his various debts. In one letter he writes that “when she made me a proposal, in effect, of ten times a greater sum than I desired: I might rationally entreat of her not to mock my distresses with a relief I could not accept in her way, but to procure me the assistance I wanted in my own, at so much less an expence, and of the fitness of which is it not for
me, to spurn with the scorn it deserves, the suspicion of my not being the best Judge.” The dispute is as much about control as about money: Cleland clearly felt that he had been unjustly passed over as his father’s rightful heir and that his mother’s conduct “robs me of all the patrimony my poor father left me.” According to her, “his poor Father had nothing to leave.” But whether or not he had legitimate grounds to resent the terms of her will, one might still wonder why Cleland did not “endeavour to work out [his] own happiness” more energetically at this stage of his life.

He maintained he had done everything possible, and complained of “the continuation of my distresses in spite of my most unwearied endeavors to overcome them, endeavors rendered abortive by her discountenance of me,” or what in the same letter he calls “the perseverance of Mrs Cleland’s open, and known disowning of me, of which my life must soon be the victim.” It seems to be fixed in his mind that his mother’s “discountenance,” her having “so cruelly set the example of deserting him,” had effectively scotched his chances of being considered for one or another government post or sinecure, for which he evidently spent much of the decade waiting. “Nothing is however certain,” he writes, “than that if Lady Allen and Mrs Cleland, were but to stir in the least for me; the conjunction is not unfavorable, for my procuring some employ, that might render me serviceable to my country, my employers, my family, and myself. But of this I have long totally despaired.” Dickinson had already disputed this the year before, writing, “Family differences are so common that they have little or no influence upon publick affairs[.] And an employment of the importance you intimate must have depended so much upon your own Merit that your having been well or ill with her could have been of little Consequence.” But Cleland held fast to his belief that his success or failure depended on his mother’s good or ill will; and her ill will was all he was to know.

One letter from Cleland to his mother survives. It is a small-scale de profundis, distilling all his bitterness, grief, and self-pity into one last bid to touch her, yet refusing to allow that it ever will. He wrote it after learning of the death of her sister and enclosed it with a cover to Dickinson on 6 March 1758. She may never have read it. The fact that it was preserved and eventually sold with the letters from Cleland to Dickinson suggests that Dickinson never passed it on to Lucy Cleland. She could have read it and returned it to her lawyer, but as she had her own “Collection” of letters from her son, it seems likely that had she read it, she would have kept it with the others, to be destroyed or lost after her death.

Although Cleland told Dickinson that his letter was “simply a compliment of
condolence, to my mother, on the death of my Aunt, which has, I assure you, greatly afflicted me,” it violates the norms of the condolence letter in order to make a much more personal appeal. But as is common with Cleland, his appeal is laced with aggression. He begins by expressing his “difﬁdence of your even receiving this application” and immediately turns against the reader with whom he is meant to be condoling, stating in advance his “certainty of your not doing justice to the real motives of it.” In this, his letter’s ﬁrst sentence, he has turned it into a ﬁeld of combat between author and reader, so that his claim to be writing at the urging of “Nature and Gratitude” strikes a rather hollow note. Even when he offers a standard expression of condolence—“I learnt of my aunt’s death with inﬁnite concern”—he turns that, too, against his mother by stating that “it would be the height of cruelty” for her to doubt this. But in telling his would-be reader that he expects her to doubt and willfully misread what he writes, he encourages a hermeneutics of suspicion, inviting her to read warily. When he writes, for example, that his aunt’s death affected him “more perhaps, than if, in a personal attendance on her, I had been prepared for it, by observing its gradual approaches,” his plain statement hides a barbed reminder that it was they who forbade him to attend on her. As the epistolary monodrama unfolds, his aunt’s death becomes only a pretext for a last stab at self-justification (the son, too, wields a “poinant and ready pen”). Every expression of tenderness or sympathy brings rage and reproach in its wake.

After observing how affected he was by the suddenness of his aunt’s death, he writes that “it used to be some sort of consolation to me, amidst all the low, ignoble, scandalous misfortunes, to which you have been contented that I should be exposed for such a series of years, to think I was not utterly an unconnected being whilst you and Lady Allen should be alive.” Here, the ostensible “consolation” of family ties is exposed as a cruel sham by his mother’s “content[ment]” at his “low, ignoble, scandalous misfortunes”; indeed he insinuates that it was she who “exposed” him to those misfortunes in the first place. The sentences that follow exhibit a similarly disharmonious tone: “I feel more tenderly for what I am sure you must feel for this loss, than for myself. Do not then grudge me, at least, the cold consolation of joining my afﬂiction with yours, though at the distance your unrelenting prescribes to me.” The discord of “tenderly” and “grudge” leads to the oxymoron of “cold consolation,” which is no consolation at all. There may also be a wry twist to his claim to feel his mother’s loss of her sister “more tenderly” than his own, for how “tenderly” could he have felt the loss of one who kept him, unrelentingly, at a distance?

If Cleland’s professions of tenderness are also bitter reminders of how un-
tender his mother has been toward him, his most profound offer of comfort is also his harshest accusation of guilt:

My now sincerest wish is that the news of my own death may soon compensatively comfort you for that which you are now lamenting. Dirty cares, pitifull distresses, the sense of which is redoubled at once by their indignity, and by the heart-breaking circumstance of their being owing to your implacability, have long impaired my health, and made the only delivery I now expect from them, my hourly prayer. All that I complain of, is its being so slow.

He offers up his death as a comfort to his murderer. But in doing so, he makes the guilt of it all hers. This is a charge he had been making since the earliest letters to Dickinson, writing in one of his “affliction at the parricide hand that has placed and keeps me on the rack”; but even if he always intended that she should read or at least hear about what he wrote to her lawyer, the impact of reading this in a letter addressed to herself, as she was mourning her sister, must have been far greater. His attempt to smuggle such an accusatory screed into his mother’s house in the guise of a “compliment of condoleance” might fairly be likened to “Stabs, which as if of themselves not murderous enough must be poisoned too with a treacherous air of kindness.” Yet Cleland’s is a peculiar form of treachery: he wants his words to wound, and is willing to use innuendo and subterfuge, but he is not scheming to any rational end or from any secret motive. If he wanted to persuade her to change her will, for instance, he “was not such an ideot,” as he notes, as to think this was the way to do it. He seems instead to want to make her feel the same distress and heartbrokenness he feels, but he masks this as an expression of “the natural affection, and tender reverence which my heart has ever born you, though sometimes over-clouded by transient fits of passion and resentment.” Or perhaps this isn’t a mask at all: words of “rage and pain,” as Coleridge uneasily registers at the end of “Christabel,” may for Cleland have been the very language of familial love.

Cleland’s letter to his mother has three movements. In the first and third, he thunders against her “unnatural” and “brutal” abandonment of him “to the cruelty of the world” and offers her his imminent death, which “can only give you pleasure,” with this sarcastic blessing: “May the years taken from my life be added to yours!” Between these histrionic outer movements, however, he subsides into a more meditative, less tumultuous passage, in which he reflects on his own character:
I attribute then all that I have suffered by your obduracy of heart, not to you, but to a fatality not the less cruel for my not being able to account for it. You cannot, I know your excellent sense too well, be angry with me, for what I am, since what I am, I am constitutionally, and am therefore undoubtedly more to be pitied than condemned for it. My passions and errors are not more my choice than the features of my face.

Like his mother’s “obduracy of heart,” Cleland’s “passions and errors” are constitutional, imprinted by “fatality” or nature just as his physical features were. It is intriguing that in his own case he moves away from the model of cultural imprinting or imitation by which he accounts for the “passions and errors” of Catherine Vizzani and Fanny Hill; intriguing, too, that he does not spell out what passions and errors he means—perhaps only what he goes on to call his “greatest fault, my contempt and ignorance of the value of money.” Yet this fault “is more nearly related to Virtue than to Vice” and should actually endear him to her, “when you consider [that fault] was exactly my father’s, and has been but too faithfully transmitted with his blood to me.” What he is, he is by biological, specifically paternal, inheritance. His father’s character has been reproduced in him, absent one thing: “I have not, as he had, a Mrs Cleland to take care of me, and to supplement that so ruinous defect.” The son’s is a twofold lack, conjugal and filial, with a single name: he lacks a “Mrs Cleland” as either sexual partner or mother, and in either case as caretaker and “supplement.” His estrangement is both that of an abandoned child and that of one who is, by choice or constitution, outside of the normative structures of sexual reproduction and marriage. I do not mean to read into this a “confession” of sodomitical or otherwise perverse desire, but rather to read it as acknowledging his difference or distance from the culturally encoded (and parentally reproduced) normality of the married couple and his status as an alien, a kind of changeling, within his own family.

What remains of the Cleland-Dickinson-Cleland correspondence stops in September 1762 with a letter from John Cleland entreating the lawyer “to make one effort more to heal [the] breach” between mother and son and a note from Dickinson excusing himself from the task. Although there was “no one so fit, and I believe so well inclined to heal the bleeding wounds of our family,” as Cleland once wrote him, Dickinson had troubles of his own. Because of what he calls “the Great Misfortune that has happened in my family,” he had lately been “incapable of seeing almost any body, or attending to any thing,” so he
urges Cleland “to apply to some other of her acquaintance or friends” for help.\(^4\) There is no record of whether Cleland felt the same sympathy for Dickinson’s misfortune that he expected Dickinson to feel for his, nor of whether the “bleeding wounds” of the Cleland family ever healed. When Cleland wrote, his “poor mother” was in a “state of languor and decay,” but characteristically, he was not thinking of her suffering so much as his own, complaining that “it would cruelly aggravate my misfortunes if Mrs Cleland should leave the world without giving me the consolation of being sure of her forgiveness and blessing. Is it in nature that she can do me so cruel an injury?”\(^3\) As far as I know, this is his last written mention of her, and it does not hold much promise of healing. The bleeding wounds had been open too long, since well before Lucy Cleland wrote her will in 1752. In what appears to be the first of his letters to Dickinson, Cleland tells, or rather half tells, a story to show how unjustly his mother and aunt have long treated him. “About three years ago,” he begins—sometime in late 1749 or early 1750—his mother and aunt offered him £50 per year to look after some properties or investments in South Carolina.\(^4\) When he arrived there, his contact, a Mr. Fryer or Frier, had got into financial trouble and gone off to Jamaica. Having no resources of his own, Cleland followed him there, only to find Fryer dead, leaving Cleland high and dry, a colonial orphan. Accordingly, he writes,

rather than come upon the parish at Jamaica! where no man was ever better treated, or with higher respect, I came home: when, I scarce dare ask you to believe it: I was welcomed, from this vile insignificant voyage, with a reproach, as for a fault that I had come home. Yes, for a fault! and punished for it, too, by a total retrenchment, of that Bounty which being their own voluntary subscription, constituted a kind of arrears, even equitably due: since, not the least shadow of Justice was there to accuse me of having forfeited it, by any the least misconduct of mine.

It is a puzzling story, all the more so as there is no mention of a voyage to Carolina anywhere else in his writings. It may be what Griffiths referred to when he testified that he asked Cleland to prepare the expurgated \textit{Fanny Hill} as the only way to recoup his debt, “as Cleeland was going abroad”; if so, Cleland must have made his “vile insignificant voyage” between December 1749 and October 1750, when there was a lull in his writing.\(^5\) This brief and cryptic account portrays him as a victim of maternal cruelty, first in being sent into exile, and then in being punished for the failure of a scheme he had no part in devising. Transported to the colonies by an unloving mother, he resembles both Fanny’s love Charles, whose father has him kidnapped and carried off to “one of the
factories in the South-Seas” (55), and the poet Richard Savage, whose equally “unnatural” mother, “not enduring me ever to approach Her, offer’d a Bribe to have had me shipp’d off in an odd Manner, to one of the Plantations.” From being the architect of a projected Portuguese East India company, Cleland had fallen, by his mother’s will, to being “fit[ted] out, for half-a-crown, at a Wapping slop-shop with a Pea-Jacket, and Honeycomb breeches”—the kit of an indentured colonial servant. As so often in these letters, just recalling the miseries he lays to his mother’s account exhausts all powers of expression: “more I would say, but my illness, and pain afflict me so, that I can no longer hold the pen, on this disagreeable subject.” The author is silenced by the very excess of feeling that spurred him to write in the first place.

A Fretwork of Fluid Brilliants

Having left off his career as a “miscellaneous writer” in 1753, and thwarted in his design to make a new start as playwright with the rejection of Titus the next year, Cleland spent most of the 1750s in limbo, writing overwrought letters and waiting for a call that never came to offer him “some employ” worthy of a gentleman. He did publish Titus, with the comic entr’acte The Ladies Subscription, at his own expense in 1755, but judging by his letters this didn’t yield any financial benefits, nor did it lead to any interest from theatrical producers. He claimed not even to have offered Tombo-Chiqui to the theaters, but its publication in 1758 did mark his return to the world of professional authorship, as it was offered for sale by the bookselling partnership of S. Hooper and A. Morley. As his hopes for a government post faded after 1756–1757, Cleland began to establish new working relationships with a number of booksellers, starting with Samuel Hooper, whose shop “at Gay’s Head near Beaufort Buildings in the Strand” Cleland gave as his return address in a letter to Dickinson in 1758. In addition to Tombo-Chiqui, Hooper and Morley had published Grose’s Voyage to the East Indies, of which Cleland was likely the ghost author, in 1757, and over the next dozen years, Cleland worked with several prominent London booksellers: Israel Pottinger, who published Cleland’s satirical verse epistle The Times! An Epistle to Flavian (1759), and a novella, The Romance of a Day (1760); Thomas Becket, who copublished two essays on physiology and hygiene, the Institutes of Health (1761, with Thomas Davies) and the Phisiological Reveries (with Peter DeHondt, 1765); Thomas Lowndes and William Nicoll, with whom Cleland published a collection of novellas, The Surprises of Love (1764), and his third novel, The Woman of Honor (1768); and Lockyer Davis, who issued Cleland’s
essays on etymology and the Celtic origins of European languages—*The Way to Things by Words, and to Words by Things* (1766), *Specimen of an Etimological Vocabulary* (1768), and *Additional Articles to the Specimen* (1769). Cleland even renewed his association with Ralph Griffiths, who published second editions of *Titus Vespasian* and *The Ladies’ Subscription* in 1760.

These were all major figures in the eighteenth-century book trade. Becket and DeHondt, like Lowndes and Nicoll, were leading publishers of fiction; Samuel Hooper published Francis Grose’s celebrated *Antiquities of England and Wales* (1772) and *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785); Lockyer Davis played a key role in publishing the *Works of the English Poets* with Samuel Johnson’s biographical-critical prefaces and was bookseller for the Royal Society. Israel Pottinger, trenchantly described by Robertson Davies as a “bookseller, madman, and hack,” was a more shadowy character, but as publisher of the *Busy Body* and the *Weekly Magazine* (1759–1760), he played an important role in the early career of Oliver Goldsmith. Pottinger worked out of the same commercial building as Griffiths, the Dunciad in Paternoster Row, and while his publishing career was checkered—his bankruptcy in January 1760 hastened the death of Goldsmith’s *Weekly Magazine* the next month—the book trade was notably precarious. Indeed, of the nine booksellers who worked with Cleland between 1757 and 1769, at least five declared bankruptcy at some point in their mainly successful careers.

Pottinger recovered sufficiently to publish Cleland’s *Romance of a Day* in September 1760, although his unstable finances or psyche may have led Cleland to publish the follow-up *Romance of a Night* with William Nicoll in 1762 and the collected *Surprises of Love* with Lowndes and Nicoll in 1764.

As checkered as his career was, then, and as bizarre as the *Physiological Reveries* or the essays on language may seem to us (and to some of his contemporaries), Cleland was not really an outcast or pariah, and some of the most successful of eighteenth-century booksellers were willing to take a chance on even the most idiosyncratic of his writings. The chance paid off for Lowndes and Nicoll with the success of his *Surprises of Love*. Written between 1760 and 1764, these romances were Cleland’s first works of fiction, and first original plots, since *Memoirs of a Coxcomb*, to which they have a certain affinity—being what Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield, called “little gallant histories, which must contain a great deal of love.” All four of these comic-sentimental romances end happily, and while in all but the first there are real moral and physical dangers to be overcome, the prevailing approach is playful, lighthearted, deliberately superficial. Although Stanhope calls “novels” the fictions Cle-
land calls “romances,” his definition gives the plot common to the **Surprises** and the **Coxcomb** (and the **Woman of Pleasure**): “The subject must be a love affair; the lovers are to meet with many difficulties and obstacles to oppose the accomplishment of their wishes, but at last overcome them all; and the conclusion or catastrophe must leave them happy.” Cleland’s two **Memoirs** expand and complicate this formula in novelistic ways, but in the **Surprises** he harks back to the approach taken by William Congreve in his 1692 masquerade-romance **Incognita**. Although Congreve had not yet written any plays, he constructed **Incognita** in imitation of “Dramatick Writing, namely, in the Design, Contexture and Result of the Plot.”51 In his preface to **Incognita** Congreve writes that “the Design of the Novel is obvious, after the [lovers’] first meeting . . . and the difficulty is in bringing it to pass, maugre all apparent obstacles, within the compass of two days.” Cleland’s design in the **Surprises** is equally obvious—to bring the fated couple together, or as Congreve puts it, “marrying [the] Couple so oddly engaged in an intricate Amour”—and he commits himself even more strictly than Congreve to the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action. Congreve untangles his intrigue “within the compass of two days”; Cleland his within a few hours. Congreve’s “Scene is continued in Florence from the commencement of the Amour”; Cleland’s are each restricted to a neighborhood in or near London. So the first of the **Surprises** is **The Romance of a Day; or, An Adventure in Greenwich-Park Last Easter**, while the second is titled **The Romance of a Night; or, A Covent-Garden Adventure**. The third and fourth do not announce the setting in the title, but **The Romance of a Morning; or, The Chance of a Sport** takes place inside a farmhouse in Kent, while **The Romance of an Evening; or, Who Would Have Thought It?** is set in a suburban villa on the Thames in Fulham. As with Congreve, so in Cleland’s romances, “every Obstacle . . . in the progress of the Story act[s] as subservient to that purpose”—the couple’s marriage—“which at first it seems to oppose,” a principle that in comedy, Congreve writes, is “called the Unity of the Action” and, in these romances, “Unity of Contrivance.” This theatrical quality of the **Surprises** was noted by a critic in the **Monthly Review**, who wrote that the “‘Romance of a Morning’ . . . might be easily turned into a dramatic form and could hardly fail of succeeding on the stage”—an ironic postscript, as James Basker has noted, to Cleland’s abortive career as a playwright.52

The **Surprises** were the most critically and commercially successful of Cleland’s later works but are almost unknown today. My juxtaposition of Cleland and Congreve is meant not to claim a direct influence but to foreground the novellas’ generic affinities in order to understand better how to read them. Even
though he was writing seventy years after Congreve, Cleland in the *Surprises* turned his back on all the innovations in narrative fiction from the period that separates them, in particular the representational strategies we still associate with novelistic realism in its various forms, as in the work of Behn, Defoe, Haywood, Richardson, the Fieldings, Lennox, Smollett, and others. This was not his last word on the subject: with *The Woman of Honor* he adopts a version of Richardsonian epistolary realism, and is concerned to situate the narrative in a recognizable contemporary cultural and social world, which is described in some detail. Although the *Surprises* are set in locales whose names—Greenwich Park, Covent Garden, Fulham—correspond to those of real places, they are no more attached to the world outside fiction than *Incognita* was to the realities of seventeenth-century Florence. They represent, rather, a deliberate evasion of the contemporary, which is not to say that they are out of time but that they defy or stand against their own time. By returning to the mode of *Incognita*, Cleland gives the *Surprises* an anachronistic flavor—similar to what Edward Said, in his discussion of Richard Strauss’s late works, calls their “strangely recapitulatory and even backward-looking and abstracted quality.”

Said proposes that Strauss’s late works “are escapist in theme, reflective and disengaged in tone, and above all written with a kind of distilled and rarefied technical mastery,” and while Cleland’s style is perhaps too peculiar (in both senses: individual, and odd) to qualify as “technical mastery,” his overtly escapist and archaic stories, with their running commentary on their own artifice, can likewise be read as reflections on the process of making art.

I do not want to overstate their profundity: these are, after all, “pretty tale[s] . . . prettily told,” as the *Monthly Review* put it. Their superficiality, their interest in narrative surfaces, is precisely their point. At the start of the final tale, Cleland gives a description of the Thames that could serve as an emblem for the whole collection. The hero, Sir Lionel Heartly, idly gazes at the river, “which being barely ruffled by a gentle breeze, the undulation of its surface broke the burnish produced upon it by the beams of the setting sun into such a tremulous glitter, as presented, in full play, a dazzling fretwork of fluid brilliants.” The descriptive focus shifts from the watery to the luminous over the course of this sentence, from the “undulating surface” of the river “barely ruffled” by a breeze to the “broken burnish” and “tremulous glitter” of reflected sunlight, culminating in the “dazzling fretwork of fluid brilliants”—the last two words turning light (as from diamonds) back into liquid. “Dazzling fretwork,” too, fuses solidity, liquidity, and light into a single image, merging “fretwork” as interlacing ornament and “fret” as the action of rippling or unsettling the surface.
of water, producing here a light that blinds. Cleland’s late style “in full play” is rococo, extravagant, as ornamental and brittle as any fretwork.

The superficiality of the *Surprises* is matched by the predictability of their happy endings, as Cleland himself repeatedly points out. At the dramatic climax of the second tale, *The Romance of a Night*, for example, when the hero, Lord Veramore, arrives at the house where the beautiful sixteen-year-old Felicia Norgrove is held captive, Cleland writes:

> And here, as nothing can be more awkward than going on with presenting to the mind what it has already pre-conceived, I might dispense myself with proceeding in this narrative. The reader is by this time somewhat relieved from his pain for innocence in danger, and will naturally have anticipated the rescue to come from Lord Veramore: But as the conclusion cannot well be told without the connexion of the intermediate particulars, a specification of them will, I hope, be forgiven in favor of that necessity. (109–110)

But if the ending is obvious, the difficulty, as Congreve wrote, lies in “bringing it to pass, maugre all apparent obstacles”—the most intractable of which is that Veramore, after falling in love with Felicia at first sight, has convinced himself she’s a whore, and has come to the house (in fact a brothel) not to rescue but to “have” her at any cost and so debase her for having, as he thinks, deceived him into thinking her worthy of his love. The story turns out, that is, to hinge on the psychopathology of masculine other-sex desire. Veramore, as his name suggests, is like Sir William Delamore in the *Coxcomb*, and like Sir William’s, his name is belied by his shaky grasp of the distinction between true and false love. He has fallen in love with Felicia after a single encounter in a theater, in spite of her near-complete silence; he has then leapt to the conclusion that she is a whore on equally paltry evidence. What is strange is that, disdaining her as a whore, he “conceiv[es] so fierce a desire, that he could not himself account for it” (108). Accustomed to treating women with offhand contempt—“he had, in the course of his dealings with the women, found it much easier to get them than to get rid of them” (73)—with Felicia he is split between the extremes of “love” based on only a visual impression and “desire” based on resentment and jealousy (he imagines she is the whore of another man, Sir Thomas Darkfield). Cleland so contrives events as to make Veramore realize his error, break down the door behind which Sir Thomas is about to rape Felicia, reunite her with her family, and take her as his wife. But before this “pretty tale” arrives at its inevitable end, it has exposed its hero as scarcely less “profligate” and “abandoned” (107) than its villain, making his avowed “constancy” ring a little false,
especially given the extreme emotional inconstancy to which he has been prey throughout. There is a glint of the sardonic in the story’s last sentence, where Cleland writes that Veramore “made it the great and pleasing care of his life, that she should have no cause to remember but with satisfaction, the storm that, in the Covent-Garden adventure of that memorable night, had so fortunately brought her into port” (150). Not only does this make it sound as if he spends his life reminding her of what must have been a terrifying ordeal, but with its verbal echo of the Woman of Pleasure (“Thus, at length, I got snug into port” [187]) it affiliates Felicia with Fanny, both of them “saved” from brothels by men who mistook them for whores and desired them as such.

The four romances of the Surprises of Love, then—as superficial, old-fashioned, escapist, and predictable as they undeniably are and aim to be—are also studies in the perverse, slyly disenchanted essays in the vagaries of romantic desire and the “pretty” contrivances of romantic fiction. Neither as outrageous and satirical as the Woman of Pleasure nor as unfinished in form as the Coxcomb, and far more decorous in their representation of eros than either, the Surprises nevertheless fret the surfaces of the romantic fantasies they retail, stirring in odd discordant notes that hint at more troubled, or capricious, undercurrents of desire. In The Romance of a Day, for example, the soon-to-be lovers, Frederic and Letitia, children of wealthy suburban gentlemen, each separately go in disguise to Greenwich Park—he as “a Sugar-Baker’s ’prentice in the City, just out of his time” (28), she as a maid—in order to frolic with the commoners. As in Eliza Haywood’s 1725 Fantomina; or, Love in a Maze, their slumming is not just idle or innocent play but an expression of illicit desire, a foray into underclass urban sex tourism. Cleland’s Frederic mingles with the “subaltern class” of women in order to experience a degree of sexual freedom unattainable among the women of his own class:

The half-advances and half-repulses of some, the skittish wildness, or the tractable tameness of others, the gentle glow in all of working nature, yet exalted by the conspiring heat of the weather and exercise, opportune trips and provoking falls on the green, on purpose to be taken up again by so pretty a fellow as Frederic; all this scene, in short, of low, if what is natural can be called low, merriment, had not even unsensually affected him. (9)

Cleland’s perspective on the relation between sexuality and social class is not easy to pin down: if he celebrates the “subaltern class” as “natural” (exuding “the gentle glow . . . of working nature”) and so not properly speaking “low” at all but rather sensually “affect[ing],” in Frederic and Letitia he links sexual desir-
ability to social privilege. “A pair so extremely handsome and so well matched,” Cleland writes, “struck all present . . . In short, there was a general murmur of extorted applause, for almost all were displeased, since the men, as the old song says, all wished to be in his place, and all the women in hers” (21). Both Frederic and Letitia, however, like Fantomina, “have the same design, that of concealing their real condition of life from one another” (34), and if their sexual allure corresponds to their social rank, they need to conceal the latter to give free rein to the desires unleashed by the former. We learn at the end of the tale that their fathers are neighbors on Blackheath and have made plans for them to marry. This being so, the absurd implausibility of their never having met before their “adventure” in Greenwich Park might actually suggest a counternarrative: that, like Fantomina and Beauplaisir, they have met, in the suburban drawing rooms they were brought up to inhabit, but that only by assuming an identity beneath “their real condition,” and escaping to “such a place of vulgar and not always decent mirth” (15) as the park can they respond to one another in a “natural,” not necessarily “decent,” manner. For these high-born suburbanites, erotic desire is fueled by the fiction that the other is a low-born stranger.

Like the other three stories in The Surprises of Love, The Romance of a Day moves to its happy ending by way of earnest reflections on the superiority of virtuous love to “debauchery” in all its beguiling but ultimately delusive forms. It is in these passages that Cleland might most plausibly be called a “sentimental” author, taking “sentimental” to mean expressing moral sentiments or precepts. It would be hard to make a case for his fiction as “sentimental” in the sense of aiming to touch the reader’s heart or elicit tears; there is nothing here of the “true pathos” for which one writer in the Sentimental Magazine praised the scene of Le Fever’s death in Sterne’s Tristram Shandy, and which other readers sought in the novels of Richardson and Mackenzie. Instead, we are treated to passages such as this, near the end of The Romance of a Night, after Veramore has rescued Felicia and given up his plan to pay for sex with her:

He could not dissemble to himself, that all the joys he had hitherto experienced, in giving way to the temptations of gallantry, or of merely sensual appetite, never deserved, even in the light of voluptuousness, to enter into balance against the exquisite sensations that were now opening a new world of pleasure to him in his heart: A pleasure, which, not excluding desires, nor setting them above virtue, like that, resided in a just medium, between the coarseness of a brutal appetite, and the chimerical pretensions of Platonism; defended from either extreme, by the sentiments of honor and of nature. (138–139)
Such “tail-pieces of morality” are a constant in Cleland’s work, and this is undoubtedly a sentiment he meant the reader to take seriously; but he also undercuts it by conveying it in the discourse of some very unreliable moral teachers. Veramore, although changeable and internally divided, is not a fully developed novelistic character like Fanny Hill, and it might be misguided to read his sudden moral sententiousness too skeptically; we might agree instead with the critic in the *Monthly Review* who found the story’s “moral unexceptionable.” Yet the pattern of allusions to Cleland’s earlier fiction, with its “smack of dissipated manners,” and to other stories within the *Surprises*, makes it difficult to take such a passage at face value. The echo of Delamore in Veramore, for instance, hints at an ironic inflection to the name, while the echo of Fanny in Felicia’s being brought snug “into port” reinforces her affinity to the woman of pleasure Veramore has angrily, excitedly taken her to be. If Veramore is a genuine convert to virtue, it is curious that the villain of the next story, *The Romance of a Morning*, is explicitly likened to him. Driven by resentment and jealousy, “Mr. Grubling” is determined to have the heroine, Isabella, for himself, and as Cleland writes, “He would have yielded just in the moment’s fit of sensuality, and with not a jot more delicacy, than under the like provocations of disappointed desire, and piqued vanity, he would have taken a wife out of a C—— g—— Bagnio” (182). But this is exactly what Veramore has done, driven by the same impulses, in the same place. Such parallels do not invalidate the sentiment Veramore expresses, but they insinuate that he may not merit the moral authority he assumes.

So it goes in the other romances: in each, the protagonist’s moral reflections are playfully subverted by an authorial aside or narrative incongruity, leading us to question the sentiments so earnestly expressed. In *The Romance of a Day*, Frederic, ennobled by his new love for Letitia (although he thinks her a serving maid), muses at length, as they walk through the park, on the superiority of true taste to debauched appetite, the sentiments of the heart to mere “possession,” only for Cleland to cut in with this comment: “It is not however probable, that Frederic made, at that instant, all these reflexions; it was enough that he acted as if he had made them” (45). The moral self-consciousness of the characters in didactic romance is pure contrivance, Cleland steps out of the tale to tell us, inciting us to wonder what Frederic might more “probab[y]” have been thinking, or what it could mean to act “as if he had made” the reflections ascribed to him. In *The Romance of a Morning*, the hero, Mr. Vincent, has fallen in love with a disinherited sixteen-year-old orphan, Isabella, now serving as a lady’s paid companion, and this has thrown him into a quandary, on which he, too,
reflects at length. Of Isabella, he suggests that “there is nothing throws more
beauty into the face and person, than the goodness of the heart. Sentiments
are your best cosmetic” (170). As is typical in romance, inner (goodness) and
outer (beauty) are in seeming harmony, even if the word “cosmetic” adds an
incongruous whiff of artifice, as if sentiments were a kind of makeup or mask.
This ambiguity only increases as Vincent worries over the ethical and social im-
lications of loving a virtuous but penniless girl. “The ridicule of falling in love
with a Pamela,” he begins, invoking the story’s most familiar literary precursor,
“would, it is true, have nearly appeared as much a ridicule to him as to any one;
But such is the nature of the Passions, while they trample on Reason, to keep,
however, all the measures they can with her. It is on their knees to her that they
depose her” (178). This passage, half inside and half outside the character’s
consciousness, is a little tour de force of equivocation. It offers the usual antith-
esis of passion and reason, in this case love versus social decorum or prudence,
and Vincent seems to be heading to the usual judgment: that passion needs to
submit to reason. But from the outset, he hedges, as when he allows that fall-
ing in love with a Pamela “would . . . have nearly appeared as much a ridicule to
him as to any one.” Clearly it does not appear so to him, and in the second half
of this sentence Cleland shifts away from Vincent’s voice to anatomize his mo-
tives and the larger struggle between two warring forces. It is “the nature of the
Passions” to “trample on Reason,” but these personified passions are cunning
enough to “keep . . . all the measures they can with her,” as if to hide from the
subject what he is really doing. Reason is Queen, and the Passions get “on their
knees to her,” but only to trample and “depose her.” They needn’t even “pay a
real homage to her,” Cleland writes, for “the shadow of it serves their turn.” The
Passions are Machiavellian, ruthless in turning the dumb show of submission
to Reason (getting “on their knees to her”) to their own ends. Vincent justifies
his desire for this Pamela as a way of setting right “the outrages of fortune to
her” (179): she should have been an heiress, not a servant. “But all this time,”
Cleland observes, “he took special care not to tell himself that, but for the power
of her exquisite beauty, such a thought would have probably never entered into
his head. In short, even our virtues are often more interested than we imagine.”
All Vincent’s reflections on the proper relations between reason and passion
are a cosmetic discourse—useful in the short term to conceal his real motives,
but only from himself.

The final story, *The Romance of an Evening*, is the most complex in plot and
edges closest to tragedy. It starts with the hero, Sir Lionel Heartly, saving the
heroine, Melicent, from drowning, after the boat in which she is traveling over-
turns—a mishap that causes the death by drowning of another passenger, an old woman, and later the death of a third from the effects of cold. Our sense of the near approach of calamity only increases when we learn that the boat was the vehicle of a conspiracy to kidnap Melicent by the brutal, drunken Squire Bullurst, who meant to rape her, and the old woman who drowned, the wicked faux-religious hypocrite Mrs. Crape, who planned to keep her imprisoned as a whore in a London brothel. In this “pretty tale,” the good are easily duped (Melicent and the woman she thinks is her mother believe the old bawd Mrs. Crape to be “a character of sanctity and devotion” [234]), while evil is undone only by accident. By the end, of course, virtue and true love triumph, but there is some danger that even the virtuous Sir Lionel could be driven to crime by illicit desire. Having saved the unconscious Melicent, he lays her on the riverbank, and as Cleland writes, “Nay, even the pity itself, so essentially due to the condition which she was in, was absorbed by a passion which was but the more violent for its being the first time of his life that he had felt it” (219). Here, too, Cleland echoes a scene from the *Woman of Pleasure*: the story that Fanny’s fellow whore Harriet tells of her deflowering by a young man who found her unconscious on a riverbank and, trying to revive her but unable to “govern his passion” (104), raped her instead. The possibility that Sir Lionel’s “passion” might also be too “violent” to govern has been raised in an earlier passage, in which Cleland tells us that, as Sir Lionel has never yet been attracted to a woman, “the first object that should raise the passion of love in him, would carry him beyond any bounds of reason” (213). Carried “beyond any bounds of reason” by “violent” passion, even Sir Lionel could act the part of Squire Bullurst or Harriet’s ravisher; that he does not may be due less to virtue or reason than to circumstance (there are other people nearby). Melicent revives, but the threat of the illicit does not disappear, for no sooner have they fallen in love than they discover they are brother and sister. No “bound of reason” is more inviolable than the incest taboo, yet we know “the passion of love” can carry Sir Lionel “beyond any bounds.” His character, then, makes such a transgression possible, while romance conventions, and the tale’s suavity of tone, rule it out. This tension between two possible plotlines, one criminal, one chaste, generates the story’s passage of greatest emotional intensity, when Sir Lionel, rather than expressing relief that he didn’t learn the truth too late, bewails his misfortune, his violent passion unchecked. It is at this point that his mother turns the tragic story on its head: “As mournful, as pathetic as was the tone with which he pronounced this conclusion, and as much as Lady Heartly was herself penetrated with the worthiness of his sentiments, she could not help bursting
out into a loud laugh” (260). Even if we read this as just a vivid way of confirming what other eighteenth-century stories of incest averted, like *Joseph Andrews* or *Tom Jones*, may have led us to expect—that Lionel and Melicent are not in fact brother and sister—Lady Heartly’s reaction is jarring. Instead of the tender smile or comforting embrace her name seems to promise, she “burst[s] out into a loud laugh,” both verb and adjective out of keeping with the story’s genteel setting and her son’s “mournful,” “pathetic” lament. Her loud laugh disrupts the pathos of the scene and seems to mock “the worthiness of his sentiments”: as in all the *Surprises*, worthy sentiment is undermined by the intrusion of irony or laughter.

Cleland takes pains in the last lines of *The Romance of an Evening* to reaffirm the triumph of virtue, writing that “the enjoyments of virtuous love, spiritualized by sentiment, partake of the immortality of their parent, the soul” (273–274) and concluding that “Vice may, indeed, sometimes give what is falsely called pleasure; but it is only for Virtue to give what is truly called Happiness.” It would be perverse to deny that this is the author’s real sentiment, but equally so to overlook all the ironies and doubts that encircle it. In these stories, happiness depends less on virtue than accident: fortuitous meetings, timely discoveries, the lucky deaths that ensure a hero will inherit a fortune. It is only in a literal sense that the *Surprises* can be labeled “chaste,” as they were in the *Monthly Review*, for while no Sadean “Crimes of Love” are committed between its covers, such crimes play at the margins of the text, threatening the safety and virtue of male and female characters alike.³⁹ At the same time, the melodramatic and tragic are kept at bay by the “low merriment” (9) and “loud laughs” that punctuate the stories, and the “dazzling fretwork” of Cleland’s rococo style.

**The Cure of Love**

Following the success of *The Surprises of Love*, the collection’s publishers, Lowndes and Nicoll, contracted with Cleland to produce a three-volume novel.⁶⁰ He was paid a first advance of ten guineas in March 1765, three months after the *Surprises* appeared, although it was to take him nearly three years to deliver the completed text of *The Woman of Honor*, which finally came out in early 1768. As things turned out, *The Woman of Honor* was a critical and commercial failure, and more or less marked the end of Cleland’s authorial career: only the two supplements to *The Way to Things by Words* and a stream of pseudonymous political letters to the *Public Advertiser* in the 1770s and 1780s were to follow. The writer for the *Critical Review* deplored Cleland’s reliance on the clichés of
sentimental romance: “The same dull round again, of perfect, and therefore insipid and uninteresting, characters . . . the same jarring affections,—in short, the same hotch-potch of sentiment, adventure, and intrigue.” The critic for the *Monthly Review* interestingly suggested that the plot had “been woven together merely to serve as a vehicle of conveyance between the author and reader,” not specifying what Cleland was conveying. But the author seems never to have found his reader: the only other critic to write on *The Woman of Honor* since 1768 is William Epstein, in his 1974 biography; perhaps no one else has read it. Epstein seconds the early reviews, writing that “numerous digressions interrupt and at times overshadow the chief narrative line, creating a haphazard and even whimsical structure,” and that the novel’s characters “are all stereotypes, acting out their roles like mechanical puppets.” My goal is not to challenge these claims but to reframe them, to make a case for *The Woman of Honor* as a text whose formal strangeness, wavering plot, and near-lifeless characters show Cleland pushing against the boundaries of the novel-romance form in a deliberately awkward, alienating way, as if to shake readers free from their absorption in what one of its multiple narrators calls “the imaginary spaces of fiction and chimæra.”

Like the *Woman of Pleasure* and *Coxcomb*, Cleland’s third novel has for its protagonist an orphan, Clara Maynwaring, who travels from the provinces to London, comes into contact with a range of vicious and virtuous characters, and achieves conjugal felicity with an exemplary other-sex partner. Unlike the two *Memoirs*, it is epistolary in form, its thirty-nine letters divided among ten character-authors and written over an indeterminate period of time—several months to a year, perhaps. This temporal indeterminacy represents a movement away from Cleland’s precise accounting of time in his first novel, and from the Richardsonian model of epistolary realism, which in other respects *The Woman of Honor* seems to follow. Especially in its first volume, *The Woman of Honor* imitates Richardson’s *Clarissa* in the cropped names of its heroine and her rakish pursuer—Clara from Clarissa, Lovell a truncated Lovelace—and in its plot of sexual entrapment, disclosed in letters from Lovell to his fellow rake Golding. Clara, Lovell, and Golding are rather down-market copies of Clarissa, Lovelace, and Belford. Clara is beautiful, virtuous, and accomplished but has only a small legacy from an uncle who died bankrupt. Lovell is an aristocratic seducer but is derided by Clara’s guardian as “a most consummate coxcomb” (1:81), “afraid of the ridicule of idiots for not resembling them” (1:151); even his sexual conquests, including “the stale battered Countess of Flauntantribus, of whom half the town had been sick these ten years” (1:161), are distinctly unim-
pressive. His sidekick Golding is an ignoramus and toady, “vulgar and illiterate to the last degree” (1:178). Lovell and Golding embody the theory of fiction Cleland articulated in his early critical writings—that the novelist should “[paint] the corruptions of mankind, and the world, not as it should be, but as it really exists”—whereas Clara exemplifies Johnson’s argument that fiction should provide the reader with virtuous models for imitation. In that light, *The Woman of Honor* could be viewed as an attempt to reconcile two competing strains of novelistic realism. Yet in other ways, as with the novel’s vagueness as to time, Cleland breaks with the norms of realist fiction: the characters lack psychological verisimilitude or depth; the plot is discontinuous, and our expectation of development or suspense is repeatedly thwarted; many of the letters are discursive rather than narrative and have nothing to do with the story; the romantic hero is not introduced until halfway through the final volume. The letters in *The Woman of Honor* breach the conventions of literary realism in ways that make for a discomfiting reading experience.

This is nowhere clearer than in the representation of Clara, the woman of honor herself. She—or as Joel Weinsheimer wittily calls Austen’s Emma Woodhouse, “it”—embodies Epstein’s claim that Cleland “failed to explain his characters’ inner motivations in intimate detail, to invest their thoughts and actions with a credible psychological reality.” I basically agree, but would substitute *refused or declined* for “failed,” as Cleland rejects Richardson’s principal strategy for creating the illusion of access to his characters’ supposed interiority: bringing the reader up close to the first-person “presence” of the character in the act of writing. As an early admirer of Richardson (perhaps with Richardson’s help) wrote in a preface to *Pamela*, “The Letters being written under the immediate Impression of every Circumstance which occasioned them . . . the several Passions of the Mind must, of course, be more affectingly described . . . than can possibly be found in a Detail of Actions long past.” In *Pamela* and *Clarissa*—for all the complexity, in the latter, of Richardson’s orchestration of multiple voices and narratives—by far the dominant voice is the heroine’s, and by far her chief concern is the analysis of her own motives and actions. In *The Woman of Honor*, by contrast, Cleland adopts Richardson’s epistolary format but does away with any first-person account of “the several Passions of the [heroine’s] Mind.” Clara’s letters are perfunctory and unreflective, and she is immune to self-analysis or self-description. In the final volume there is only one note from Clara, an addendum to two very long letters in which her brother-in-law, Edward Mellefont, tells her London guardian, Mrs. Buckley, that Clara has fallen in love with a Lancashire neighbor’s son, Leonard Sumners. But Clara herself
says nothing of her “Passions” and not a word of Leonard Sumners, only offering the worthy sentiment that “love is never so strong, so invincible, as when it is a virtue” (3:187). For the last hundred pages, Clara writes nothing. This may be a daring experiment, or a bad miscalculation, but it is not an oversight: Cleland rigorously excludes any opportunity for the characters, especially Clara, to give voice to an inner life of feeling.

Adopting the form of a dialogical collection of letters but evacuating it of what Richardson thought to be its heart—the illusion of unmediated access to the interior life of characters produced by writing to the moment—Cleland keeps his protagonist at a disconcerting narrative and emotional distance. The effect is twofold: first, Clara is displaced as the center of narrative interest; second, she becomes an emblematic figure of passionlessness, the absence or repression of feeling, which emerges early as one of the novel’s key motifs. Even though Mrs. Buckley writes on first meeting her that “with all the charms of innocence and sweetness, you see her heart breathing in every gesture, every motion, every word” (74)—an epidermal transparency that establishes Clara’s fitness to be a heroine of sentimental romance—Clara utterly rejects the claims of love. When her friend Lady Harriet Lovell (the rake’s sister) excitedly tells her she is engaged to marry the aptly named Marquess of Soberton, Clara writes of her own indifference to love and her inability to share Harriet’s enthusiasm (letter 4). At this point, we might suspect this is a way of alerting the reader to anticipate Clara’s eventual, inevitable fall into love, and in part, it is. But for the first two and a half volumes of this three-volume novel, she registers no feeling, even antipathy, to any of the men lining up to court her. The sheer repetitiveness of her refusals, in line with Cleland’s refusal to give any access to the character’s presumed inner life or thoughts, means she has no story of her own: no secrets, no doubts, no desires, no unconscious. Instead, she embodies what the novel presents as a rejection of, or incapacity to feel, love; and while this is portrayed at first as a sort of damage that needs to be repaired, it later offers itself as the solution to the problem of love itself, which comes to be associated with the delusive promises of fiction.

In the same early letter in which Clara declares her indifference to love, she writes that Mrs. Buckley, when shown some letters from Soberton to Harriet, found in them “not the shadow of sentiment, nor a spark of love” (91). If Clara’s indifference can be read as a form of conventionally feminine modesty, Soberton’s “spark”-lessness is both unromantic and unmasculine. His failure of love or desire—Harriet, too, expresses regret that he’s not a more ardent lover (letter 19)—poses a threat to the prospect of a happy marriage, and it is telling that this
failure is initially juxtaposed to Clara’s indifference, for it suggests that neither of them is capable of “natural” feelings or desires. Whether either will experience some form of erotic or romantic awakening, and with or for whom, are key questions the plot is designed to answer; but well into the second volume, *The Woman of Honor* is less a sentimental romance than a novel of insensibility, a story of sexual dispassion.

With Clara seemingly immune to desire, the narrative interest of the first volume rests with the cut-rate rake Lovell, who in his first letter to Golding is already hatching plots to entrap her. If this story line is taken from *Clarissa*, so is the tension between rakish insouciance and glimmers of genuine feeling, as when he describes himself as “planet-struck” (117) by his first sight of Clara. This avowal belies Mrs. Buckley’s claim that he is unable to love. “Beauty may give Lord Lovell desires, because he has eyes,” she writes, “but never love, because he has no heart; he may possibly know the gross pleasures of sensation; but never the voluptuous raptures of sentiment” (166). This is a variation on the motif of passionlessness, but if, like Soberton and Clara, Lovell is deficient in love, at least he’s stirred by desires. More important, he has space in the text to articulate those desires. Soberton and Clara are cordoned off from the reader—no letter from Soberton appears till near the end of the second volume, not even the letters scrutinized by Mrs. Buckley for “shadow[s] of sentiment”—but Lovell puts his feelings on paper, even hints he’s revealing more of himself than he’d like, as when he writes of Clara, “I have been trying to establish my point with this strange, perverse, what shall I call her, Angel, for that word is at the end of my pen, and places itself on the paper, almost without my leave” (1:230). Notwithstanding Mrs. Buckley’s verdict, we actually see more, and more convincing, signs of a capacity to love from Lovell in the novel’s first two volumes than from either Soberton or Clara.

Nevertheless, he tries to play the rake, and it is as “a perfect Matchavell at intreagues” (1:242), as his “illiterate” friend Golding calls him, that Lovell drives the novel forward. Such, at least, is the expectation Cleland creates in the first half dozen letters. But when we see the plotter in action, any sense of danger or suspense collapses. His “Machiavellian” scheme amounts to no more than a bid to bribe Mrs. Buckley to let him kidnap Clara. A sorrier seduction plot would be hard to devise, and the likeness to Lovelace drains away as, after Clara refuses to see him, the mortified Lovell turns to drink, is injured in a tavern brawl, and falls into a dangerous, rather feminizing, fever. Cleland short-circuits the libertine seduction narrative, stripping the seducer of all his glamour and cunning and emptying his plot of any threat. Lovell’s intrigues neither test nor endanger
the novel’s heroine, and his abrupt collapse leaves the novel foundering, as there is no other plot on offer. His fever leads to an equally abrupt reformation, and although he writes that Clara has reawakened his heart and made him “sensible of the dignity of my being” (2:166), he makes no effort to prove his love or even see her again; instead, by the novel’s end he has gone abroad to repeat his grand tour. This may seem a strange way to close the novel’s libertine seduction plot, but is in keeping with the theme of passionlessness and the corresponding formal strategy of distancing, as we only hear of Lovell’s travel plans at third hand, in a letter from Mrs. Buckley to Mellefont. In going to the Continent, Lovell is removing himself from Clara, the object of his desire, and the proof of his reform or cure is the geographical, affective, and narrative distance that marks the suppression of all unruly or disruptive feeling. In effect, he has become another Soberton, earlier praised by Mrs. Buckley for having conducted himself properly on his grand tour, in particular for having avoided the “stupid circle of pandars, buona-robas, opera-singers, the canaglia virtuosa, mumping Cicerones, [and] silly cicisbeos” (2:85–86). At least four of the terms on this list refer to illicit sexuality—pandars, buona-robas (fancy-dress prostitutes), opera singers (either castrati, viewed as sexually available, or female singers, often affiliated, like actresses, with whores), and cicisbeos (gigolos or kept boys). Soberton’s propriety, and now Lovell’s, is tied to sexual self-regulation. But such self-regulation, for him, is inseparable from an inability to love, an absence of passion. It is as if the only cure for sexual excess is the extirpation of all desire.

This cheerless prescription is repeated in the novel’s next movement when, after Lovell has been dismissed from the text, a new suitor for Clara’s love appears: none other than Soberton himself. Clara seems to have awakened feelings in him that Harriet could not, for with his first letter, to his friend Launcelot Greville, he encloses a note in which he declares his love to Clara and proposes to break off his engagement to Harriet. Now that he wants Clara, Soberton replaces Lovell as the novel’s center of attention, for in fiction, at least, desire is the motive force, the focus of all interest. This plot turn potentially puts the text’s two paragons of virtue in compromising positions: they seem ideally suited to one another, yet they both have obligations to Harriet, who has encouraged their intimacy. But once again, Cleland short-circuits his own plot, enclosing Clara’s refusal of Soberton in the same letter in which we learn of his proposal to her. Of course, Clara’s written refusal could mask some degree of interior conflict on her part and could prove to be just one in a series of moves through which this new intrigue is played out. As before, however, Cleland
The Man of Feeling (1752–1768)  209
denies the reader any other access to Clara’s thoughts than her short letter of refusal, and when Soberton is told she has returned to Lancashire, he simply, instantly ceases to love her. He resolves to marry Harriet immediately and asserts that he really loves her, not Clara after all. Yet his putative love for Harriet seems more like a regression to his original state of passionlessness than a mature recognition of true feeling. Giving up any claim on Clara, he writes Greville that “I sin against all the laws of romance”; but “leaving that pleasant statute of the Love-code to its proper authority in the imaginary spaces of fiction and chimæra, I am not in the least afraid of submitting this recovery of my false step, to the decisions of Reason and even of Love” (3:72). That last phrase is perplexing: while it seems to hold open the possibility of love affiliated with reason, the overall burden of the sentence is to relegate love, and the “pleasant statute of the Love-code,” to “the imaginary spaces of fiction and chimæra.” Love, Soberton seems to claim, or hope, has no reality apart from the delusive conventions of literary romance.

Cured of his destabilizing passion, Soberton, like Lovell, is dismissed from the text: he writes no more letters, and no more is said of his love for Clara, Harriet, or anyone else. The last movement of the novel introduces Clara’s third suitor: Leonard, a beautiful, wounded youth, newly orphaned, whom Clara nurses back to health. Even more than Fanny Hill’s Charles, Leonard is Cleland’s fantasy-ideal of the masculine hero. His father taught him so well that he is “a perfect master” of all “parts of learning, in all objects of the human inquiry” (3:169). Moreover, having grown up in Canada, where his father was stationed, he is so athletic that as a boy he surpassed

the savages themselves in all the points of bodily agility, dexterity, and valor, which they esteem so essential a part of personal merit. He was barely fourteen when he could outstrip the fleetest of them at running, or defy them to out-swim him in the roughest lakes, or cross the stream at a tremendously small distance [above the falls] at the stream of Niagara . . . He was not superior to them only in the chase of the fox, the moose, or the elk, but would attack with more open intrepidity the bear and the panther. (3:139–140)

Cleland’s hero combines intellectual and physical prowess, savage and civilized arts, European and (Native) American cultural values. He is both courageous—at fifteen years old, he fought alongside his father at the 1759 battle of Quebec—and humane: after the battle, he tended the British and the French alike, even saving a wounded French soldier from the violence of a brutal British one. He is also, needless to say, physically perfect: “In harmony with his face is the whole
of his form, cast in the most exquisite model for shape, stature, and proportion” (3:165). But in keeping with the approach Cleland has taken throughout the novel, all of this is reported at third hand, in two very long letters from Mellefont to Mrs. Buckley, while Clara writes nothing. All Cleland gives us is Mellefont’s observation that when she is with Leonard, Clara displays “a certain melancholic tenderness, such as I had never remarked in [her looks] before” (3:167–168). Seen only through its visible external symptoms or signs, Clara’s awakening to love is not allowed to touch or engage the reader but is kept mute, held back.

The one moment in which feeling threatens to break through restraint comes in the novel’s last letter, from Leonard to his friend Charles, in which he recounts in detail the scene of his declaration of love to Clara. Love, as he tells it, is instantaneous: “surely the most consummately ill-bred clown could hardly have exhibited a broader stare of surprize and wonder, at any object, than I did, just then, at the first sight of this miracle of beauty . . . It was a blaze that overpowered me: a rapture that kept my eyes motionless, and fixt on the divinest face that in my life I ever beheld” (3:251–252). This is love according to what Soberton contemptuously dismissed as “the laws of romance,” and it blots out language, motion, even sentience. In short order, he proposes marriage. “But when I expected her answer,” he writes, “she gave me no other than that of bursting out into tears and deep sighs” (3:260). It is the only time Clara loses control, the sole moment in which passion “burst[s] out,” in the inarticulate form of tears and sighs, and it is soon over. That single outburst attests both to the rawness of feeling and to the severity of its repression elsewhere in the novel. Clara’s love looks very much like anguish—she has earlier called it a “dangerous passion” (3:184)—and Leonard, too, warns that “lovers believe everything like children, or break through everything like madmen” (3:257). The dangers of childish credulity and destructive madness, Clara writes in her only letter in the novel’s last volume, are especially threatening to women, “so commonly doomed to the fatal alternative of being sacrificed or betrayed!” (3:185), and her outburst of sighs and tears reflects that pained recognition. While the novel swiftly moves on from this moment of emotional surfeit to a happy ending with the couple married “under the united auspices of Love and Honor” (3:272), it can do so only because Clara reins in passion—never expressing it in writing, in fact never writing again.

When Mellefont tells Mrs. Buckley that Clara and Leonard have fallen in love, he playfully cites a literary precursor: “Our Angelica has, I fancy, found her Medoro” (3:182). Angelica is the “pagan” object of the Christian knight Orlan-
do’s unrequited love in Ariosto’s sixteenth-century epic *Orlando Furioso*. When she elopes with a wounded Saracen knight, Medoro, whom she has nursed back to health, Orlando goes mad (*furioso*). This story, which Cleland may also have known in Handel’s operatic version (*Orlando*, 1733), parallels that of Clara nursing and falling in love with Leonard, although neither Soberton nor Lovell follows Orlando into madness. But an apprehension that all love is a kind of madness or loss of self—as Ariosto wrote, “che non è in somma amor, se non insania” (what is love, after all, if not madness)—lingers at the margins of Cleland’s novel. While Clara asserts that “love is never so strong, so invincible, as when it is a virtue,” Cleland makes no effort to convey a sense of an interior emotional life to which we have access, and offers no evidence through Clara’s writing or reported speech that would enable us to judge whether she is able to reconcile eros and reason, passion and virtue. Instead, we have only Mellefont’s note to Mrs. Buckley that he has officiated at the wedding of “the thoroughly recovered Mr. Sumners to Clara Maynwaring” (3:272)—and the word “recovered,” while obviously referring to his restoration to health after his injury, also echoes an earlier passage, when we were told that Soberton, after his brief detour into passion for Clara, had “recovered, without any danger of a relapse” (3:79). Eros is a kind of illness or insanity, a loss of mastery over the self, as Soberton was warned by both Clara and his friend Greville, and just as his “recovery” entailed his retreat into passionlessness, so may Clara’s and Leonard’s entail the damping down of feelings that threaten to burst out as “tears and deep sighs” or as “a blaze that overpowered me.”

Or might it be that it is only in fiction that one can be paralyzed by rapture or driven mad by love? No literary text is more extravagantly fictional than *Orlando Furioso*, with its hippogriffs and journey to the moon, so Cleland’s citation of it as a precursor to *The Woman of Honor* invites us to reflect on the playful artificiality of his own romantic fiction. Within the novel, several characters comment on the gap between literary romance and real life, as if they’re trying to work out what kind of text they inhabit. In his last letter, Leonard dismisses the romantic cliché that a person can die of joy: “I now do not believe a sillable of its possibility, or I could never have survived the rapture into which this her acceptance of my suit now threw me” (3:262). But as with Sir William Delamore, his attempt to distance the “truth” of his own experience from the hackneyed conventions of popular fiction only draws attention to how closely he, too, adheres to the codes of romance, with its overpowering blazes and swoons of “rapture.” Earlier in the novel, Soberton’s friend Greville argues that passion, despite what “the modern Tragedy-writers, and Novelists” pretend, is not beyond control:
“the cure of Love, conquered by virtue, is not so extremely rare, as Poets, Novelists, and Romance-writers would persuade us, in their records of fancy and fiction” (3:57). Soberton, having undergone “the cure of Love” himself, agrees, as we have seen, that “the Love-code” has “its proper authority” only “in the imaginary spaces of fiction and chimæra” (3:72). But what other spaces can the fictional Marquess of Soberton inhabit? What code, if not “the Love-code,” has authority in The Woman of Honor? The novel is nowhere more artificial than when its characters speak out against fictional artifice, as if by doing so they could make us forget they are fictions themselves.

In fact the romance strand is only part of the text, and at times it seems as if Cleland would be happy to leave it, and the love code it enacts, behind. The critic for the Monthly Review sensed that the romance plot was “woven together merely to serve as a vehicle of conveyance between the author and reader,” and the profusion of essayistic digressions on topics utterly unrelated to the story—horse racing, pensions, mineral waters, boxing, the ancient British constitution, and so on—suggests that Cleland was bridling at, or bored with, the restrictions of the novel form. In the letter that opens the third volume, Soberton’s friend Greville acknowledges that he is “unconscionably exceeding all the common limits of a letter” and has written, instead, “an epistolar pamphlet” (3:2). Cleland, too, has written a text that messily exceeds the common limits of epistolary romance, and not accidentally. Repeatedly drifting off course from the line of its own plot, The Woman of Honor is both a hackneyed romance and an aggressively misshapen antiromance, a set of scattershot attacks on the corruptions of upper-class life and a wry commentary on the consoling fictions of domestic felicity—a disenchanted farewell to fiction in the guise of a novel.