John Cleland died on 23 January 1789, aged seventy-eight. His death was reported the next day in a notice in the *Public Advertiser*: “Yesterday died at his house in Petty France, Westminster, John Cleland, Esq.” (*Pub. Adv.*, 24 Jan. 1789). Cleland had lived in Petty France, a few hundred yards from his childhood home in St. James’s Place, since 1782, and it was there he had written his last letter to the same *Public Advertiser*, ending with its prophetic vision of Britain “debased and reduced . . . nearly to insignificance and nullity” (*Pub. Adv.*, 21 July 1787). In keeping with his long-running identification of his own “perishing” health with that of the nation—“A Briton” as a miniature and mirror of “Britain”—Cleland intimates in this last letter that “insignificance and nullity,” death’s oblivion, awaited him too. So they did; but that’s not where the story ends, for insignificance is trumped by textuality, nullity by recuperative acts of reading.

When John Nichols, in the obituary he wrote for the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, stated that *Fanny Hill* “brought a stigma on [Cleland’s] name, which time has not obliterated,” he pointed to one way, the most obvious, by which an author
can overcome, or at least outlast, his own death: by continuing to be tied to a text
that continues to be read. Cleland himself, so he said, wished the book in ques-
tion to be “buried and forgot,” but as Boswell wrote of its author, it “resolutely
persisted”—or in Nichols’s words, “its poisonous contents” remained “in circu-
lation.” And this circulation, sustained by the interest of readers like Boswell,
is the necessary condition of authorial afterlife. In Cleland’s case, the afterlife
may have been scandalous—shadowed by a stigma “consigned to his memory”
as long as the book survived—but weighed against the “nullity” of being “bur-
ied and forgot,” that may not have been a bad bargain.

Fanny Hill’s notoriety, or the ill effects of it, may in any case have been over-
stressed. Not that there has not been much moralistic denunciation over the
years, and a short-lived threat of legal prosecution of Cleland himself, albeit
never followed through on, but the novel’s literary qualities were also openly
praised, and it never stood in the way of Cleland getting other work published.
In 1762, William Rider included Cleland in his catalog of the significant “liv-
ing authors of Great Britain,” writing that the Woman of Pleasure, “tho’ justly
censured by Men of rigid Morals, must be allowed to be the best executed and
the most picturesque of any Work of the Kind, not excepting that of Petronius,
and the celebrated Dialogues of Meursius.” Further, Rider’s concession that
the work was “justly censured by Men of rigid Morals” is tepid at best: “rigid
Morals” hardly has a positive ring, and could even be read as a mocking double
entendre.

Some passages in Nichols’s obituary suggest that he knew Cleland, even that
he had visited him at home, as when he writes that a portrait of William Cleland
“hung up in the son’s library till his death, which indicates all the manners
and d’abord of a fashionable town-rake in the beginning of this century.” The
impression of familiarity is reinforced when Nichols writes that Cleland “lived
within the income of his pension for many years, in a retired situation in Petty
France, surrounded by a good library, and the occasional visits of some literary
friends, to whom he was a very agreeable companion.” But even the firsthand
accounts of those who visited Cleland at home have a certain elusiveness. When
Boswell visited him in April 1779, Cleland told him that a French visitor said he
“had not only the finest situation of a house in London, but in Europe. It was
fine, romantic, and pleasant.” Could this “fine, romantic, and pleasant” spot
be the same “old house in the Savoy” where Boswell had found Cleland twelve
months before, served by a crone, in a “room, filled with books in confusion
and dust”? Perhaps Cleland had moved in the meanwhile, although we know
from Beckwith that he was still in the Savoy two years later, in 1781, but could any house in the Savoy ever have been described as “romantic,” or as having “the finest situation” in Europe?

Similar questions emerge from the accounts witnesses offer of Cleland’s mysterious pension. The most famous, and unlikeliest, version comes from Nichols. Amid the furor aroused by the Woman of Pleasure, he writes, Cleland “was called before the privy council; and the circumstance of his distress being known, as well as his being a man of some parts, John Earl Granville, the then president, nobly rescued him from the like temptation, by getting him a pension of 100 l. per year, which he enjoyed to his death.” Is it really possible that Granville would have got Cleland a lifelong pension just on the condition that he not write any further obscene books? News of such a reward would surely have made the rounds of Grub Street, tempting other gentleman-authors in distress to repeat the experiment. Nichols’s story, implausible on its face, is also at odds with what Cleland told Beckwith: that he had “enjoyed a Place or Pension under Government of 200£ a year, which was taken from him on Account of his Publications.” Boswell’s Cleland, meanwhile, evidently claimed that Lord Bute, when prime minister, had offered him £1,200 a year to serve as a kind of one-man cabinet: a story so far-fetched that Boswell “thought he raved.” All three of these stories, true or false (or neither or both), must have been started by Cleland himself, but each gives rise to a different reading of the shape of his authorial career and of the political contexts within which it unfolded. Likewise, the contrasting glimpses we have of his domestic circumstances—a room “with books in confusion and dust” versus “surrounded by a good library”; enjoying “the occasional visits of some literary friends, to whom he was a very agreeable companion” versus passing “under the Censure of being a Sodomite, as he now does, and in Consequence thereof Persons of Character decline visiting him”—lead to widely discrepant understandings of his social and cultural position, and of his character and habits. It might just be possible to reconcile these seeming contradictions among Nichols’s, Beckwith’s, and Boswell’s sketches of Cleland, but each appears to belong to the life of a different author.

The crux of any such life is the corpus of writings to which the author’s name is attached. To attribute a text is to begin constructing a narrative of authorship, but this is tricky and frustrating in periods like the eighteenth century, when anonymous or pseudonymous publication was the norm. In his catalog of living authors, Rider attributed just two specific works to Cleland, the Woman of Pleasure and the Coxcomb, but Nichols, in his obituary, made a stab at something like a comprehensive or at least representative list. Although he passes
over its name in silence, the *Woman of Pleasure* overshadows Nichols’s list, so that every other text is subsidiary to it, whether, like *Memoirs of a Coxcomb*, it exhibits the same “smack of dissipated manners” or, like *The Man of Honour*, it was written as “an *amende honourable* for his former exceptionable book.” But not so fast: what is this *Man of Honour*? It looks like a simple mistake, a misprint for *The Woman of Honor*, which Nichols does not mention, and it was long assumed not to exist. But in 1987, James Basker showed that a three-volume novel by that title was published three years after the *Woman of Honor* and so reopened the question of Cleland’s authorship. If it were found and shown to be his, what rethinking of the trajectory of his career might it compel?

As it turns out, more information has since come to light, and *The Man of Honour; or The History of Harry Waters* can be pretty confidently ascribed to another jobbing writer, John Huddlestone Wynne. But the general problem, and the shimmer of uncertainty, remain. In an intriguing comment near the end of his obituary, Nichols writes that Cleland “shewed himself best in novels, song-writing, and the lighter species of authorship.” But there is no trace of any songs by Cleland—does that mean Nichols was wrong, or might there be a cache of lost songs somewhere awaiting discovery? Nichols includes little from the 1750s, when Cleland largely worked as a writer for hire, but looks mainly to his last two decades of writing: to the political letters and the “curious tracts on the Celtic language.” That could be because this was the period when Nichols knew him best, or because this is what Cleland wished to have remembered. Either way, Nichols gives less weight than I to Cleland as translator, polemicist, reviewer, and experimenter with literary form, and he plays down what I have stressed: the perversity and strangeness of much of his output. The details, emphases, and omissions in Nichols’s account, as in mine, combine to produce a version of Cleland’s history in keeping with a particular view or interpretive stance, a way of reading the material remains; and in making this version public, getting his life into print, he offers his subject another way of outlasting his own death: as the protagonist of another author’s biography or “Life.”

In Nichols’s biography, Cleland is first and last his father’s heir. “He was the son,” Nichols begins, “of Col. Cleland, that celebrated fictitious member of the Spectator’s Club, whom Steele describes under the name of Will Honeycombe. A portrait of him hung up in the son’s library till his death.” While I share Epstein’s skepticism as to the often-repeated claim that William Cleland was the model for Steele’s character, I find it a suggestive starting point for this account of the son’s life, for it makes him the offspring of an already “fictitious” figure and blurs the distinction between the actual person and his representation in
print. Or in paint: the image of the father as a young “fashionable town-rake in the beginning of this century” hangs over the son’s library to the day of his death, a sign of affiliation leading to the statement that Cleland inherited “the scatterings of his father’s fortune, and some share of his dissipations.” Those “dissipations” pervade the work that “tarnished his reputation,” but had been exacerbated, as Nichols tells it, by a journey abroad that Cleland made between leaving school and shipping off to Bombay. At some point between the ages of thirteen and seventeen, he suggests, Cleland “went as consul to Smyrna, where, perhaps, he first imbibed those loose principles” that later would bear “poisonous” fruit in his fiction. Only “on his return from Smyrna” did Cleland set sail for India and the career I set out in the first chapter of this book.

Where did this story, unsupported by even a shred of documentary evidence, come from? I can only infer that it came from Cleland himself, who might be read as the ghost author of his own obituary. Since it is not a story that anyone else recorded, and since Nichols writes as a familiar, it seems most likely that he had it from Cleland firsthand—although it is certainly possible that, as with the Woman turned Man of Honour, he did not quite get it right. Cleland was never consul for the Levant Company in Smyrna, nor is it likely he lived there before setting out as a foot soldier to Bombay. He could conceivably have gone there at some later period, but Nichols’s chronology is quite clear, and I don’t think he is just garbling an anecdote he misheard or misremembered (as one might misremember a book’s name). Like the story of Cleland before the Privy Council, the story of Cleland the boy consul of Smyrna, imbibing the “loose principles” of oriental decadence, does not read as if it could have originated with anyone but the subject himself. Who else would bother to invent such a tale? It takes its place with a handful of other puzzling or fantastic stories that crop up now and again in the Cleland archive. Some of these, such as Cowan’s 1733 accusation that Cleland “not many years since deserted his King, Country & even the Colour Nature design’d him,” come to us secondhand, but most were told by Cleland himself: the story of his mother and aunt packing him off on a “vile insignificant voyage” to Carolina and Jamaica, for instance, or the allegation that Thomas Cannon and his mother joined forces “to consummate the murder of an unfortunate gentleman who had saved his life, and whom, in return, he poisoned five times with common arsenic.” It is impossible to know from these one-off claims if there’s any truth to them. Surely he would not just have made up the voyage to Carolina in a letter to his mother’s lawyer, but what of the Cannons’ poison plot, or the pension for not writing, or the posting to
Smyrna? Yet if the evidence is missing that would allow us to judge the truth of these strange claims, we can guess how Nichols came by the two he included in his obituary: “in conversation,” he writes, of Cleland entertaining his “literary friends,” “he was very pleasant and anecdotical.” Even after his death, the stories he authored of his own life—true, half true, or false; self-deceiving or knowingly counterfeit—might stay in circulation, and generate new stories in turn.

One of the effects of the “stigma” that shadowed Cleland’s name from the start of his writing career was a tendency for other writers and critics to accuse him of involvement in a variety of literary forgeries and fakes or to identify him as the author of some disreputable work. Sometimes the motives are obviously mercenary, as when the publisher of the 1766 Memoirs of Maria Brown (whose subtitle promises “the life of a courtezan in the most fashionable scenes of dissipation”) declared it on the title page to be “Published by the Author of a W** of P***”; or when, in 1969, the proprietors of Sphere Books not only credited the reissued Memoirs of an Oxford Scholar (1756) to Cleland (the original was published anonymously) but thoughtfully inserted some new, sexually explicit parts to make good on the link to Fanny Hill. More often, the scandal associated with his first book was taken as sufficient reason for assuming he was available for any scheme of literary piracy or fraud that came his way. So, nearly twenty years after his death, rumors began to circulate in print that Cleland was involved in the machinations that led to the illicit publication of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s Letters in 1763—including, in one version of the story, the claim that he was one of “two English gentlemen” who pilfered the manuscripts from a clergyman to whom Lady Mary had entrusted them and smuggled copies to the publisher Thomas Becket, who issued them against the will of Lady Mary’s heirs. As far as I have been able to find, this rumor first aired in 1803, forty years after the Letters’ publication and fifteen after Cleland’s death. I know of no evidence to support it from Cleland, Becket, or any of their contemporaries, although their professional ties during this period (Becket published the Institutes of Health and Phisiological Reveries) make it at least possible. Fifty years later, Robert Carruthers, in his biography of Pope, used Nichols’s Smyrna story to bolster the charge that not only had Cleland been involved in pirating the genuine Lady Mary letters, he had also written the fake ones published by Becket four years later. Cleland, he writes, “was an adept at literary fraud, and disreputably connected with the original publication of Lady Mary’s correspondence”; and the fake letters “are evidently from the same mint, which,
as Cleland had resided in Turkey, and travelled widely, and was besides a man of talent and imagination, [he] was capable of producing a base coinage little inferior to the genuine metal.”

The charge Carruthers repeats here, like the story of Cleland as teenage consul at Smyrna, is, as to evidence, utterly baseless. Even Cleland’s supposed animosity against Lady Mary, which is often adduced as a likely motive for his participation in these piracies and counterfeits, is doubtful, and is belied by his comments in print. I have no wish to clear him of any role in this literary conspiracy; I would actually like to think he was one of the mysterious gentlemen-thieves, and that he did author the spurious letters (one of them alluding to the “preposterous loves” of Hadrian and Antinous). It may be that the rumors of Cleland’s part in this and other forgeries are true, and it is likely that more works will be attributed to him as other evidence is found. The Cleland canon, first put on a scholarly footing by Epstein in 1974, has almost doubled in size since then, thanks to the detective work of James Basker and especially of Roger Lonsdale, who added eight significant works to the corpus of a dozen or so identified in Epstein’s biography. Some of these more recent attributions, including the Penlez and Vizzani pamphlets, Pinot-Duclos’s Memoirs, and The Dictionary of Love, are integral to my reconstruction of Cleland’s writing life, for the life, as I have written it, is an outgrowth of my readings of the texts, not the other way round. Only the texts are real; the life is a phantasm. In that sense, at least, the life is unfinished as long as the work is read, reread, salvaged by readers from insignificance and nullity.